

The Return of Ultra Woman

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Summary: As a result of the incidents that occurred in “Luck and Consequences,” Lois has recovered the powers that she had as Ultra Woman. However, now it’s several years later and she has a daughter to consider. What will she do?

Disclaimer: This is a fanfic based on the television show, Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman. I have no claim on the pre-existing characters whatsoever, nor am I profiting by their use. The new characters and story elements are mine. No infringement is intended by this work.

Note: This is a sequel to “Luck and Consequences” and the 4th part of First Flights. This story will be best understood by reading those first.

Chapter 1

It’s late in Smallville. To an outside observer, I’m sure that this looks just like an evening in any other household with members of a family sitting and talking together. In many ways, the normalcy is only a veneer. The rustic hominess of the Kent farmhouse seems somehow inconsistent with the fact that two of the four adults in the room are the most powerful beings on the planet. The fact that I’m one of those beings is an idea that I still have trouble getting my head around.

Clark and I have been here in the Kent home for only a few minutes. My husband arrived before I did, after having lost a game of super-speed flying tag that had zigzagged across much of the North American continent. When I arrived, I found the Kent family deep in the middle of a discussion concerning the potentials for tomorrow’s weather. I barely worry about the day-to-day weather in Metropolis and fear that I’m even less interested in the Smallville forecast.

Within moments, the discussion comes to a pause. I don’t know if there was a sense that I was being left out or if they simply exhausted the discussion potential for tomorrow’s weather. In either case, it’s Jonathan, ever the most cautious and practical of the family, which turns to me and asks, “Wasn’t it dangerous for you to be out flying with Clark here? I seem to remember some concern about the possibility of your powers failing.”

I glance at Clark only briefly before replying. “No, it wasn’t. Earlier this evening we got the results of the tests that Bernie conducted at Star Labs. My powers are permanent this time.”

Jonathan doesn’t seem to expect this result and just sort of freezes. Martha recovers more quickly and comes back with a question. “Honey, are you okay with that?”

“Yes, I am. But it really doesn’t matter, because there’s nothing I can do about it now.”

I’m about to start trying to explain about biofields and Kryptonian Elements, but before I can even begin, Clark jumps in. Based on the confident tone he uses as he outlines the science, I almost get the impression that he’s been spending extra time with Bernie Klein. After a few minutes he concludes with, “So you see, once there was a self-sustaining collection of the KEs in

Lois’s system, it was only a matter of time before she developed powers just like mine.”

Then I add my final observation. “Since there’s no way to remove the KE’s, there’s no going back. The way Bernie Klein put it was that now I’m just as Kryptonian as Clark.”

Jonathan looked startled. “The way you two describe it, having these KEs in your system sounds like some kind of disease.”

Clark laughs at this. “Actually, it does sound a lot like that. In many ways, the KEs are like an infection that can be transmitted from one person to another. I guess it’s a good thing that this particular ‘disease’ is very, very hard to catch. Bernie thinks that it was a near thing for Lois to end up with a KE, ‘infection’ even being married to me and carrying a Kryptonian baby.”

“So Lois, you said that you are okay with this but... well, I’d think you would be having a stronger reaction than you seem to be.” Martha says.

“That’s the weird part,” I reply. “I suppose I should be excited or scared or something... I don’t know — more intense than what I’m feeling. But it all feels surprisingly natural. What I do know is that I’m happy about it.” I glance over at Clark and find myself smiling before I continue. “One of the great things about our relationship is that Clark and I are able to share so much. This just opens up more things that we can share. And when the time comes, I’ll be able to help with that part of Lara’s life too.”

“Are you sure that Lara is going to have powers as well?” Jonathan asks.

“There’s really very little doubt about that now,” Clark replies. “Based on what Bernie was able to learn from this latest round of tests, he believes that anyone who can sustain KEs in their system will develop powers. We think that Lara will get her powers at about the same rate that I did growing up.” Then he reaches over to me and takes my hand in his. “Lois having the powers should be a big help for Lara.”

Martha takes advantage of a pause in the discussion to up at a clock. “I know it’s probably early for you but it’s about time for Jonathan and me to think about heading for bed. Are you staying here tonight?”

It’s only 10:30 but that means 11:30 Metropolis time. “I didn’t realize it was this late. We’re off tomorrow, so there’s no reason to wake Lara to take her home now. We can stay the night and then fly home in the morning.” I make eye contact with my husband. “Is that okay with you?”

“That’ll be fine,” Clark says. He then turns to Martha and asks, “Speaking of Lara, how was she this evening? Has she been asleep long?”

Martha’s smile gets even bigger than normal as she talks about her granddaughter. “Lara went to bed about an hour before you arrived. She was fine today and seems very comfortable here with just her grandparents. Once it got dark, she did look for the two of you a few times, but was generally quite happy. Are you going to go up and see her?”

“We’ll look in on her before we head for bed,” I reply. “I’d rather let her sleep and if she does wake up during the night we’ll be right there.”

“Then we’ll say goodnight now,” Jonathan says as he lifts himself out of his chair.

Almost as if that were a cue, the rest of us stand in unison and Clark addresses his parents, “You two go on up. I’ll close up down here and then Lois and I are going to bed. Goodnight.”

The rest of us head for the staircase as Clark starts turning out lights.

When I finally come downstairs the next morning with Lara in my arms, I can tell that Martha is surprised at the lateness of the hour. It’s nearly 8:00 am and between the time difference

from Metropolis and her knowledge of my habits, I suspect that she had expected to see me at least an hour earlier.

“Good morning Lois, I hope you slept well,” Martha says in a cheery tone.

“Um... yeah, I slept well.”

Martha notices my nervousness immediately. “Lois, is something wrong? Is Lara okay?”

I try to reply in a more casual tone. “No. Lara is fine. Nothing’s wrong.”

She seems to relax at this. “Good. You look so... I don’t know, nervous. And with that loud crash last night I couldn’t help but wonder.”

I almost jump at the question. “Crash?” I ask. So much for my casual tone.

“You had to have heard it. It was just before midnight when Jonathan and I were woken up by a loud crashing noise. It sounded like something hit the house. If Clark wouldn’t have been home, I’m sure Jonathan would have gone outside to look around. But back when Clark lived at home, whenever anything like this would happen, Clark would always just use his vision to look outside and let us know if there was anything to worry about. Since Clark didn’t say anything we just went back to sleep. Lois, that noise was so loud that you must have heard it.”

Now I’m sure that I look more nervous than ever. I feel like I should be looking for a place to hide. Martha picks up on my reaction and asks, “Honey, what’s the matter?”

I feel my expression melt into a sheepish smile. “Clark didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Well... Martha we’re really sorry.”

“I don’t understand. Sorry about what?”

“That noise last night. Well, it was us.”

Now she’s confused. “Did you drop something?”

“No.” I can tell that I’m sounding defensive again.

“Were you... Oh honey, are you floating in your sleep now too? Clark used to do that all the time. Before he really mastered flying, sometimes he would wake up and fall. Is that what happened?”

That’s something that I haven’t thought about yet. “No. But I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

“So Lois, what happened?”

I can feel myself turning beet red. In a very quiet voice I answer, “We broke the bed.”

“Lois!”

She looks startled at my revelation and I realize what she must be thinking. “No, Martha! Not like that!”

For an instant, Martha just stares at me. Then, she starts laughing softly. At seeing her reaction, I start chuckling myself.

“Lois, I’ve never seen you turn so red so fast. So, if it wasn’t... that, what happened?”

“This was our first night that we felt really relaxed since all this began and well... one thing led to another and pretty soon we were... well, wrestling on the bed.”

She gives me a sarcastic look. “Wrestling?”

“Well, yes. There was also some chasing around the room and a bit of tickling mixed in. At one point, he got away from me and was on one side of the bed while I was on the other. I decided to use some super speed to catch him. That worked, but I ended up pushing him toward the bed and — he landed sort of hard. That was when the bed broke. Anyway, we’re really sorry. Clark is going to fix the bed before we leave today.”

A few hours later, everyone is gathered over lunch. Between getting a later start than expected, and the time it took for Clark to fix, and reinforce, the bed, we had decided to head back to Metropolis after our midday meal.

Lara is in a high chair and gleefully doing many things with

her food other than eating it, when Jonathan finally brings up the subject that everyone has been so skillfully avoiding all morning. “Lois, do you have any plans for your new — abilities?”

“I don’t know. I guess I should be thinking about it, but I just keep finding excuses to avoid the issue.”

I reach to Clark and take his hand in mine. I look into his eyes for a few seconds before I get the courage to speak the words that I’ve been so afraid to say. “I don’t think I want to be Ultra Woman again.”

Clark looks a little surprised. “Honey, did you think you had to?”

“Well last time I had the powers, I did the Ultra Woman thing and at some level I guess I feel like I have to do it again now.”

“You know that’s not the way it works. I’m not Superman because I feel like anyone expects me to be. Sometimes I really wish I could stop, but because of how I feel when I see people in trouble, I just can’t.”

Clark pauses for a moment, and then continues. “Do you remember what happened when you created Ultra Woman?”

I have to think for only a second. I flash a teasing smile at my husband. “You remember. You were there. It all started with that out-of-control truck. I just couldn’t let it crash when I knew I could stop it.”

“I remember,” Clark replies. “But there’s a difference between intervening when something happens right in front of you, and taking on a responsibility like being Ultra Woman. What were you thinking then and what are you feeling now?”

“I’m not exactly sure. I can tell that this feels different. When it happened that time, I kept thinking that I had *your* powers. Deep down I just knew that your powers were meant to be used that way. Somehow, I just felt compelled to fill in for you. Now... well, you still have your powers and are still Superman. Back then, the world needed me because you weren’t available. That’s not the case this time.”

I stand up and start nervously walking around the room. “And, there’s more. I like helping people, but... it was so hard! I still remember the times when I would get there too late.”

As the emotions started bubbling up, I can feel the tears start to flow. Clark moves quickly to engulf me in a gentle hug. After taking a few seconds to compose myself, I’m able to continue. “It hurt so much. I don’t think anyone else can understand how painful it is. It’s so hard to have all those abilities, and still not be able to save people every time. And... I’ve also got some other reasons, but I get scared that I’m making up excuses.”

Clark puts a hand on my cheek and brings my face toward his own. “You know I’d never think that.”

I feel like I have to get all my reasons out in the open, so I press on. “Remember ‘The Superman Argument’? I don’t think Lara can afford to have both of us as full time reporters *and* on-call for hero work.”

Martha’s voice actually startles me as she interjects. “Lois, you don’t need to convince Clark or us of what you need to do. It sounds to me like you’re trying to convince yourself.”

Clark added. “Honey, you don’t need to convince me. You’ve been a hero longer than I have, and it has nothing to do with super powers. What you accomplish as a reporter does as much good as I do as Superman. And you’re mostly right about Lara needing you.”

I look at him suspiciously. “Mostly right?”

“Lara and I *both* need you. From my perspective, you already have three very important identities. You’re Lois Lane the reporter, Lois Lane the mother, and Lois Lane my wife. Ultra Woman can stay on whatever planet she went to when she disappeared.”

to the powers is the way I wake up in the morning. I used to think that our neighborhood was unusually quiet, but it doesn't seem like that anymore. Several months ago, when I first noticed the increase in noise, I thought that for some reason our neighborhood had become much noisier. Now I know better.

As much as the sound bothers me, the other changes help compensate. Waking up with so much energy in the morning is wonderful! Throughout my adult life, I've had to fight to be fully alert between the time I get out of bed and the time that first cup of coffee takes effect. Now, I wake up and as soon as I decide to climb out of bed, I feel ready to go.

Looking over at Clark and seeing him still fast asleep gives me hope that I'll get used to the changes. He insists that the hearing issues are all about training yourself in what not to hear. As I watch my love sleeping blissfully, I have to believe that adapting to the extra energy is also just a matter of getting used to it.

Since I'm awake, I figure I might as well get started. I look in on Lara to make sure she's still sleeping and then head for the shower. This is another one of the changes that I should have noticed but didn't. For most of my life, I've loved my showers to be as hot as possible. Whenever I had to take a shower with the water any cooler than I like, it was almost unbearable. Over the past few months, I've kept up the habit of taking a hot shower, but it's not the same. I can feel that the water is hot or cool but it doesn't seem to matter very much anymore.

I'm about to step into my shower when I wonder how quickly I can get through it if I use super-speed. I've used the speed enough just fooling around that I'm comfortable with it, so why not. The water is running and already hot. I will myself to high-speed mode and immediately bump into an unexpected problem. From my perspective, the water flowing from the showerhead has stopped. Well, stopped may not be the right word. The water seems to be just floating in the air. When I step into the shower, it's as if I cut a hole in a cloud of water droplets. I move around a bit to get all the water that was suspended in the air, but I quickly use up the available water. Now I'm standing here waiting for some more water to reach me. After what seems like a long time in my accelerated state, I find myself growing more frustrated with non-moving water. I shift back to normal speed for just an instant to allow the water to flow over my body and then I shift back to high-speed again. Watching the water suspended in the air is interesting to look at, but it makes for a miserable shower. So, lesson number one, I may be able to go at super speed but the water in the shower is limited by normal time. No real advantage to be gained by super speed here. I shift back to normal speed and finish my shower that way.

After my shower, I head back to the bedroom and wake up Clark. "Good morning sleepyhead. It's time to get up."

He rolls over and mumbles. "It can't be."

I wonder again how long it will take me to get that adjusted to the extra energy. "C'mon Clark. I'm already done with my shower."

He snatches at my leg in what looks to be an attempt to pull me back into bed. I laugh as I dart out of the way. "Not right now, mister. You need to get ready and I need to get dressed."

"Spoilsport," he says with a laugh. My being out of range means that whatever is on his mind, he's going to have to get out of bed. I'm pleased that once he's clear of the mattress I feel his arms go around my waist and am treated to a particularly well executed good morning kiss.

As he heads for the shower, I look over my clothes for the day. I've just decided on what to wear when I hear Lara stir. Now this is something for which the super speed works very well. I shift into high-speed mode and dress very quickly. I still remember the first time that I tried high-speed dressing. With his spin, Clark makes it look so easy! Well, it's not. The first time I

tried a high-speed change of clothes, what I got for my trouble was a set of shredded clothes and two buttons buried deep in a nearby wall. However, those problems are past and this morning it's less than a second from the time I hear Lara until I'm fully dressed and standing next to her in her room.

Once Lara is up, the morning takes on a very normal feel. I just don't see our around-the-house routine changing very much because of my powers. While I'm watching Clark prepare breakfast, I do think of something. While neither Clark nor I are at risk of being burned by something too hot or cut accidentally by the careless use of a knife, Lara is. I've noticed that on those occasions when Clark has lost his powers, he often ends up cutting or burning himself in the kitchen. Nothing bad, but he's just not used to being careful. It will be many years until Lara gains her invulnerability and until then we need to be careful not to teach dangerous habits.

When we get in to work, I'm especially glad that we had come into the office for a short time the day after the car bomb. It's going to be hard enough getting back into the swing of work but at least most of the people in the office saw us the other day and know that we're alive and healthy. I think Lara's day-care providers made the biggest fuss. Clark and I had checked in with them, but this was their first chance to fawn-over Lara since the incident.

As I settle in for a morning of trying to return some normalcy to my world, I can't help but be amazed that it's only been three days since that car bomb exploded. Clark and I were in the middle of several investigations when everything got crazy, and I'm having trouble getting back to them. Part of me wants to do something about the people that came after us, but there just isn't any more to that story. All of those responsible are already in jail, and we covered everything else in the after-bomb write up two days ago.

It takes nearly twenty minutes but I finally zero in on an investigation that feels like it has enough meat to help me get back in the groove. During this period, I've sneaked a few looks at Clark. As near as I can tell, he's looking through his work list and doing the same thing that I am. After a call to set up a meeting with a source for later in the day, I feel almost back to normal. This time when I look for Clark, he's not at his desk. I concentrate for just a second and can't help but smile as I lock in on his heartbeat in the storeroom. He's always said that he could do this with me and now I understand. I don't have to make an effort to figure out which heartbeat is his. I just know.

After a few seconds, he emerges and heads toward Perry's office. On the way, he moves past two younger women. One I recognize from research and the other has the look of someone new. As Clark moves on past them, my hearing locks onto something other than Clark's heartbeat.

"Who's that?"

This is from the younger blonde girl that I don't recognize.

"Clark Kent. Isn't he a dream?"

"I'll say!"

"And he's the nicest guy you'll ever meet too."

I know that I shouldn't be listening, but I have to admit that it's fun hearing other women drooling over *my* husband.

"Really? Is he taken?"

You bet he is Blondie!

"Yeah. His wife is Lois Lane. She's the one that they call Mad Dog!"

I didn't think that name was still around.

"Too bad. Why do the good-looking, nice guys always get snapped up by bitchy ice-queens?"

"Be careful. She's right over there."

Suddenly I'm sorry that I've been eavesdropping. While they've been talking I've been feeling my temper rising. It's bad

enough that they're having this conversation while I'm just across the room, but the new girl would have to be a blonde!

"I heard you. Still, I think I should to get to know him. Who knows, he might be interested in someone younger and more capable of appreciating him more than a woman called 'Mad Dog'."

I feel a rush of emotion and a stack of papers right beside the two women bursts into flame. I immediately snap my eyes shut and put my head down until I can get myself under control. Based on the sounds I'm hearing, it seems that the fire is small and quickly contained. Before the commotion even dies down, I feel a familiar hand on my back and hear Clark's voice. "Lois, are you all right?"

I leave my head down and keep my eyes closed. "Yes."

"Honey, what's wrong?"

I whisper to my desktop. "I started that fire!" I know he'll hear me.

Now his face is close to mine. "What happened?"

"One of those women. She was... they were, well, talking about you."

"What. But why?"

I'm keeping my head down but now it's because I'm embarrassed. "They were talking about me too. I must have lost my temper and the fire started. I didn't mean to."

I feel his arms go around me. "It's fine. No one was hurt and there wasn't any damage other than some burned papers. Will you please look at me?"

I'm going to have to do this sooner or later, so I may as well get it over with. What I see when I look up is compassion. Of course, this is Clark, what else would I see? I hadn't realized it, but apparently, I had been crying. As he gently wipes away my tears, I think again about how lucky I am. He starts talking, but his voice is at a whisper so low that I know that only we can hear. "Darling, the heat vision was the trickiest power for me to master. When I was a teenager and this ability first came in, this sort of thing happened several times."

"Really?"

"Yes. That was the time of my life when I learned so much of the restraint that you tease me about. My choices were to either develop a great deal of control over my emotions, or get used to starting fires every time I got upset."

"You're not making this up?" I ask hesitantly.

"No. Next time we're in Smallville, ask Mom or Dad about when the heat vision switched on. There were more than just a few embarrassing fires."

He is *so* good at helping me feel better. "Clark, this never happened when I was Ultra Woman. Once I got used to them, none of the powers ever got away from me like what just happened."

Clark seems to think about this for a moment, and then continues, still in a whisper. "Are there any other differences in the powers that you've noticed?"

"Well, they all seem to be stronger and harder to control than before. This time, it feels like I'm getting more of a result from almost no effort."

"We should talk to Bernie. Remember that last time they were borrowed. I wonder if it's possible that they never were at full strength. Bernie did say that they were fading the whole time you had them."

Suddenly Clark's head pops up and he gets that oh-so-familiar far-away look.

"Is there an emergency?" I ask.

He relaxes and looks back at me. "Yes, but I don't need to go."

"That's another thing that I don't understand. If the powers are stronger, why can't I hear all those emergency calls that you do?"

"I learned that the more I tried to help out, the more I heard. We talked about training yourself not to hear noise in our neighborhood. Well, this is the same, but in an opposite sort of way. If you try to listen for emergency calls all the time, I'm sure that before too long you'll be able to do the same thing."

"In that case I suspect that I'll never develop that talent."

"Maybe not." Then I see a grin develop and he continues.

"But I have a feeling you will train yourself to hear conversations and telephone calls even better than I do."

I can't help but chuckle. "Watch it, mister."

"Anyway, all the powers are like that. Getting them to do exactly what you want takes a lot of work. You're probably going to need to practice controlling all of the powers in their new, stronger form. Like I said, the heat vision can be particularly tricky, but you probably need more practice with all of them."

He pauses for a moment and his expression looks especially thoughtful. "Now that I think about it, I can blame my heat vision for it taking me so long to tell you how I felt about... us."

"You have to explain that."

"When my heat vision was first starting to work, I learned very quickly that any time my emotions flared I would start a fire. I had to work to make sure that my emotions were always under control. You've commented about how calm I tend to be all the time. That's where it came from. Think about your average teenage boy with all the hormones surging. Now, think about me. I had to keep a very tight rein on my feelings all the time. I spent years concentrating on being calm, in control and... cautious. Sometimes I think that having to control my heat vision changed my entire personality."

"Okay, but why do you say that delayed your being more truthful about your feelings?"

"Lois, I was crazy about you from the moment we met. I should have just asked you out as Superman and been done with it. Even as myself, I could have been more obvious about my interest in pursuing a personal relationship. The cautious streak kept telling me to go slow. One of the things that I've learned from you is that overcautious isn't always the best approach."

I'm feeling better now. It helps to learn that even Clark had troubles at first. However, I can't let him off too easily. "Clark, I knew the day you arrived that there were a *lot* of things I could teach you."

Chapter 3

It only takes a few days to get into the rhythm of living with the powers. I have to say that I like the advantages that these abilities, particularly the super speed, bring to getting ready for work in the morning. Over the course of this past week, I've gotten into the habit of doing almost everything in the morning at super speed, except, of course, showering.

Work has turned out to be surprisingly unaffected by my new abilities. I've managed to avoid starting any more fires at the office, but then again, I haven't seen the blonde girl since that one day. I wonder if she somehow sensed that she was the inadvertent target of that thermal outburst. So far, I haven't had the opportunity to take advantage of my, um, upgrades. Based on years of working with my husband, I believe that the x-ray vision and hearing will be the most useful during an assignment, but that's still to be tested.

Today we're working on an investigation into some allegations of bribery in city government. We're just getting ready to break for lunch when I see Clark get that familiar far-away look on his face. I know that there's no point in asking what's going on until his mind returns. Part of me is still annoyed that I don't hear those emergency calls, but just the same, I haven't made any real effort to train my hearing to pick them up. In an almost abrupt movement, Clark leans in close and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Gotta go," he whispers and rushes for

the stairwell.

At just that second, Perry comes walking up. “Where’s he off to in such a hurry?”

I’m long used to these questions by now. “Just one of his skittish sources,” I reply with a casual tone. “Clark has always had this habit of making connections that don’t feel comfortable around women. He has this great network of contacts that don’t like to talk with me there.”

Perry sighs. “I guess it’s a good thing you’re past your ‘Don’t trust anyone’ phase. There was a time when this would have driven you crazy with doubt thinking that your partner might be hiding something from you.”

“Well, you know his running off all the time almost broke us up in the early days. Getting to understand and trust him and what he was doing was part of the breakthrough that allowed us to be together.”

Just then, there was a shout of “Look at this!” from across the room. The bullpen television, which is kept on at all times in case of breaking news, was showing a picture of what looked to be the 53rd Street Bridge.

The image is an aerial shot of the bridge that appears to be coming from a news helicopter. Between the smallness of the screen and the image motion, it’s hard to make out a lot of detail. There’s a column of smoke coming from the south end of the bridge. The smoke is an inky black color that I’ve seen before in fires where oil or gasoline is involved. As we watch, the helicopter moves in for a closer view. Now we can see dark red flames at the base of the smoke.

The fire seems to be so broad that the entire bridge roadway is blocked. This is particularly dangerous on this bridge since it always operates as one-way traffic flow. On many bridges, if one direction is blocked, the other lane is available for evacuation or emergency vehicles. On this bridge, with the road blocked the way it is now by this fire, the only way off the bridge is to backtrack. With the accident at the very southern end of the bridge, and the bridge itself completely clogged with traffic, this is a particularly dangerous situation.

“Turn up the volume,” Perry shouts.

Someone must have found the remote for the television, because suddenly we can hear the audio feed. “...a tanker truck loaded with what looks like either fuel oil or gasoline was involved. We don’t know the details of what triggered this accident, but it’s clear that the resulting fire spread quickly and closed down the southbound traffic flow of the bridge. Superman arrived a moment ago and is presently working to get everyone clear of the fire.”

I see Perry look around quickly. “Samuelson, get down there now!”

“On it, Chief!” and he runs for the elevator.

I’m about to demand that I should have this story, but before I can say anything Perry turns to me and says, “Lois, I know what you’re going to say. Before you do, I’ll remind you that we had this talk a few years back, and Superman stories get spread around to the whole staff. It seems clear that this story falls into that category.”

I’m actually caught with my mouth open, but manage to stop myself before I say anything. It only takes a second to register that this is the correct decision. “Okay, Perry. I hate missing this, but you’re right.”

As I turn back to the screen, a second voice comes in on the television audio feed. This sounds like an in-studio anchor. “Jim, do you have any idea why Superman hasn’t put out the fire?”

“When he first arrived a moment ago, it appeared to us that he was making an effort to do just that. However, it didn’t seem to work, and he quickly switched to getting people clear of the fire. I’m guessing that he felt it would be more effective to get all the people out of the area first. I wouldn’t be surprised to see him

make another effort to put the fire out after all the people are clear.”

As the reporter continues, Perry turns back to me and asks, “Isn’t the 53rd Street Bridge the one you were investigating as part of the corruption scandal that you and Clark did last year?”

“Yes. We were following a money trail of contractors that did substandard work on a variety of city projects. There was some major maintenance done on that bridge last year and it appeared that there may have been some shortcuts taken in both materials and workmanship. However, as hard as we tried, Clark and I couldn’t find any proof of problems with the work on that project.”

Perry considered this for a second. “Do you think that bridge is safe?”

“I don’t know. You know as well as I do that in many cases, the lack of proof doesn’t mean that the problem doesn’t exist.”

I turn my attention back to the images and reports from the accident. “...appears that on this day, the traffic going across the bridge was composed mostly of trucks carrying gravel to the new Millennium City development complex.”

Up until that moment, I hadn’t given any thought to the load on the bridge. The fire is at the south end of the bridge and as the camera pans north from the accident scene, it looks like there was some sort of convoy of gravel trucks. This reminds me of our research on the bridge. The maintenance work that we investigated had been related to concerns about the overall structural integrity of this bridge. There were questions about its ability to carry heavy loads. Projections of the load requirements for the Millennium City project had triggered the maintenance work in the first place.

As we watch, Clark shifts his attention to the fire itself. He’s using the freeze breath to put out the fire starting from one side of the roadway. As he blows on the fire, I can see splattering of the burning liquid onto surrounding vehicles. If there had been people trapped in those cars and trucks when Clark arrived, I can see why he worked first to get the people clear. In only a few seconds, the fire is just about out. I breathe a sigh of relief. This had the look of something that could have gone very wrong.

Suddenly, the section of the bridge adjacent to where the fire was burning gives a sharp jerk and drops about six feet. Now the voice of the reporter covering the accident takes on an air of panic. “It appears that either the accident or the fire must have damaged the bridge. I can see bending metal and the bridge is twisting in a way that doesn’t look right. I think this section of the bridge is about to collapse!”

Clark disappears from the image of the fire clean-up. Only a second later the camera finds him holding up the bridge. The image zooms out and I can now see that people are practically leaping from their vehicles and running to get off the bridge. Unfortunately, the fire had not been completely out. As soon as Clark stopped blowing on it, the fire surged back and was now completely blocking the road. Since the fire was between them and the nearest end of the bridge, the people are fleeing back toward the north end where there was no impediment to getting off the bridge.

While Clark is holding the bridge, I can tell that he’s using his x-ray vision to watch the people flee. It’s only been a second or two since the bridge dropped but already there are only a few that are still in their cars. The roadway north is now crowded with people who have decided that it was past time to get out of their vehicles and off the bridge. Without warning, the camera jerks to the north end of the bridge. This section is now choked with people fleeing the collapsing section. Progress is slow because this part of the bridge is full of vehicles. As I look at the image of this section of the bridge, I realize that there seems to be a concentration of those gravel trucks all near each other. As the image steadies on this part of the bridge, the deck drops in a way

that resembles what happened at the south end of the bridge near the fire.

The voice of the reporter now becomes frantic. "...looks like there may be a similar problem at the north end of the bridge. I don't know if it's the gravel trucks, the extra weight of the people or if the fire has compromised the overall structural integrity of the bridge. Whatever the cause, that section of the bridge looks like it's about to give way! There must be a couple of hundred people on that part of the bridge!"

I can't believe I'm watching this. Clark is still supporting the bridge near the fire. Most of the people are now clear, and he's trying to hold it just long enough to provide an escape for the stragglers. Some of the people have only just left their vehicles. Among these are some elderly and a few women with small children that aren't moving very quickly.

There must have been a second camera crew in the area because the image switches to a split-screen. One image is a wide shot of the bridge and the other is a close up of Clark. I can see him glancing back and forth between the two collapsing sections of the bridge. His face is a picture of worry. Somehow I know that he's wondering if he could move fast enough to release the bridge and move the remaining people at super speed before the bridge gives way.

With no further warning, the north end of the bridge gives another lurch. However, this time instead of stopping after a few feet, the bridge deck only slows down. It seems inevitable that unless Clark moves right now, many of the people that are still trying to get off the north end of the bridge will die.

With a look of anguish on his face, Clark seems to disappear. The next instant, the north end of the bridge stops falling and rises back to the original level. People are running now and it looks like the kind of situation where someone is going to be trampled.

Now the split image is showing both damaged areas of the bridge. Clark is holding the north section, but most of his attention seems directed toward the south end. Not even a full second passes when, with a huge tearing sound, the section of the bridge near the fire collapses. The television camera zooms in just enough to see the cars and trucks falling to their destruction.

Mixed in among the debris are the unmistakable shapes of at least one pair of bodies.

Chapter 4

"Darlin, are you all right?"

That's Perry's voice. Where am I? Somehow, I seem to be lying on the ground. As the world comes into focus, I see Perry and Jimmy, their heads close together, looking down at me.

"What happened?" I ask.

It's Perry that responds. "Lois, I don't know. What do you remember?"

I think for a second. "I saw the bridge collapse. I saw people..." Then I remember. I was watching the television and saw the debris falling when the bridge began to collapse. Then my vision blinked and I was seeing the collapse from another angle. Then it hits me, I was seeing through Clark's eyes. I remember a series of images. There was debris... an old man... a little girl. Then I felt a wave of despair such as I've never felt before, and everything went black. My God! I was linked in to Clark's mind! I remember what Jonathan and Martha said they felt when Clark thought I was dead. Clark and I already share a bond and now with this Kryptonian... crap... in my system, I got his shock of seeing those people die with both barrels.

I realize Perry is waiting for me to continue. "Perry, I don't know. I saw the collapse. There was stuff falling and... Were there people?" Perry's response is a solemn nod. "That's the last thing I remember. How long was I out?"

"Less than a minute. Are you okay? Are you sure you didn't

hurt yourself when you fell? You collapsed like an old accordion."

"Perry, I'm fine." How do I explain that I could fall off the building and not be hurt?

Then he gets a very fatherly look on his face. "Lois, are you pregnant again?"

I raise my eyebrows at him. "I had a complete physical check up after the car bombing the other day. I'm not pregnant." I need to compose myself. "It's just... when those people fell from the bridge..."

Perry reaches out and puts his hand on my shoulder. "I know. I'm just a bit surprised that you reacted like this. You've seen tragic news before. Do you need to go home?"

"No. I should be here. What's the situation?"

Perry looks over to the television for just an instant before responding. "Superman is still supporting the bridge. It looks like the rest of the people will get off safely now. I have a team on the way for general reaction." He pauses and looks at me very intently. "I need someone to get Superman's reaction. After what just happened, I think this is too personal for Samuelson. Are you up to interviewing Superman and writing the story?"

Normally he wouldn't even ask. My fainting must have him unusually flustered. I gather myself and respond with as strong a tone as I can muster. "Superman won't be talking to any press right away. He'll be torn up at what happened and I'm sure he'll leave the scene as soon as the emergency is past. When he's ready to talk, I'm sure Clark and I will be able to get an exclusive. But Perry, I think we need to tread carefully on this. I know he's always sensitive when he can't save people. The way this played out right in front of him... I could tell from the camera angle that he was watching when it came down. He's going to be very upset about this"

"Darlin' I know that. I also know that despite the efforts to maintain a public distance, you're close to him. Use your best judgment when you write the story. We don't need to sensationalize this. He tried his best. But the public will want to know his perspective on what happened."

Clark and I are lucky to be working for Perry. "I can get that story later. For now, I want to pull all the information that we have on that bridge. I want to review the notes from the cost-cutting investigation and see if there's enough to develop a sidebar on the main collapse story."

I start to stand and Jimmy moves in quickly to help me up.

It's more than two hours later when I trudge up the stairs in front of our home. On most days, this scene plays out with the three of us together. Lately it's been either Clark or me helping Lara navigate the stairs, but today I'm alone. While I was researching the bridge, I called Mom and asked if she could take Lara for a few hours. I hope I'm making the right call on this. Clark loves seeing his daughter but I think this will go better if it's just the two of us. He's going to be devastated. It might help to have Lara's energy, but it may be the last thing he needs right now. I'm guessing that this will go better if he can feel free to let go of some of the pain. If I've guessed wrong, we can just go over and pick her up. Besides, I have some issues of my own that will be better handled if it's just the two of us.

I haven't heard from my husband, but I just know he's here. It would be neat to claim it's more of that telepathy, but this is simple logic. Clark will be devastated and I'm sure he won't want to be around anyone where he has to hide his feelings.

As soon as I'm in the doorway, I can hear his heart beating. Over the past few days, I've learned that I can tune the hearing and listen for many things. However, Clark's heartbeat is different. Like what happened the day I started the fire, when it's his heartbeat, I just hear it. I don't have to try, it just happens. Most of the time, I notice it when he's coming down the stairwell

after a Superman outing. Sometimes I pick it up when the elevator door opens. Whatever the reason, it's a nice experience. It's just a way of knowing that all is right with my world.

He's sitting in the middle of the room. The shades are drawn and it's dark. That really doesn't make much difference to us with our ability to see in the dark, but there's a feeling of darkness just the same. I move over to him without saying a word. As I sit down next to him, I make sure to sit so closely that our hips are touching. He's a very tactile person and right now, he needs me in his personal space.

After a few seconds, I open with a simple, "Hi."

He leans into me. I can feel the anguish. "I tried so hard," he says. It's almost a sob.

"Clark, you did your best."

"It wasn't enough."

"If you weren't there, many more people would have died today."

"Lois, I watched the bridge collapse."

"You had no choice. The bridge is over a half-mile long. That section of the bridge was already collapsing. Had you left for even a second, many more people that were on the section that you were supporting would have died."

He takes a deep breath. "I could see the people in the debris."

Now isn't the time to tell him that I know exactly what he saw and felt. It's one thing to hear about a tragedy after the fact, but to watch helplessly... Clark isn't used to that.

After a brief pause he continues. "There was a family on the section that fell. Lois, there were children!"

I see tears start to trickle from his eyes and pull him to me. For the next fifteen minutes or so, we just hold each other. I wonder how the people of Metropolis would react if they know that the mighty Superman was at home weeping. Eventually I can tell that the outburst has run its course and he asks, "Where's Lara?"

"She's at my mom's. I thought you might need a few minutes of quiet time."

He takes my chin in his hand and gently turns my face to his. "You are so thoughtful. I'm better now. Why don't we go get our daughter?"

His smile always lights up my world. However, now it's time for me to unload a bit of my burden. "Clark, before we pick up Lara, we need to talk about something else. The tragedy today wasn't your fault."

"I know that. It just that..."

I cut him off. "No. You don't understand. It was *my* fault!"

"Lois, honey. What are you talking about?"

Through a growing torrent of tears I reply, "Those people... It's my fault that they died." I lean heavily into him as I feel an overwhelming surge of emotion. When I first sat next to Clark, there was a sense of my giving support and energy to him. Now we seem to have done an about-face. I can tell by the feel of his arms around me that now he's more worried about me. He knows me well enough not to ask any more just yet. Right now, I need to let go and feel his arms around me.

After a minute or so, my burst of emotion has run its course and the tears are subsiding. I'm ready to talk but I don't want to leave his embrace, so his shoulder will hear my confession. "Remember that city maintenance corruption piece we did last year?"

He tries to reply. "Yes, but..."

"Clark! Let me finish!" I snap back at him. "While you were still at the bridge, I went back to our notes from that investigation. I thought that in light of the collapse we might be able to use some of that data, even if there wasn't any conclusive evidence of wrongdoing. Well, when I went over the information of the bridge again, I found it. I was able to close the gap in the money trail. I traced the documents where funds were allocated

for work and material. There was another document where the materials were purchased and the work was performed. The materials were way below spec for that job. I'm the one that reviewed those documents for our initial investigation. I missed the link!" The last sentence was almost a scream. "If I would have done my job properly in the first place, that bridge could have been repaired." I pull him to me more tightly and just hold on for a moment.

Finally, I hear his voice. "Honey, you can't take all this blame. You weren't the one that did the shoddy work. And you also know that sometimes, no matter how hard we try, we still miss things."

"I know! But, Clark, the people that died today..."

"Sometimes those things happen. How many times have you told me I can't do everything?"

There is a long moment of silence. Finally I spit out what's really bothering me the most. "Clark, this time could have been different. Ultra Woman could have held up the other end of that bridge."

Clark is trying his best to help me through this. "Honey, be fair to yourself. It all happened very quickly. I know you well enough to be sure that you didn't watch the events unfold and make some kind of decision to stay out of it."

"No. When the report came in, you were already there and my first thought was to cover it as a reporter. When Perry sent Samuelson, I relaxed and became a... spectator." How best to address this? After a second I ask, "When you see something like this unfold, what's your first reaction?"

Clark looks uncomfortable with this question. "Lois, I..."

"We both know the answer so please just humor me and say it."

He takes a deep breath before responding quietly. "I think about what I can do to help."

"Of course. But today I never had that thought until after it was over. I didn't make a conscious decision to not help, but this time I never thought about helping either. All I did was watch! I don't know if I would have been able to act in time to help but I never even thought to try. I can't let this happen again!" The last line is barely a whisper.

Clark is quiet for a long time. Finally, he seems to decide on what to say. "We've been through this. Even if you recreate Ultra Woman, we can't save everyone. Doing this won't bring those people back!"

He means well but that was the wrong thing to say and my reply carries an angry edge. "Don't you think I know that! But, I can't do this again. Even between the two of us, I know that we won't be able to do everything. I have to be ready the next time something like this happens." Then I go on in a much softer tone. "I need to be ready."

Clark's reply is in careful tones. "If you're sure, you know I'll do everything I can to make this work. What about our talk the other day? What about Lara?"

I'm glad I didn't have to argue about this. He knows he would have lost. "This will have to be a very part-time job for me. Everything we said the other day still applies. Ultra Woman will have to be off-duty most of the time. I'm not about to try to step up to your level of hero work. I just can't face the prospect again where I know that I could have made a real difference, but wasn't ready to act."

My husband is looking at me with an intensity that, back in the old days I would have only associated with Superman. "Honey, please think about this some more before committing to a decision. If Ultra Woman starts making appearances, even if they are rare, there are going to be questions."

He's right. However I feel today, this can't be a spur-of-the-moment decision. "I promise I'll think about it some more and we will talk again before I make a final decision."

“That’s all I can ask. So, are we ready to get Lara?”
I manage a small smile as I stand up. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 5

We’re supposed to be out on a date tonight. Who ever heard of spending a date on the roof of a high-security lab standing by the secret entrance? However, by Lane and Kent standards, maybe this should qualify as a typical date.

Lara is with Mom and Dad. They love the chance to be grandparents together when babysitting Lara, and they’re always our first call when looking for that service. There are definitely some benefits to them being in on Clark’s secret. We can do things like go to Paris for dinner and not have to make up flimsy excuses about what we really did any given evening. Even those little lies add up and weigh on you. Given the naturally honest nature of my husband, I just don’t see how Clark did it all those years.

We’re still trying to figure out how to tell them what has happened to me. I guess that part of the problem is that we never did get around to deliberately telling them about Clark. Their knowledge of the Superman secret still makes me nervous, but the Christmas thing just happened so fast. For good or not, it did happen, and one of the results is that we never had to think of a good way to bring them in on the secret. Now that we have a new secret, we need to deal with that sort of thing again. I’m sure I’m not going to wait very long, but I want to do it my way. Clark has threatened that if I don’t tell them within a month, he’ll do it himself.

We’ve been on the roof of Star Labs for less than a minute when Bernie lets us in. His greeting is cheerful as always. “Lois, Clark, how are you this evening? How is Lara?”

“We’re all fine. Lara is doing well. She’s with her grandparents,” Clark answers.

“It’s always nice to see you but I gather that this isn’t a social call,” Bernie says.

We look at each other for just an instant before Clark nods ever so slightly as a signal for me to go ahead. “Bernie, I’ve decided that I’m going to have Ultra Woman return.”

I expect a strong reaction but he only raises an eyebrow slightly. “I guess I can’t say that I’m too surprised. May I ask what prompted this decision?”

“There were a couple of things. You know that Clark and I both feel that having these powers carries a certain responsibility. Well, after that disaster last week, I decided that I have to be ready to help the next time something happens that Clark can’t handle alone.”

Bernie looks very concerned. “I had guessed that accident was hard on both of you. But I’m sure you aren’t here just to tell me that Ultra Woman is about to make a return.”

Clark addresses this. “Actually, that is a major part of it. You’re our friend and the only non-family member that knows our secret. Since you already know about Lois, we don’t want you to find out that she has entered the um... ‘family business’ by seeing a news report.”

A blush colors Bernie’s face. “Thank you both. I’m touched that you would think to include me.”

I reach out and put my hand on his shoulder. “You know we think of you as part of the family. But you’re right. We would have just invited you over for dinner if that was all there was. I was wondering if it would be possible for you to work up a testing program for my abilities. I’d like to be extra sure that I’m ready for using the powers the way that Clark does. You told us that the powers were actually fading the whole time that I was Ultra Woman. Knowing that has left me wanting to be extra cautious.”

As I’m saying those words, his expression is changing from a neutral smile to one where he is grinning like the Cheshire Cat. I

need to remember this moment next time Bernie needs cheering up. The idea of developing a set of tests of my powers seems to be going over well.

“Lois, that sounds like a great idea. We can start with some detailed biofield scans. I already have a blood workup from just a few days ago but it would be great if we could get another sample. A matching set of scans and blood work will probably give us everything we need to start. I can spend the next few days developing a plan for testing that will allow us to establish a baseline to see if your powers are changing in any way.

The rest of the visit consists of measurements and samples. I’ve gotten more used to that awful Green Kryptonite needle that he uses to draw blood, but I’m sure I’ll never like it. After about an hour, we finish up with the tests that Bernie can think of as a starting point. The last thing we do is discuss having him over for dinner one evening within the next week or so to go over the plan for monitoring my powers. With that, we leave Star Labs and decide to spend the rest of the evening having a real date. After all, we already have babysitting taken care of. What parents of a one-year-old would pass on a chance for a romantic dinner out?

There is a special joy of soaring at 1000 mile per hour in the open air. I don’t even know how to describe it. Up until Clark, no one knew this feeling. Now it’s something we share, and I am so looking forward to flying with Lara when she acquires this power. For now, I’m flying just below Clark. He’s carrying Lara who’s sleeping in her daddy’s arms. Since he’s flying with her, he’s wearing the red and blue suit.

We struggled with how to handle the family flights between Smallville and Metropolis. When Lara was a baby we never worried. I would carry her and Clark would carry me. Now it’s different. She’ll be talking soon, and we would rather avoid having to explain why she keeps talking about the times she flew with her parents. For now, we’re trying to keep three rules. Rule number one is to always start with her asleep. We can make the trip so fast that she probably won’t wake up until we are there. Rule two is that Clark always carries her wearing the suit. That way if she does wake up, any memories will be of being carried by Superman, not by her daddy. And finally, the newest rule, don’t let her see me fly. Although, if Ultra Woman does come back, I could probably fly with her as long as I’m in uniform. When she gets a little older, these trips will have to stop. Even being friends with Superman, it would be hard to explain why we have Superman and Ultra Woman fly her to her grandparents’ house for weekend visits.

This is to be a family meeting in Smallville to let Martha and Jonathan know that I am going to be Ultra Woman on a part time basis. Clark and I have talked twice more in the week since the bridge collapse. I’m glad that Clark has been here to help talk these things through, but by the second day after the incident, I was certain about what I was going to do. Having these powers is a great responsibility. I would like to think that even without Clark to have shown the way, I would still feel that having these powers means that there is a responsibility to use them in a certain way. I just don’t know what I would have done had Clark not already set the example. What I do know, is that I’ve seen what Clark does as Superman. Having lived that through him and as myself as Ultra Woman the first time, I can’t just stand by.

Recreating Ultra Woman is going to be a difficult balance. When it became clear how serious I was, Clark started going on about how the role can take over your life. He reminded me of all the difficulties we had when we were getting close and, even though he knew that his disappearances were hurting my feelings, he kept running off to be Superman anyway. I know he means well but I won’t let that happen. I reminded him that I’m several years older than he was back then and I have a much better support system in place to remind me of my priorities.

As we near Smallville, Clark pulls in along side me and we fly silently side by side. He turns toward me and says, “She isn’t going to wake up now.” I can see that she looks to be in a deep sleep in her father’s arms. He pulls in closer so that we’re actually in contact while flying. At times like this, I wonder which is better, flying on my own or being carried by Clark? Flying is wonderful, but there’s a special feeling to be in the arms of my husband. I felt it that first time when he carried me back from the space center and I’ve loved it every time since then. However much I love flying alone, I miss that sense of connection and completeness that comes from being in his arms.

After only a few moments of that, we’re over Smallville. It’s after dark so there’s no danger in us making a gradual descent to the farmhouse. Shortly thereafter, we’re seated in the living room. Martha is holding Lara, who is still sleeping blissfully.

“How are you two doing? What’s news in Metropolis?” Jonathan asks.

“We’re fine. I guess the big news is still the aftermath of that bridge collapse,” Clark replies.

At this, Martha looks up and Jonathan’s expression turns very somber as he continues. “Yeah, I figured that would be on your mind. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” Clark replies. “Right at first, I was distraught about what happened. But I had to learn a long time ago that even Superman can’t do everything.” He squeezes my hand before continuing. “I just don’t know how I got through things like this before I had Lois to lean on.”

I have to cut in here. “Honey, you always had me to lean on. I remember a few times from those first years. I wouldn’t know why you would be so depressed some days, but I could tell that my partner occasionally needed a little extra support.”

He flashes that devastating smile at me. “True, but it’s been so much better since I can talk about what’s really bothering me at times like this.” He turns his attention back to his parents and continues. “So after the incident, Lois came home and found me sitting in a dark room. Well, like always, she got me straightened out and I’m ready to move on as best I can. However... Well, Lois, why don’t you tell the next part?”

How can this make me so nervous? “Well, Clark isn’t the only one that was shaken up by what happened. Have you seen the news reports?” I pause as they both nod. “Because of the way Clark was holding up the bridge, he was looking right at the damaged section at the far end. When it collapsed, he used his special vision to watch the accident.”

“Lois, I swear...”

I raise my hand to cut him off, and then continue. “I guess it was the anxiety of the moment or something but one instant I was standing in the newsroom at the Planet and the next I have a vision of zooming in on the collapsing section of the bridge. When it fell, Clark was looking at those people that didn’t get away. Thanks to that Kryptonian telepathy, when it happened I was looking through his eyes.”

Clark squeezes my hand. “Honey, I’m really sorry. I would never have done that to you on purpose.”

“I know. But I think the whole awful experience just accelerated the process. I suspect that we would have ended up here before too long no matter what.” I turn back to Martha and Jonathan. “As you’ve probably already guessed, after seeing what happened to Clark and considering my own feelings, we’ve decided that Ultra Woman will make a return.”

Jonathan looked mildly surprised but Martha barely batted an eye. “What about Lara and your career?” she asks. “I seem to remember that we went over all this recently in this very house.”

“You’re right Martha. What’s changed is that I’ve come to realize that I can’t just sit on the sidelines even if I want to. I believe in what I said before, and Lara definitely comes first. Most of the time, Clark handles things just fine without any help.

It’s only because he almost always finds a way on his own that I think this may work. However, there will be times that I can make a difference because Clark is either busy somewhere else or just plain needs help. Now I know that I have to be ready when that time comes again. I guess that what’s really changed is that when we had this talk last week, I was thinking about being Ultra Woman the way that Clark is Superman. That’s a full time job and it wouldn’t work for all the reasons that we talked about before. Now we’re talking about a part time job where I would only appear when I am really needed. It’s going to be a hard balance but I feel like I have to try to find a way to make it work.”

I pause for a moment to see what their reaction will be. Finally, it’s Jonathan that breaks the silence. “As soon as you appear, there are going to be questions. You’ll need to think through the answers carefully ahead of time. Some of those reporters are awfully smart.” He’s looking at me in a way that tells me just what smart reporter he’s thinking of right now. I love being a member of this family!

“Clark and I have already talked about this. We actually have several reasons for making the trip here tonight. First, we wanted to tell you in person about the change in plan for Ultra Woman. Second, we wanted to bounce some ideas off you about that exact back-story. And finally...” I turn to Martha and have to fight down an attack of nervousness. “Martha... I, um... Well, I really like the Ultra Woman costume but I was wondering if we could do it again.”

Martha seems amused by this. “You know I’ll be happy to make more copies of your uniform.”

“Well — what I’d really like is something a little different. Clark and I have been talking, and if I’m going to do this I want a uniform that is more — well me.”

“I can understand that,” Martha replies. “So just exactly what are you thinking?”

“Well, there are three things. First, no more hot pink. Second, I want to do something different with the mask.”

I pause for just a second. So far so good. Martha doesn’t seem bothered by these changes.

“And...” Martha asked.

“And, no cape.”

We spend much of the rest of the evening convincing the master tailor that, with the right design, a cape is not necessary. It’s a long discussion.

Chapter 6

Bernie is having dinner at our house this evening. He’s actually very pleasant company but, as is often the case, his presence has an ulterior motive. The real reason for this visit tonight is to bring an update on the state of my abilities and go over the plan for continued testing. We’ve just adjourned to the living room and it’s time to get down to the business that has brought him here tonight. Ever since the first time he came over when we sprang the secret of Clark’s identity on him, we’ve made a rule of no shop-talk before dinner.

Since this is about me, I get things started. “Bernie, from what you said on the phone, I guess you have some information on my abilities. You seem very relaxed tonight. Does that mean it’s fair to say you haven’t found anything wrong?”

“You’re right Lois. Although when I first worked up the numbers from the tests, I was so worried that I almost called you.”

“What do you mean?”

“There was a small but measurable decrease in the strength of your biofield. When I first saw it... well, it alarmed me. I almost called to warn you against using the powers until I could figure out what was going on.”

Clark is on the edge of his seat and just has to say something.

“Since you didn’t call, I guess it turned out to be all right?”

“Fortunately, I remained composed enough to wait before calling. I went ahead and finished the blood work. I found the KE concentration to be the same in that sample as it had been in the previous one. Since I expect there to be a direct correlation between the KE concentration and the intensity of your Kryptonian biofield, I figured there had to be something else going on. I reviewed the tests once more and verified that the numbers were correct. The decrease in field strength was very small but measurable. Then it hit me... You’ll never guess what it was.” Bernie pauses as if he’s actually expecting us to have the answer. He really should be a teacher.

“Allergies?” I offer, mostly to give him an excuse to move on.

He chuckles at this. “No. Think about it, when did I take the last scan?”

Clark answers. “It was in the evening.”

“Yes!” he exclaims. Bernie can be very excitable. “And how did you get to the labs that evening?”

My turn. “We flew.”

“Don’t you see? You were using the powers at night. We did the previous scan during the day. The difference was due to your use of the abilities without the sun to replenish your energy reserves. I went back and reviewed some of the scans I’ve taken of Clark and found essentially the same variance in his biofield as well. Anyway, it turned out to be a false alarm. I do have a new list of tests that I’d love to run some time to track energy depletion from use of the powers at night.”

“Maybe some other time,” I reply. “But for now are you telling me there’s no point in running any tests?”

“No Lois, not at all. Of course, based on the evidence we have, I don’t think you have to worry. However, I understand you want to be extra careful. I have a full set of tests that I’d like to run. Based on this discovery, I believe we should make a point to collect the data under as similar conditions as possible. Since the first one was at night, we should to continue to take data at about the same time in the same way. I’d like to get biofield scans at twice a week and a blood sample once a week for at least three more weeks.”

He’s looking at me expectantly. “Do we have to do the blood samples?” I feel like a little kid, but I hate needles.

His expression is sympathetic but I can tell he’s not going to budge on this. “I’m afraid so. It’s the only way I can track the KE concentration. That element is crucial. I promise that after the third sample, unless we find something wrong, we’ll reduce the blood samples to no more than one per month.”

“I hate needles.” I say softly. “But, okay.”

“I have a few more tests in mind, but the biofield scans and the blood samples are the core of what we’ll be doing. Can you come to the lab tomorrow evening?”

I look over at Clark and he gives me one of those “whatever you want to do” looks that husbands have given their wives since the dawn of time. “Tomorrow will be fine,” I reply.

“Great,” he says. His smile is entirely too big. Of course it’s great since he’s not the one getting stuck with a Kryptonite needle.

I think Clark is in a hurry to get my mind off the needle. “So, was there anything else relating to Lois or the powers that you wanted to talk about tonight?”

Bernie replies with an air of nervousness. “Actually, there is. Thanks to all the information I’ve been able to gather over the past year or so, since you’ve given me more access to you both, I’ve made a huge breakthrough in understanding how some of the powers work. I’d like your permission to publish some of the results.”

Now Clark looks excited. “What have you found?”

“It all goes back to the first thing you did as Superman. You

know, when you lifted the space transport into orbit.”

My turn to smile. “We’re unlikely to forget that day.”

“Yes. Anyway, that particular feat has always bothered me. I could never quite come to grips as to how you lifted it. You see, if it was just about strength, you couldn’t have lifted the space transport.”

“Bernie, I’m not sure I’m following you. I’m *very* strong.”

“But Clark, there are two other factors. First, no matter how strong your body is, there is the issue of lifting force. You might be strong enough to bench-press a million tons but when you fly, the lifting force needs to come from somewhere other than the strength of your body. The space transport weighed well over 100 tons. That’s an enormous amount of lift. Then there is a second problem. I’ve watched the film of when you lifted it into orbit. Clark, to put it bluntly, you grabbed it in the wrong place.”

Clark looks pained now. “Bernie, could you please get to the point?”

“Clark, the space transport was intended to be lifted in only one way. The mechanical structure was designed to be able to support its mass only if it were lifted at certain strong points. It had to be that way to keep the weight as low as possible. You just grabbed it on a convenient surface. It should have collapsed from the mechanical stress as soon as you attempted to lift it.”

“You know that didn’t happen. I’ve carried lots of things without having them collapse.”

“But that’s exactly it. That should happen all the time when you move or carry very heavy objects, but it doesn’t.”

“So, you think you know why?”

“Have either of you ever heard of a Higgs boson or a Higgs field?”

I’m staring blankly but Clark comes up with something. “Isn’t it some kind of subatomic particle?”

“Yes. It’s never been observed but it’s generally believed to exist. Trying to find it is one of the reasons they’re building the giant LHC collider at CERN in Europe. Higgs interactions are the difference between particles that have mass and those that don’t.”

Clark and I have learned it’s generally a good idea to let Bernie keep on going at times like this. We may not understand most of it but there is often something in there that will be important later. “I’m not sure I’m following you,” I say.

“How about this? Think of a photon and an electron. One is a packet of light energy. The other is a piece of matter. The photon has a mass of zero and the electron has mass. At the quantum level, they’re both fundamentally packets of energy. The difference... The *big* difference between them, is that the electron has a Higgs interaction and the photon doesn’t. Everything we call matter is only like that because of a Higgs interaction at the subatomic level. A stronger Higgs interaction results in the particle having a greater mass. If there was some way to reduce the Higgs interaction of matter, you would effectively reduce the mass.”

“So you think that’s what I did with the space transport?”

“Yes, but there’s more. I believe that’s what you do whenever you use many of your powers. Think about when you move something at super speed. I’m sure you’ve taken some physics. Did you ever think to calculate the acceleration induced g-forces involved whenever you move yourself or anything else at super speed?”

Now Clark looks embarrassed. “Bernie, I was Journalism major. I didn’t take much physics.”

“Oh. Well, when I started considering this family of problems, it was one of the first things I did. Based on the measurements we’ve taken relating to the way you move at super speed, the forces involved are staggering. I can assure you that every person you have ever moved at super speed should have been killed instantly from the g-force shock. But, as with the lifting, that hasn’t happened. The only explanation I could find

seemed to be that your Kryptonian biofield has the ability to alter Higgs interactions and thereby reduce mass and inertia substantially. So, when you lifted the space transport, as long as you were holding it and extending your biofield, the mass wasn't a hundred tons, it was probably substantially less than a ton. And when you move at super speed I suspect your mass, and that of whatever you're holding, is damped almost down to zero."

Clark seems to be following this better than I am so I'm happy to let him ask the questions. "I think I follow all this, but if you just want to publish a theory of how my powers work, I don't think you need my permission."

"Clark, it's more than a theory. I've found evidence indicating that Higgs dampening is happening. Your biofield seems to have the ability to interact with all the fundamental forces. I believe your ability to fly is a complex interaction of mass neutralization and the ability to manipulate gravitational and electromagnetic fields. I have data from tests on your biofield showing some of the effects of the process. I'd like your permission to release some of the data."

Something isn't quite right. "Bernie, you seem awfully nervous about this. What is it about publishing this information that's making you so jumpy?"

He looks almost relieved to have the question asked. "If I publish my findings, it will open up multiple paths of research relating to Higgs dampening. If the research pans out, it would lead to devices that are almost limitless in their potential."

"I believe you," Clark says. "From the way you are acting, there must be a down side to releasing the information."

"There is," Bernie replies gravely. "Understanding these forces could lead to machines that could neutralize your abilities. If those were to get into the wrong hands..."

"If you publish your research, were you planning to include information linking the powers to the KEs in our blood?"

"No. That information isn't necessary. The existence of KEs is the one piece of information I treat as the most secret of all. I haven't shared it with anyone and I don't think you should either. For this publication, my expectation was to simply describe that you have the ability to affect Higgs interactions. Consequently, I would be describing the biofield but not its source."

I can see Clark wants to help, but he also having flashbacks to Jonathan's "they'll dissect you like a frog" warning. Finally he asks, "Is there any way to do this Higgs dampening without my or Lois's help?"

"No."

"With this information, how long is it likely to be before anyone invents a device capable of affecting a Higgs particle?"

"You mean besides using KEs?"

"Yes. If they don't have the KEs, how close are we?"

"Clark, remember when I mentioned CERN earlier? That is the smallest, least expensive device that anyone on this planet has come up with to even try to detect a Higgs particle. It will consist of twenty miles of superconducting magnets and is going to cost billions of dollars to build. Even if this information stirred up a new interest in Higgs research, I don't see that much will be accomplished for a very long time. The CERN device won't be finished for years. I would guess that if everything went perfectly and there was a series of unexpectedly lucky developments, it might be twenty years. However, I think a more realistic that the quickest that we could expect anything useful to come out of this research would be fifty years."

"Fifty years!" I exclaim.

"I think that would be the quickest." Bernie deadpans. "Like I said, we aren't even sure of how to discover them yet."

This is a complicated subject. It sounds like this could be very important information and I'd love to help Bernie but I don't want to put my family at risk. This is just too big a decision to make quickly. "I'd feel more comfortable if you could give us

some time to think this over. We'd like to help and I think I can understand how and why this could be important, but we need to consider the long term risk to our family."

I notice Clark nodding in agreement as Bernie responds. "I completely understand. I'm not even close to having anything ready to publish. I guess I should have made myself clearer that I didn't expect an answer tonight; I just wanted you to think about it. If you think you would agree to any kind of publication, I would expect that we would then first review the material together. I would only release what you felt comfortable being included."

Now Clark looks more relaxed. "Thanks. Lois and I will talk about this, figure out what we want to do and then let you know."

Now Bernie's smile doesn't look so nervous. "Whatever you decide will be fine. Really! I wouldn't put the two of you and Lara at risk for anything."

It seems like we are about done for the evening. "Was there anything else in particular you wanted to talk about tonight?"

Bernie takes a second to think before a huge smile lights up his face. He glances in Clark's direction then looks back at me. "Lois, I understand that Ultra Woman is going to have a new look?"

Chapter 7

It's amazing how the time has flown by. When I first decided to re-create Ultra Woman, I was worried about having to make my first appearance in the old hot-pink suit. I've had lots of time to look at those pictures from Ultra Woman's first run, and looking back, I find it hard to believe I picked out that color in the first place. Yes, it was distracting, and bright colors have been very effective in helping with Clark's disguise. However, even before I made my debut, we knew the bright colors weren't going to be enough in my case. That was why we added the mask at the very end.

During the suit redesign process, Martha has been so easy about everything but the cape. I don't know where her cape fetish comes from. Perhaps someday, years from now, I'll try asking Jonathan. Who knew it would be such a big deal? However, now that we're done, even Martha has to admit the new suit looks very good.

I'm particularly happy that I was able to get through the redesign exercise without revealing to anyone else in the family my most personal reason for wanting to upgrade the suit design. Someday Lara will know that her mom is Ultra Woman. I have enough fears of dealing with her during her teenage years without having to worry about her constantly reminding me that mom's super suit is a fashion disaster!

Having Bernie helping with the new suit has also proven to be valuable. When he first asked about the suit change, for some reason I thought he was going to tease me about style or fashion sense. I should have known he wouldn't do that. His interest was purely professional. He was able to take advantage of his connections in the scientific community to get some very special fabric for both Clark and I to use. The spandex is out and fabric 56KSY7B is in.

Clark only barely got away with wearing the suit as underwear all those years. There is no way I could do that on a long-term basis even if I wanted to. Bernie was able to get fabric 56K and it looks just like the spandex Martha used for Clark's original costumes. While it looks the same, it's actually very different. The main property I like is that it's very sheer. Clark or I can compress the whole suit, except for the boots, into a space the size of a thimble. This enables me to carry the suit around in its compressed form and, when necessary, use super speed and change anywhere. The suit legs are designed to give the illusion of wearing boots. Unless someone looks very carefully right after I change, it will look like I'm in the full uniform. By having a

few pairs of boots placed strategically around the city where only Clark and I can reach them, we can change anywhere and in less than a second be in full uniform.

A door opens behind me and Martha comes in. “Are you ready?”

I had slipped into muse-mode and sort of lost track of time. I’m still staring in the mirror in Martha’s sewing room. “I don’t know. It was supposed to be so much easier this time.”

“Lois, you look fabulous and besides, it’s just the guys.”

I turn to face her. “Are you sure this is it? I mean, it’s a bit... I don’t know, plain. Maybe we should add something.”

“Honey, this is a great look! I think this looks even better than Clark in his all-black Kryptonian ruler suit.”

Now *that* is a high target to shoot for. “Do you really think so?”

“Absolutely! Now, let’s see what the boys think.”

Martha opens the door and leads the way. I give her a few seconds to get into the front room and sit down then I take a deep breath and stride out. This will be the first chance for Clark or Jonathan to see the new suit. Martha and I didn’t start out trying to keep the new design a secret, but through a combination of chance and circumstance, we did the re-design without input from the men. I walk as confidently as possible into the main room and wait for their reaction.

I get a “Wow!” from Jonathan.

Clark is just staring with his mouth slightly open. I move around a bit and turn so they can see the suit from both sides. I can’t help but smile as I watch Clark’s reaction. I think he likes the look.

The all black uniform Clark wore with the Kryptonians served as the inspiration for this design. Instead of black, I went with a dark purple. I liked the idea of purple and wanted something dark enough so that it wouldn’t look cartoonish. Instead of a separate mask, the suit itself continues up the sides of my neck to create a form-fitting mask that covers my eyes and forehead. The lower part of my face is uncovered and my hair is free. In the first suit, I kept worrying about the mask coming off. This approach makes that impossible. Finally, there is the Superman ‘S’ on the front in the same place as on Clark’s suit. The symbol of the House of El is in gold against the dark purple of the suit. The ‘S’ is the only thing on the suit that isn’t dark purple.

Finally, I just stop in front of my husband. “Clark, say something.”

He seems to fumble for words for a second or two. “Um, wow doesn’t even come close. Lois, you look... Fantastic! Now that I’ve seen this suit, I’m especially glad we decided to make public the fact that we’re married.”

“Does it really look that good?”

Clark stands up and in a second, his arms are around me. I know my husband well enough to have an idea of what’s probably on his mind. He definitely approves of the look.

After a second, he whispers in my ear. “It’s better than good. When you show up in this... well, I don’t think shooting at you is going to be the first thing that enters the mind of most of the male criminals.”

As I arrive home from Star Labs, Clark greets me with a kiss. “This visit seemed to take a little longer than usual,” he says. “Was there a problem?”

“No. This was my last blood sample and Bernie made a big production out of it. He knew how much I was looking forward to getting past this part of the tests. We did spend a few minutes talking about the test results so far. Based on the data he’s collected, my powers are stable. My field intensity thingamajig is the same strength as yours and it’s not changing.”

“Great! So now all we need is a suitable situation for you to

make your debut.”

“All of the indications so far are that I’m good to go. There’s no reason to believe there’s any danger of an unexpected loss of powers when I need them. We’ve cut back my lab visits to once-a-week and that’s just to be on the safe side.”

Clark gets a distracted look on his face. “Is there an emergency?” I ask.

“No. Dinner will be ready in a minute,” he says over his shoulder as he hurries back to the kitchen.

I head for the bedroom to wash up for dinner. There are still some issues to take care of before Ultra Woman makes her appearance. I’m still trying to figure out how to tell my parents about the change. Every time I think of an approach, there seems to be something wrong with it. I guess I know it will be fine but... well, it’s just so weird. I keep seeing it in my head. “Mom, Dad, you know how you were worried that Clark is an alien and I’m human? Well, that’s not a problem any more.”

I think the other weird part has been practicing in front of a mirror. When I was Ultra Woman last time, I was always nervous whenever I made a public appearance. When I asked Clark if he had any idea how to prepare for this part of the role, he suggested I approach it as if I were practicing for a public speaking appearance. I’ve spent some time in front of the mirror pretending I’m addressing a reporter or police or whoever. It has helped, but it still feels silly. I think Clark is just better at this than I am.

In many ways, I actually feel over prepared. It hadn’t been more than a few days after I learned I had the powers again that the bridge collapse happened. Right then, I thought I needed to hurry to get ready for the next incident. Looking back, I should have known it was very unlikely that there would be another need so close on the heels of the first.

I hear a call from the kitchen. “Honey, is something wrong?”

“No. I just got to thinking a bit.” I walk into the dining room where Clark has dinner all laid out. Sometimes I wonder if the wonderful dinners he makes are partly his way to compensate for all those mornings we start with nothing more than coffee and doughnuts.

“What were you thinking about?” he asks.

“What else?”

“The big debut?” he asks.

I just nod in reply. He knows the waiting is eating at me. “You know you’re ready. You’ve practiced with the powers. You have your new uniform and you’ve worked at speed changing in and out of it so much you’re at least as fast as I am.”

Last week we tried to have a race but we could never tell who won. It was fun though! There’s no question that Clark finds the new suit — arousing. That was not exactly the reaction I was going for when I came up with the new look, but I’m certainly not complaining. These thoughts almost cause me to miss the fact that he’s still speaking.

“Can you think of anything you have left to do?”

“Not really.” I think for a moment and realize I’m still a little nervous about one of the issues. “Are you completely comfortable with the back story? I mean, are you sure you’re ready to announce to the world that Superman is married?”

He hardly bats an eye at this. “Absolutely! I think it will work out better in the long run for our association to be clear. As soon as you reappear the questions will begin.”

“But...?”

He comes over to me and I feel the wonderful warmth of his arms. “I’m sure,” he says. “It’s been a few years and, to be honest, I got tired of speculations about Superman’s love life a long time ago. There will be times when we appear together and I’d rather not have to pretend we’re just friends.” He pauses a moment and I notice a sly smile appear. “Besides, you remember how Jimmy reacted to Ultra Woman, and that was in the old suit.

Like I said the night you first showed me this version, I want the whole world to know in no uncertain terms that Ultra Woman is taken.”

A small voice in the very back of my mind was asking how I felt about Clark’s possessiveness. After all, I belong to myself, not him. He’s my husband, not my keeper. This isn’t the first time I’ve heard that voice. I think the forcefulness of the voice was the source of many years of avoiding relationships. The difference is that when I hear the voice now, I can’t help but smile. I’m happy Clark shows a reasonable amount of possessiveness. To be perfectly honest, I’ll also be happy when the women of the world know that my husband is off the market.

Another issue comes to mind. “I think we’re making the right call in not wearing our rings. We can easily say it’s not a Kryptonian custom.”

That brings a look of seriousness back to Clark’s face. “Someone would try to get a picture and sooner or later we would run the risk of the rings being identified. I’ve always been worried I would forget to take my ring off and be caught wearing it. I accidentally did forget once, but was lucky enough that no one noticed and there were no pictures of my hands that day. Are you okay with the rest of the back story?”

“Yeah. I learned that the New Kryptonians had been to earth and left Kal El behind. I had found you attractive on my first visit and blah, blah, blah. I’ve got it all down Clark. I’ve practiced the speech so many times I hear it in my sleep.”

“Honey, I know the waiting can eat at you. Have you thought about making your debut with me on a more regular emergency? At least then we’ll be past the first time situation.”

“That might be the way to go. I don’t want to wait too long. I’m ready for my debut now but I’d really like to set the precedent that Ultra Woman only appears when there is an extra special need. If I accompany you on a regular call, we’ll be breaking the rule before it’s even established. Besides, I still haven’t told my parents yet.”

I can tell he’s fighting not to say either, “I told you so,” or “Whose fault is that?” However, apparently he can see I’m not in the mood for that sort of reply. After a brief pause he says, “Lois, we’ll see them next weekend. Why don’t you tell them then? After that, you’ll be free to appear as Ultra Woman at any time. You’ll be able to make your planned role clear at your first press conference.”

“Ok, next weekend it is.”

He gets a mischievous look on his face. “You know, once you make your appearance, maybe I should look to do a suit revision so I have one that matches yours. After all, you did say how much you liked the black suit. Maybe after dinner we can go up to the bedroom and you could put on the purple suit and I can see if it inspires me to think of a new design for mine.”

I respond with my most wicked grin. “I’m certain my wearing the suit in our bedroom will inspire you to think of several things, but a new suit for yourself will not be on the list.”

Chapter 8

Clark and I have been investigating some worrisome rumors that have surfaced since the bridge disaster. There have been some rumblings in the Metropolis underworld about how to take advantage of Superman being “tied down” such as had happened with the bridge incident. According to various sources, some people are trying to develop plans to pull off an especially big job if they know Clark is unavailable to help.

This all began with a bank robbery that took place at the same time as the bridge collapse. It wasn’t anything special, just a lone-gunner job. There was no evidence of any connection between the robbery and the bridge, other than fortuitous timing by the bank robber. The timing was such that not only was Superman tied down on the bridge, but most of the Metropolis

emergency services response teams were also diverted. It might have gone largely unnoticed except the Star plastered it on their front page with a large-type line of “Crime in Metropolis: Timing is Everything.” The headline was very effective in boosting their sales for the day. It also seems to have brought the potential of crime-while-Superman-is-busy into the minds of many people.

Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to pull a story out of these rumors. When we started this investigation, we figured we’d be able to break it open in a few days. It hasn’t been as easy as we thought. After nearly two weeks of investigation, our findings are a mixed-bag. A lot of the so-called plans are nothing more than pipe-dreams on the part of two-bit thieves. There does seem to be an undercurrent of something bigger. It feels like there’s some sort of organized effort at work to encourage the belief that if Superman is out-of-the-way, the Star headline will prove correct and the city will be easy pickings. Do these people expect MPD to close their doors because Clark may not be able to help? This doesn’t seem to make sense. Even so, according to the word on the street, there are a lot out there who seem to believe exactly that.

It’s late morning when Clark approaches me with a question I wish I would have thought of.

“Do you think the police know about these plans?” he asks.

“Probably. MPD is usually fairly good at picking up on trends like these.”

“But Lois, what if somehow they’ve managed to miss it this time?”

I think Clark’s still feeling residual stress from the bridge incident. He’s usually not this worried about things, but he does have a point here. “Why don’t I call Bill Henderson and set up an interview. We can share some of our findings and ask for the official Metropolis Police Department view on the situation. If he hasn’t heard anything, then we can stress to him that our findings suggest this is something MPD should look into.”

Bill is available now, so we head immediately over to MPD headquarters. As we enter Bill’s office, he seems to be in a good mood. “Lois, Clark, good morning. Have you gotten around to replacing your car yet?”

Since the car bombing, Bill seems to open every conversation with this question. I think it represents a special connection between us. He was particularly appreciative that we called him first to tell him we survived the bombing unharmed. I’ve come to believe the car represents a bridge of trust we’ve established. He may be right. “No,” I reply. “We’re still arguing with the insurance company. They’re trying to say they don’t have to pay because the coverage we have differentiates based on if the car was totaled due to a front, side or rear collision. Since it was none of the above, they’re trying to say we aren’t covered.”

Bill starts laughing at this. “You must be kidding. An assassin blew up your car in a murder attempt. I wrote the police report.”

I drop heavily into one of the chairs facing his desk. “They’re trying to delay as long as possible so they can make a low-ball offer and we’ll take it to get the process over with.”

Bill had closed the door to his office and was just sitting down in his own chair. “They have obviously never come up against Lois Lane.”

Clark laughs slightly at this as he takes his seat. “You’re telling me. It’s not that much money.”

I cut him off. “Clark, it’s the principle. Every time they bully someone into taking less than they are supposed to get, it makes it more likely to happen again. I will not be a willing participant in that system.”

Clark turns to Henderson, obviously anxious to change the subject. “Bill, we’re getting lots of chatter about ways to try to take advantage the next time Superman is tied down like he was last month. Are the police aware of this and if so are any plans being made to deal with the possibility?”

Bill's expression turns defensive. "On the record?"

I take this one. "We have to print something. The rumors are everywhere. You know we'll be straight up on this, but Bill, we'd rather not go to press with something like "No Comment" from MPD."

There's a pause, as Bill seems to consider what to say. "Okay. On the record. The MPD is aware that the tragic events of last month may have created the perception of a possible window of opportunity among some of the less reputable members of the Metropolis community. MPD is committed to being prepared for any eventuality. We know there are those among us that may feel tempted to take advantage of a situation where Superman is otherwise occupied. MPD..."

"Bill, what the hell are you doing?" My shout is more of a challenge than a question and the outburst puts him back on his heels for a second.

His reply has a note of challenge of his own. "You said you wanted something on the record!"

"Don't read us a damn press release! Bill, you know us. I thought we were way past that stage."

Clark could see my irritation. He reaches out and puts his hand on my arm in what I guess is a 'calm down' gesture. For just an instant, I'm afraid he's going to try to lecture me about letting Bill do his job. Instead, he turns and addresses Henderson. "Bill, Lois is right. You know us. I can't believe you would feed us a predigested pile of... well, that speech you just delivered." Sometimes I'm so proud of my husband I can barely contain it. When we first met, he would have taken that speech and walked away. It's nice to think he really has learned from his senior partner.

Bill still looks fidgety. Finally, he seems to come to a decision. "Okay, but this is big and I'm trusting both your judgment and discretion on this."

Clark and I both nod.

"We're not sure of what to make of the information that's trickling in to us. All of our normal sources are full of plans to take advantage of the situation, but we just can't get any specifics."

"Bill, we're getting the same from our sources. Why did you read us a 'press release' speech that doesn't say anything?" Clark asks.

Bill stands up and walks over to his window. "Two-bit smash and grab we can handle. MPD already covers most of those with no help from Superman. Certainly we have for the past year or so." Bill pauses for a second. "By the way, do you two know anything about why he cut back on his activities starting about a year back?"

I wish Bill would have been looking at me when he asked the question. Unfortunately, when he finished he was looking straight at Clark. Clark's reply was a well-prepared, "Um..."

Bill almost shouted with glee. "You do know why!"

Clark is so... Clark! One minute I'm thinking about how far he's come and the next he's freezing up trying to think of what to say to Bill. I figure I'd better step in before he comes up with a lame Cheese-of-the-month quality excuse that will do nothing other than reveal to Bill that he's lying. "Yes, Bill, we know. But we're sworn to secrecy on this, so please don't ask us for the reason."

My interjection pulls his eyes off Clark. He stares at me for a long moment. "Fine!" The irritation in his voice is unmistakable. "I wish I knew what the connection was between you three." I give him my best 'get real' look but he just shakes it off. "Don't roll your eyes at me. You just admitted you know personal information no one else does. Everyone knows the three of you have been all mixed up together since Superman first appeared. Every once in a while we get someone new in the department, and when they find out how well I know you two... well, more

than once I've been asked if there really was something to those pictures a few years back."

"Bill!" My outburst surprises even me.

"You don't need to shout at me. But you've just admitted I don't know the whole story." His words are a challenge but his tone is defensive.

We seemed to have reached to point where even Clark has had enough. "Bill, please, can we get back to business?"

He shakes his head for a second. "I'm sorry. Whatever it is that ties you all together is just one of those issues that nags at the back of my mind. I know you two, and I don't believe for a second there's any funny business going on. I'm sorry I even mentioned it."

I need to get past this and back on subject. "It's just... well, you know what we've been through because of those pictures. Now, can we get back to the reason we're here. What's the message MPD wants to send? We won't be your propaganda machine but we certainly don't want to make the situation worse."

Bill slumps down into his chair again. "Lois, the problem is that I'm not sure if there's a particular message at all. There are hints and rumors. When we've tried to dig deeper we can't find anything. It's like grasping at smoke. We can see the patterns but there doesn't seem to be any substance to it. In some ways, I'm tempted to ask you to help us send a message along the lines of, "We know you're making plans but we're ready." But that would be just the kind of false propaganda I won't ask you to print."

"Do you have any response plans if a Superman absence does trigger a crime wave?" Clark asked.

"The whole problem is that we don't have anything concrete to go on. We've taken what steps we can. We've gone over our existing emergency response protocols and made sure our officers have been fully briefed on all of the appropriate emergency and high-alert procedures. Our dispatchers have updated phone lists to make sure we have the best chance possible to call in extra officers on a moments notice if something happens. We just don't know what we're facing."

Clark had been nodding his head at all these plans. When Bill finished he followed up almost immediately. "These plans sound reasonable. Given what you know, what else can you do?"

Bill responds with a heavy sigh. "That's just it. I can feel in my bones that there's more than we're seeing here. The problem is there's no evidence. And, even if there was, what could we do?"

"It sounds like we're in the same boat. We've been trying to put together a story and we've run into the same problems you have. We can't find any evidence on which to build a case. Perry will not let anything into The Planet on the sort of rumor and innuendo we have so far."

It's been rare that I see Henderson this frustrated. I would like to help if I can. "Bill, if we do find anything more substantial than the smoke we've all run into, we'll let you know immediately."

Bill's smile was forced. "Thanks Lois. We'll take the help."

As we leave, I can't help but feel that despite the lack of evidence, the next time Clark runs into a 'can't leave' situation will be the day of Ultra Woman's return.

Chapter 9

I love it when Clark's voice is the first thing I hear in the morning. Of course, normally when I hear his voice in this setting, the emotion conveyed in his tone is one of affection. This particular morning, the emotion I sense in his voice is worry. "Honey, wake up."

I open my eyes to see Clark sitting up in bed. He looks nervous. I'm afraid my reply is limited to a groggy, "What?"

"There's been an earthquake in Guatemala. It's triggered a

series of mudslides and there's been widespread devastation. Their government is asking for help in digging out and someone decided to use that 'Superman emergency' channel we set up. I heard the call for help on a radio somewhere nearby and it woke me up. Honey, I need to go right now. Superman's assistance in the dig-out could save hundreds, possibly thousands of lives."

"So go already." He's usually not so nervous about taking off for this kind of rescue.

There is a long pause before he responds. "I'll be gone at least all day on this."

The source of his agitation finally hits me. My reply is a whisper. "This might be the day."

His smile is forced. "You'll do fine." Then he pauses as if to think for a second. "How do you plan to handle the details today?"

"Details? What do you mean?"

"Well, there's work. Then we need to have an explanation to justify my absence for at least today. And Lara... do you want to take her to Smallville or leave her with your parents? Finally, there's the appearance of Ultra Woman herself. Do you have a plan for how to make your debut?"

I can tell from his tone that he's just as worried about this as I am. When I reply, I try for as positive a spin as I can. "I think it'll work out fine. I'll go to work as usual and Lara will be fine in daycare. When I get in, I'll tell Perry that Superman came by to warn us he would be away. If Perry asks, I can explain Superman's visit based on the idea that he knew we've been tracking the story relating to possible problems his absence might trigger. You can be covering the disaster on-site for the Planet after convincing Superman to take you with him. As for my appearance as Ultra Woman, I'll have to play it by ear."

I wait as Clark considers this for a few seconds. "I guess it will work. Are you sure about Lara and daycare?"

"I'm positive," I reply. "Think about what Bill said. We can't be certain anything will happen today, and if something does, I'm sure the Metropolis police can handle most of it. There'll be plenty of time to drop Lara at daycare and start out in the office like any other day. I may not have your talent for hearing emergency calls, but I have a very good police-band scanner. If I hear anything that sounds suspicious, I'll head out to cover the streets in person based on the escalation we anticipate. That will leave me free to make my appearance as Ultra Woman if circumstances warrant it, without having to suddenly remember I have to return a movie or something."

I'm expecting the usual banter about his excuses not being so bad, but instead, almost abruptly, Clark leans over and kisses me saying, "I need to go."

Sometimes this feels like sending my soldier off to war. I have the advantage of knowing he'll be coming back, but he will be seeing a lot of death before I see him again. "Clark, remember that even Superman can't save everyone."

"Today you may have to keep that thought in mind as well," he replies.

After one more kiss, he's gone.

Getting Lara ready for the day and getting to work isn't too difficult. She misses her daddy in the morning but doesn't put up too much of a fuss. If she weren't normally such a joy at the start of the day, I probably would never notice her demeanor being slightly off. She expects a certain amount of 'daddy time' every morning and when she doesn't get it, she makes her displeasure known. In the pre-super-speed days, the extra time to deal with a fussy Lara sometimes made me late for work. Now that I can do most of the other morning rituals with the speed turned up, it's easier to spend some extra time soothing Lara's feelings.

I arrive at work slightly early. I could have been even earlier but I wanted to start the day out as normally as possible, so I

waited for the day care center to open before heading in. I've no more than stepped off the elevator when I hear Perry's voice bellowing, "Lois, my office, now!"

As soon as I'm inside his office he starts up with, "Where's Clark? Have you heard about Guatemala?"

Well, my opening just got easier. "Clark won't be in the office today. He's in Guatemala covering the disaster and helping to document Superman's relief efforts."

This only puts Perry off his stride for a second. He does seem to use the time to think through the implication of what I just told him. "From what you've been telling me about potential developments once everyone knows Superman is out-of-town for the day, I'm not sure I agree with Clark taking off to cover a foreign disaster. If the city does explode, I'm sure I'll end up wishing both of you were here."

I respond in a tone that should reflect a certain amount of irritation. "Clark understands his responsibilities. I'll be able to cover my part of the city beat today on my own. Don't forget, I did it for years before Clark arrived."

"Darlin', I know you're capable and I usually trust Clark's decision making abilities. From everything you've told me over the past week or so, there's reason to believe that once the news of Superman's absence gets out, there could be chaos in the city. If that happens, even you'll have trouble covering it alone."

"Chief, it'll be fine. Whatever happens today, I'll be able to handle everything on my own."

I'm expecting more argument but instead, Perry gets a peculiar look on his face. All the sudden I feel like I'm under a microscope. As the seconds tick by, I start to remember that Perry is a very capable investigative reporter in his own right. Finally, he says, "There's something you aren't telling me. You and Clark know something that means it's okay for him to take off."

I try to look incredulous. "Perry, for the life of me I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ha! I knew it. Okay, so you can't tell me. But Lois, please tell me there's a Planet exclusive in this."

How can Perry do this to me? I handle cops and criminals alike and am never that transparent. I still don't know what I said or how I said it, but I feel like I might as well just go ahead and mail him the as-yet incomplete story of Ultra Woman's return.

"I still don't know what you're talking about, but do you think I'd ever let us lose a key news story?"

Perry eyes me dubiously. "So what are your plans?"

"I'll start here and keep an eye on what's happening in the street. I'll be monitoring the police channels and I'm going to play this by ear. The problem all along has been that we don't know for sure anything will happen today. Just to be on the safe side, I plan to spend much of the day out-and-about. What time I leave the office will be based on what happens as the day unfolds.

He sighs the way he often has when he knows I'm going to do something my way regardless of what he says. "Okay Lois. Please be careful out there. If you get in trouble today, Superman won't be around to help."

"Perry, I know you worry, but think about it. I have Lara to consider now. I have no intention of letting myself be in any danger today."

His face lightens just a little bit. "Somehow I believe you, but I wish I understood why. My instincts tell me it's going to be a big news day. Get out there and bring me something for page one!"

I'm starting to think that maybe this won't be 'the day' after all. Every time the scanner goes off, my reaction is, "this is it" however, if anything, today seems to be slightly quieter than normal.

It's nearly 9:45 am when I sense a change in the pattern of the day. Starting a few minutes ago, there has been an increase in the

number of calls. I didn't pick it up right away, but now I'm sure. The crimes seem to be what Bill had referred to yesterday as typical smash-and-grab jobs. If I wasn't so sensitive for unusual patterns today, I don't think I would have noticed. It's just that it's been so quiet all morning and this represents a change.

Right before 10:00 am I see Ralph heading for the elevator and mumbling something about getting to his bank before it opens. That's it! It hits me like a bolt from the blue. They say inspiration can come from the unlikeliest sources. Well, I can't think of a less likely source than Ralph. Whoever is pulling the strings behind the scenes today is going to go after a bank as soon as it opens.

I practically jump out of my chair and head for the stairwell. In only a few seconds, I'm in the suit high above the city. I may not have Clark's ability to hear an emergency call at home or in the office, but if I hover above the city roughly in the center, I can pick out enough bits and pieces of those calls to get a feel for what's happening. It's clear that the slowly increasing wave of minor crimes has MPD stretched to the limit. I'm getting snatches of calls where no one is available to respond.

I'm considering helping out with the overflow when a series of alarms all going off in rapid succession serves notice that the real show has started. I do a quick visual scan of the city and see that four of the largest banks in the downtown district appear to have robberies in progress. I take just a second to look around the city once more before I commit to an action. Nothing else is happening. Well, this shouldn't be too hard. At least all of these banks are relatively close together.

When I arrive at the first bank, I find a team of four men. Three are inside and one is waiting in a car on the street. I'm glad I thought to look for an escape vehicle on the way in or I would have missed the fourth man. The weaponry in the car, combined with the location of the vehicle, made it easy to spot. The men inside the building seem to have only just gotten the customers on the ground when I arrive. I make one quick trip around the room to collect the weaponry at super speed and the danger is over. I pause for only an instant to figure out where to incapacitate the men. I don't see any obvious place to contain the bank robbers, so the floor will have to serve. Very quickly, they're all face down in the middle of the floor with their hands zip-tied behind them. The extra fraction of a second it takes to snatch the driver from the car and add him to the collection goes completely unnoticed by the people inside the bank.

I return to normal speed just long enough to have the bank guard realize what has happened. As the suddenly changed state of the criminals registers, he gets to his feet, catches sight of me and simply freezes. Well, I suspect his inability to speak is at least partially my fault. I've seen Clark's reaction to how I look in this suit. I don't have time to wait for him to find an opening line. Thank goodness for nametags.

"James. Do you still have your gun?" I ask.

That seems to shake him out of his stupor. "No. They took it away as soon as they came in the door."

I point to a far wall. "All of the guns they had on them are in the pile. If your gun isn't there, pick out one of theirs you know how to use and guard these men until the police arrive."

James hurries over to the wall and returns with a pistol. "My pistol was there. I'd rather have a weapon I know I can depend on."

I feel the need to hurry. There are at least three other robberies taking place. "You'll have to watch them until the police get here. I'm sorry but I have to go now."

James glances and the men on the floor then quickly back to me. He gives my skin tight uniform a quick glance from head to toe and asks, "Where did those zip ties come from?"

That deserves a smile. "My secret. Now I really need to go." Before I can shift into super speed to head for the next

robbery, James manages to blurt out the question I have been expecting. "Wait! Who are you?"

I flash him my brightest smile. "A friend of a friend." Then I shift to super speed and go.

It only takes about a second of real time to reach the scene of the next robbery. Once there, I become more convinced than ever that I'm making my appearance at exactly the right time. There's another car with what looks to be the same set of weapons as at the first robbery. Based on the success of the approach I used at the first bank, I go right into the building. Sure enough, there are three men dressed the same as before right down to the kind of mask they're wearing. They're carrying the same weapons and seem to be going about the robbery in a manner that looks very well planned.

This group is a little more spread out, but at the speed I'm going, it makes no difference. When all four are in their proper place in the middle of the floor, I slow down to normal speed so I can hand them over to the guard. This time, the guard seems a little quicker on the uptake. As soon as he catches sight of me and sees the robbers on the floor, he looks around, sees the weapons and retrieves his pistol. As he comes walking toward me I see that his name is John. I really love nametags!

"John, will you be able to handle this until the police arrive? I need to go."

He glances over at the men. "Sure. I don't think they'll be a problem now. By the way, who are you?"

I guess I'd better get used to that question today. "A friend of a friend," I reply, and am gone.

As I approach the third bank, I'm unsurprised to see the same pattern as the first two. This time I take just an instant to check the pouch concealed in the lining of my boot and verify I still have enough zip ties to handle four more men. I do, and it's on to the job. I have to admit that I admire the military like precision that obviously went into the planning of these jobs. It sure makes my work easier. This time I barely glance at the getaway car before going right on in. Sure enough, there are three men in the bank and one in the car.

The robbery is barely any farther along than the others. They must have been timed to be synchronized to nearly the second. In this instance, I find two men collecting money while the third is standing guard. In less than a second I've recreated the picture from the first two banks. This time the guard reacts more along the lines of James than John. I guess I also need to get used to the gawking from the men that I encounter. Although I suspect that when they hear the rest of the story about who my husband is, they'll be a bit more discrete.

I guess the only thing that's particularly memorable about the third bank is the name of the guard. This time it is Julio. I didn't realize you had to have a J-name to be a bank guard in Metropolis. I'm a little disappointed that Julio doesn't seem to be getting around to asking who I am. He's the youngest guard so far, and I don't think he's going to get past the gawking stage. I stick around only long enough to make sure he has them covered, and then make my high-speed exit.

I know I'm moving fast, but using this much super speed really confuses your ability to judge time. Since I went to the first robbery I've been in high-speed mode almost continually. In each bank, I've shifted back to low speed only long enough to do the handoff to the guards. I think it has been only a minute or so total, but I really don't know. Before heading for robbery number four I make a quick side trip to the top of the Daily Planet building. That's one of the places I've stashed extra zip ties and want to make sure I have plenty before the next stop.

When I arrive at bank four I'm relieved to see the same pattern played out again. The organization and obvious level of training just screams of Intergang. Clark and I will have to look into who was behind these when he gets back.

I don't know if this team started early or if I've taken more time than I thought, but when I enter this bank, the men are already preparing to leave. However, convincing them to stay a while longer proves to be as easy as it was with their associates at the other banks.

Once they're all on the floor, I actually relax a bit. I have to admit that I feel a certain sense of relief when this guard's name turns out to be Fred. A fourth 'J' name would have had me scratching my head for a long time. I like Fred. He's a bit older than the others are and he doesn't stare too much. Fred not only looks at the men on the floor, but immediately makes sure they are properly bound. Then he comes over to where I'm standing and asks, "Are you a friend of Superman's?"

Finally, someone at least guesses at the obvious. I can't help but smile as I reply, "Yes," and start for the door.

I really don't want to be seen yet so I quickly accelerate to a minimal super speed. In an instant I'm out the door and high above the city. I'm glad this is a clear day with lots of sun. I've just used a lot of super speed and I want to give those Kryptonian thingies a chance to recharge. I'm hoping this little demonstration will have a deterrent effect on any other operations, which may be planned for later today.

I'm not up here for more than a minute when I realize I can hear something that doesn't sound quite right. I wish I had Clark's ability to tune in to emergency calls. I suspect that now I'm back in the hero business, even if it is part time, the ability will come. I head for the sounds a bit more slowly than I did for the bank jobs. I really wish I would have asked Clark or Bernie about the sustained use of super speed. Clark has never talked about any limit for this, but I don't remember him using it continually like I just did. It sure makes things easier.

Even not using super speed, it only takes a few seconds to reach the source of the sounds. I'm in the diamond district and this is truly a sight. It looks like the whole area is under siege. There must be ten or twelve men all dressed very similarly. They seem to be trying to rob every diamond merchant in the area. There are a few differences between these men and the teams at the banks. For one, these guys are all wearing body armor. They seem to have anticipated a bit more resistance for this operation. Furthermore, instead of a simple sedan like at the banks, this is an armored car. Based on the bags of jewelry already in the vehicle, I can see that they have been busy. The armored vehicle provides a weapon-resistant place to store what they steal and it looks big enough that when they are all done they can all get in for the getaway.

I want to take them all out but with so many, I need to think about a plan of attack. While I'm considering a plan-of-attack, something seems to change. Now they are all heading for the armored car. They seem to have a lot of stuff but it looks to me like there are still some more stores that haven't been hit. It's almost like they suddenly got word to cut it short. I wonder if I had anything to do with that. It could be that they had a very strict pre-planned time limit and the time simply ran out. Based on the military-like planning that seems to have gone into this operation that seems likely. In only a few seconds, all of the men I spotted are inside the armored car.

Well, this should be easy. I zip down to the car and heat-vision spot-weld both the driver cabin doors and the rear exit shut. Next, I drop down in front of the truck. I'm not sure if I should feel complemented or offended when the driver tries to run me down. Well, that is what I expected. I only slide a few feet before I am able to bring the truck to a halt. They seem to be determined to burn a hole in the street, but I have another idea. A minor application of super speed and I'm at the side of the truck and lifting it off the ground. The flight to the main MPD office takes less than a minute. I hope someone from the Planet gets a picture. I set the vehicle down in the no parking zone in front of

the building. I'm not too worried about them going anywhere since I set the armored car down on its side.

As soon as we're on the ground I notice movement in the cab of the truck. The two men in the front are getting their guns in position and it looks like they're going to try to shoot their way out. A little heat vision and that problem is solved. Guns don't work very well when the barrels have been melted. Now they're staring at me. I can tell they're trying to think of what to do next. While staring at them with the most serious glare I have in my arsenal, I shake my head. The dejected looks on their faces make it clear I've gotten my point across.

I'm wondering if I should pop into the building and tell them that they have a delivery, when a couple of officers appear and start heading my way. The older of the two officers comes right over to me. "Hello officer Wilson," I say as he approaches. I am seriously getting to like nametags. "This vehicle has all the men and stolen merchandise from a series of robberies that just occurred in the jewelry district. There are about a dozen of them in there. The doors are all welded shut for now. They're all armed to some level or another. If you can get a team of police out here I'll be happy to extract them and turn them over to you."

He's just staring at me with his mouth hanging open. I wish Bill or at least one of the other inspectors would have come out to meet me. My patience wears out very quickly. "Well, do you want me to get them out for you or not?"

This wakes him up. "Wait just a minute." He hurries back into the station and quickly returns with about a dozen or so uniformed police. As he walks up to me I ask, "How do you want to do this?"

He looks me over again from head to toe. "I guess that depends on you. Are you like Superman?"

"Yes," I reply.

"So you can't be hurt by any of their weapons?"

"No."

"Well, it feels odd asking this of a lady, but if you would go in and disarm them then we can handle it from there."

I should feel upset by his being a bit sexist, but I find his attitude to be pleasant in an old-fashioned sort of way. I suspect that if Clark didn't have the powers and was a police officer, in this situation he would have said just about the same thing. I had used the delay while he was getting help to think about how to get them out of there. I fly up so I'm on the top of the truck. I guess I'll get to see just how well the strength and invulnerability work now. My plan is to rip a hole in the top and go in. I was worried that if I went in through the back door they might try to shoot at me and hurt someone. This approach should minimize that risk.

As I look around, there doesn't seem to be a good edge to grab to rip the top open. I guess I'll have to make my own. I could melt my way in but I'm worried I might burn someone on the inside. With the x-ray vision, I can see they're expecting someone to come through the door. They are all ready with their guns pointed that way. After my having flown them here, you would think they would realize how futile an effort that would be, but they look to be ready to try it just the same.

I pick an area behind most of them and get ready. I wish I had practiced punching through armor before. This will be my first time and naturally, I have an audience. I hope my fist doesn't bounce off. I hope it doesn't hurt.

I shift into super speed mode and punch the steel as hard as I can. I don't know if it is the speed or the strength but when my fist makes contact, I can barely feel it. Based on how easy this was, I use my arm to cut a ragged u-shaped slice in the metal. I can't believe how easy this is. In an instant I peel back the steel like it was paper and I'm inside. I'm going so fast that they haven't even reacted yet. Just that fast I've taken all of their weapons away and stacked them against one wall. Still at high

speed, I zip tie all their arms behind them. One more very quick look around and I figure it's time to open the door. Still at super speed, I punch the door, not too hard, right on the seam. Armored doors sure make a loud noise when they slam open!

I shift back down to normal speed and signal Officer Wilson to come over. His approach is cautious. I guess he's not sure what to expect. Once he gets in the doorway, he lets out a whistle and motions his men over.

I take that as my cue to finish the job. I still have to deal with the driver. When I reach the cab and look through the window, I almost start laughing. Apparently, the driver and his friend have had the time to contemplate the implications of their melted guns and they are both staring back at me with their hands up. It only takes a second to rip the door off and get them out. I use the x-ray vision to make sure they don't have any concealed weapons and then lift them out and set them down on the ground for the police to handle.

I go back to where the rest are being collected just to make sure everything is all right. Officer Wilson is standing at the doorway watching other officers escort the last of the men away when I arrive. When he notices I'm next to him, he gives me another "once over" sort of look before speaking.

"Thank you for everything. You made our job very easy. Who are you?"

He's been pleasant so I treat him to a smile. "A friend of a friend. If everything is under control here, I need to go. I'm not sure the problems for this city are done for the day."

Before I can move, he speaks up. "Miss... um... friend. Could you please put the armored car upright? It will make it a lot easier for us to get out of the way."

I glance over at it. I should have thought to do that. What a rookie mistake! I step over and tip it back to an upright position. I need to get back to work. As I take off, I hear one more question for Officer Wilson. "Are you going to be around?"

I change my path so I don't have to yell too loud. "Yes," and with that I shift to high-speed mode and take off.

Chapter 10

In less than a minute, I'm home. I did make a few circuits around the city, but now it's gone very quiet. I wonder if this is just a lull. It's only been a few minutes since I made my appearance at the first bank. I know word travels fast, but I can't believe the entire criminal underworld of Metropolis would catch on so quickly. However, if it's true that the plan was to have everything peak just before the bank and jewelry jobs, then the lull makes sense. Whatever the reason, everything seems calm now. I need to call in the story of my appearance, so I take a chance and dial Perry's number.

After only one ring I hear, "Perry White speaking."

"Perry, it's Lois. Has anyone else called in the story on the new super?"

"Lois, where are you? We've just received a report of a girl depositing an armored car full of jewelry thieves in front of MPD headquarters. This came over the police band but there's nothing on the media yet. Do you have anything on her?"

"Chief, I've got more than that! She stopped some bank robberies before she took down the armored truck. I'm working on the preliminary story right now but we need more details on the bank jobs before we have a whole story. This is your call. Do we run with the partial or do I take some time and get more details?"

Perry pauses for only a second. "Every newspaper in the city will be running this on their front page and it'll be hitting the TV news any minute now. What we need is a better story, not a quicker one. Take the time and get the whole story."

"You got it! As soon as I can run down the details on what happened at the banks, I'll bring my story in."

"Great, Lois! I'm saving the front page for you."

For an instant, I think about the page one layout and almost miss his reply. "So, what does she look like? There aren't any pictures. I thought this might be Ultra Woman, but even with the limited information we have, it sounds like the uniform is different."

"That's right. It's definitely a different uniform. She's in some sort of form fitting dark purple suit. It'll be in my write up. Perry, the biggest news about her suit... it has Superman's 'S'!"

There's a noticeable pause before he replies. "The 'S' is the symbol of his house. I'm betting this woman has some sort of family connection. What do you think?"

I need to cut this short. "If I'm going to get the rest of the story on her appearances, I need to move now."

This gets him back on track. "Right! Get the story and get in here!"

"I'm on it Chief," and hang up the phone. I need to get to the scenes of those bank robberies and get some reactions from the people. Since I know the order in which they happened, I think the best approach will be to start at the first bank. I suspect it will be difficult for anyone else to nail down the order of my appearances. In just an instant, I'm airborne again.

I do a quick loop around the city to make sure things are still quiet. Fortunately for my story, they are. In just a few seconds, I've landed in the safe alley nearest to the first bank and switched back to street clothes. As I near the bank, I'm surprised at the lack of a police presence. They couldn't finish with the crime scene so quickly could they? When I reach the entrance, I find people milling around outside but don't see police anywhere. I notice a group of people talking near the door and it strikes me that they look familiar. I think these are some of the customers that were inside the bank during the robbery.

I walk up to the man nearest me. "Excuse me. I'm a reporter. Can you tell me what happened here?"

The man looks almost relieved when I ask the question. "There was a bank robbery attempt."

I try to look surprised. "Where are the police?"

"They haven't arrived yet. It was only about... I don't know, maybe five minutes ago."

Five minutes! It had to be longer than that. But, I was at high-speed most of the time. Could it really have been such a short amount of time? If so, then this may work out well for my story. By now, I have the attention of the whole group. "You said 'was' when you described the robbery attempt. I gather it's over. What happened?"

He's starting to answer when a younger woman cuts him off. "It was incredible. It was a woman... or maybe a girl. It was hard to tell how old she was but she was amazing!"

The man speaks up. "It was hard to judge her age with any accuracy but she was certainly female."

Now a younger man cuts in. "You can say that again! She was... Wow!"

I need to be careful or I'll start blushing noticeably. "Please, could one of you tell me what happened and who this woman is that you're talking about?"

The man I spoke to first takes the initiative. "My name is Sam Robertson. I was in the bank on business when three men came in with weapons. One of them fired a shot in the air and yelled for everyone to get down on the floor. The others were getting the bank employees out in to the main area. They seemed very organized, as if they had practiced it. Anyway, it couldn't have lasted for more than a minute. One second, the men were moving through the steps of the robbery, and then it was all over."

"What do you mean it was over?"

"Well, in the blink of an eye, instead of three men robbing the bank there were four of them on the ground with their hands tied.

There was this woman standing over them.”

“A woman? Was this one of the employees?” I feel silly asking these questions but I’m not supposed to know what happened so I have to react based on what he says, not what I know.

“No, no, no. She was some kind of female version of Superman.”

“A female Superman? Did she have the red and blue suit?”

“No. I’m sorry. I’m not doing this very well. She wore a costume but it was very different from Superman’s. It was a dark purple. The color reminded me of an eggplant. It looked like it was some kind of one piece, form fitting body suit.”

The younger man interjected at this. “It was *very* form fitting.”

Mr. Robertson shook his head slightly and continued. “Um, yes. She certainly has a very striking figure. Anyway, the suit covered most of her body. It even came up and covered part of her face like a mask.”

“Why did you say she was like Superman?”

“Well, it sure seemed like she must have been the person that took care of the bank robbers. She was standing over them and she asked the bank guard to make sure they were covered. She just appeared and took care of those men faster than anyone could see. She felt like a super hero.”

Another woman speaks up. “Don’t forget the ‘S’.”

Sam looks confused for a second. “Didn’t I tell you about that?”

“What ‘S’?” I ask.

Now the younger woman speaks up. “She was wearing Superman’s ‘S’.”

Now it was Sam’s turn again. “It wasn’t exactly the same as his ‘S’. It was sort of like Superman’s ‘S’ had been drawn or stamped in gold against the dark purple of her suit. The shape of the symbol was certainly exactly like Superman’s even if the color is different.”

“So who do you think she is?”

Now it’s the older woman. “I bet it’s Ultra Woman. I saw Ultra Woman when she was here in Metropolis a few years ago. The woman today reminded me of her.”

I realize that Sam is giving me a funny look. Now I know how Clark must feel when he thinks he’s about to be recognized. I’m thinking up excuses to bolt when Sam says, “Aren’t you Lois Lane?”

“Yes. I’m Lois Lane of the Daily Planet.”

“Aren’t you good friends with Superman? You must know who this person is.”

I knew this question would come, but for some reason I didn’t expect it quite so soon. “I am friends with Superman. However, we’ve never been as close as most people seem to think. I’ve never met this woman in purple you’ve been describing. But this isn’t about me, it’s about what happened here.”

I turn to the older woman. “You said she reminded you of Ultra Woman. Why?”

“She has dark hair like Ultra Woman. She seems to be about the same height and her figure looks similar to what I remember. It’s hard to say because of the masks. With Ultra Woman, you could get a feel for what she might look like, but this woman in purple is wearing a suit-mask that covers her face from the nose to her hairline. The way it covers her neck and the side of her face it was hard to tell what her face might look like.”

I am so glad to hear this. We spent a lot of time thinking about how to disguise my face. The old mask just didn’t hide enough last time, and I think we were very lucky no one recognized Ultra Woman to be Lois Lane. By continuing the body suit up my neck and over my ears to become my mask, we have a much more effective disguise. To be honest, it looks pretty

darn good as well.

I spend another minute or so with the four of them and get as complete a story as they can tell. I’m thinking about moving along when the police finally arrive. The way they seal off the bank, I can see I’ll have very little chance to interview James. That would have made the story better, but there are three other banks to consider. James may have been first person to meet Ultra Woman, but I don’t think he would have made the best interview. It only takes an instant to decide to try bank number four. It is the closest to MPD headquarters and if I do get to interview a guard, my gut tells me that I should talk to Fred.

Bank number four is only a few blocks away. On the off chance, that someone noted the time that Lois Lane was outside of the first bank, I figure it will be safer if I hurry to Fred’s bank using the old reliable Mad-Dog Lane push-through-the-crowds approach. Using this technique, it takes only a few minutes to reach the area of the fourth bank. I don’t know if it’s my slower approach or pure chance but I’m relieved to see that the police are already here. As I approach the building, a paddy wagon pulls up and the four bank robbers are hustled out and in to the van. Good, this should make it easier to get access to Fred.

With a little effort, I’m able to convince the officer at the door that I might be of help. I almost get in on my name alone, but this time simply saying I’m Lois Lane doesn’t open the door. Then I explain that I just came from another robbery where a woman in purple appeared and intervened. After a few minutes of consultation with someone in the bank, the officer tells me I can speak with Fred on the condition that the police can ask me about any similarities.

Once inside, an officer leads me over to where Fred is standing with what looks to be a detective. I know most of the detectives in Metropolis but I don’t recognize this man. As we approach, the detective turns to me and reaches out to shake my hand. “So you’re Lois Lane. I’m Detective Anderson. I’ve only been with MPD for a few weeks but I’ve heard a lot about you. Your being the first to show up here is consistent with what I’ve been told to expect.”

I’m not sure I like his tone. As I release his hand I ask, “Just what have you been told?”

“Everyone says you’re the best and almost always first on the scene of anything important. They also say you and your partner are the best friends that Superman has in this city.”

Maybe this guy won’t be so bad after all. “I don’t know about the ‘best friends’ part but we do know Superman. However, the other part is correct. I am the best there is.”

“So Ms. Lane, Officer Jenkins says you might have some useful information.”

“I think I might. May I ask the bank guard a few questions?”

“Lane, this is an active crime scene and I have my doubts about even letting you in here. However, Bill Henderson has warned me that if you or your partner shows up in the middle of anything unusual, saying that you might have information, it’s generally a good idea to give you more leeway than most. Here are the ground rules. No leading questions and if I think you’re providing answers I’ll bounce you out of here no matter what your name and reputation is.”

This would have been so much easier if Bill had been here. “I understand.”

This was going to be the first real test. Can I ask Fred questions about his Ultra Woman experience without him realizing he’s talking with the same person? I turn to Fred and say, “Good afternoon. What’s your name?”

“Fred Samuels”

“Hi Fred, I’m Lois Lane of The Daily Planet. Was there anything unusual about the bank robbery that just took place?”

“There were two things. First, the three men that came in seemed very organized. It was almost like they had trained for the

job. In some ways, it made things easier. I've been in robberies before where the criminal is more scared than the bank customers are. That can be very dangerous. These guys were very professional and they were in complete control from the moment they came in. Of the times I've been through this sort of thing, this is the safest I ever felt during the actual robbery."

"You say they were in complete control, what changed?"

"The girl in purple."

"Fred, would you mind describing who this girl is and what she did?"

"Like I said, those guys were pros. They came in, did the job and seemed to be getting ready to leave when there was a whooshing sound and... well, the robbery was over and there she was."

This is so difficult. If Anderson weren't here, I would just lead him along. I need this interview to fill out my story and if I push too hard, I'll be out the door in a second. "Would you please tell me some more about what you saw after you heard the sound?"

"Well, like I said they were almost finished and looked to be preparing to leave when, all of the sudden, this girl in purple was standing there and there were four men on the floor with their hands zip-tied behind them."

"Four men? Didn't you say that there were only three men robbing the bank?"

"Yeah. I don't know where that fourth guy came from. I never saw him until after the purple girl arrived."

I turn to Detective Anderson. "This sounds like the exact pattern as at Metropolis National three blocks over. Three men were seen in the bank. In the blink of an eye, a costumed woman was standing over them and four men were on the floor bound with zip-ties." Anderson just nods.

I turn back to Fred. "This girl in purple, please describe her."

"She was about medium height and had dark hair. She was thin but, um, shapely. It was hard to tell much more because of the uniform and the way it covered her face."

"How would you describe the uniform?"

"It was a sort of dark purple body suit. It was all one color except for the 'S' on her... well, here." And Fred points his hand at the center of his chest. "That was a sort of yellow color."

"Her uniform had an 'S'? Can you tell me what it looked like?"

"Oh, yeah. It was Superman's 'S'. It was exactly the same shape."

"You said it was yellow. What shade was it? Was it bright like a canary yellow?"

"No. It was a darker shade than that. More of a metallic or golden color."

"You said that her face was covered. Would you please describe that?"

"Sure. Part of her uniform went up on her head and covered her face."

"Fred you've described this girl but what did she do?"

"To be honest, I didn't see her do anything. I just heard that air-whooshing sound and there she was standing over the robbers. I'm sure that three of those men were the ones that had been robbing the bank. But I didn't actually see her do anything. She did tell me to guard the men until the police arrived."

"Can you tell me anything else about this woman?"

"Because of what happened and the 'S' I asked her if she was a friend of Superman and she said that she was."

"How old did she seem to you?"

"It was hard to tell because of the way her costume covered her face. She looked young. I'd guess maybe 25 or so."

I could kiss him! "Fred, when you were describing her uniform you didn't mention a cape."

"Hmmm... she wasn't wearing a cape."

"Did she say anything else to you?"

He thought for a second. "Not that I can remember. She seemed in sort of a hurry. It was like she knew there were other places for her to be. As soon as she was sure we were in control of the situation, she just vanished. There was a sort of "whoosh" sound like air moving. I guess that means she left super fast."

"Okay Fred, thank you for your time. I do have one more question. What was your personal impression of her?"

"She seemed nice. When she was here, you could tell she just wanted to help. I've heard people who've met Superman say he has a formal, almost cold feeling about him. I didn't get that impression at all from her. She felt... I guess 'friendly' would be the word I would use. She felt like nice people."

I knew interviewing Fred was a good idea. "Thank you. I'll probably be quoting you in my article for The Daily Planet." I turned to Detective Anderson. "Everything he said matches up perfectly with the information that I was able to get from the other robbery. If I can go now I'd like to get to work on my story."

"Okay Lane. Is there any other information you have that might help?"

"Well, at the other bank, there had been a car nearby that looked like it might have been the intended getaway vehicle. Based on what I saw at the other bank, it looked to be where the fourth man came from. Have you found a vehicle nearby matching that description?"

He's nodding as he answers. "Yes. We spotted it when we first sealed off the area."

"Then I don't know what else to tell you for now. It was nice meeting you, Detective. Thank you for letting me speak with Fred."

"Lane, what do you think of this woman in purple?"

"I'm more curious than anything else. Did you know we had another super woman here a few years ago? She called herself Ultra Woman and was some kind of friend of Superman's. After a short time, she disappeared as suddenly as she came. Other than the uniform, it might be the same person. If she is, then there are a few questions I'd like to ask her."

"You and me both, Lane. I'll be seeing you around."

As soon as I'm out the door, I hurry down the street and out of sight of the bank. A quick check of my watch tells me it's been just over half an hour since this all began. I think I need to get in the air and see what's been going on.

It doesn't take me long to reach a safe spot to change and take off. Once I retrieve my boots, I'm ready for action again. Now that I've made my official debut, it's probably time to shift into Clark's old "help with everything" mode. I'm hoping that if I make my presence obvious to all, the word will get out quickly that the "Superman free" day is over.

The downtown area is quiet. I'll need to check with Bobby in a day or so and find out if the time for these synchronized hits had leaked out. As long as I'm making this my debut, I figure I'll give some people a look. I slow down my airspeed a bit and make a few passes through the downtown area. Even at these slower speeds, in less than a minute I've been all over the downtown area a couple of times. From the stopped traffic and the people pointing in my general direction, I believe I've made quite an impression.

Since the downtown seems quiet now, I figure I'll check the rest of the city and the nearby suburbs. On my last glance around, I spot Jimmy leaning out the window of the Planet with his camera. Okay, I probably shouldn't do this but I swing near the Planet building as I'm gaining altitude for my exit from the city. As I pass Jimmy, I slow down enough that he should be able to get a good shot. I can't resist looking in his direction and smiling for the camera. What can I say? It's my paper and he's my friend.

Chapter 11

My trip out of the city core turns out to be mostly a bust. There's just nothing for me to do. Almost out of desperation, I help a little girl and her mother get their cat out of a tree. It feels corny, but it's nice to do something that isn't related to a crime. Since I'll be printing Fred's description of me as "nice people," I want to show I can do more than just stop bank and jewelry thieves.

My trip to the outskirts of the city takes only about ten minutes or so. Now that I'm back, I still don't see much going on. Either I made more of an impression than I thought, or I hit the timing for my appearance perfectly. Since it's gotten so quiet, I figure I might as well head into work. If I'm gone from the office much longer, I'll have to start thinking up excuses for where I've been. I wonder if Perry will believe I had to return a video Clark had rented or pick up our cheese-of-the-month shipment.

I barely get off the elevator when Jimmy comes running up. "Lois! Did you see her? Could you believe it? Doesn't she look awesome?"

"Jimmy, calm down. Yes, I've seen her and she's very impressive. However, I'm more interested in what she did and who she is. Tell me what you've heard about her activities today."

He takes a deep breath and seems to compose himself. "She's been all over the news. There were several bank robberies all at about the same time. Several groups hit the four biggest banks in the downtown area. There was also an armored truck that showed up in the jewelry district and a team of men were going from shop to shop taking everything in sight. Everything seemed to happen at almost exactly the same time. Anyway, in just an instant she shows up and takes them all down. I think she must be faster than Superman! It was unbelievable!"

"Jimmy, I've got all that. I was near MPD headquarters when she brought in the jewelry thieves. I need to type up my story. When you get the chance, let Perry know I'm here and I'm working on the story. I just wish we had a picture to go with the story"

At this, Jimmy burst into a grin that looks ready to split his face. "We have a picture. A few minutes after she stopped all the robberies, she buzzed the city. When she left the area, she flew right by this building. I was leaning out the window to get a picture and she flew right in front of me."

"Great, Jimmy! Do you think you got a good shot?"

He's starting to get over excited again. "This may be the shot that makes my career. I have a picture looking right at her as she flew past. We'll have the prints in a few minutes but I think I got a good shot. Lois... I think she smiled at me."

"That's great! Who do you think she is?"

"I don't know. When I heard the first reports of a super woman, I thought it must be Ultra Woman. Then I heard about the purple costume and I wasn't so sure. When she flew past, it was too quick to get a good look. It might be the same person but I don't know. What do you think about the 'S'? Ultra Woman didn't wear Superman's 'S'. Do you think it means anything?"

"I'm sure it means something but I'd rather not speculate too much just yet. I need to get started on my story."

As I round my desk and sit down, I need to think about how to approach this. This has to be a good story but I must be careful about what I write. If I had known Clark was doing this in his early days, I would have realized more quickly how good a writer he is. There are all kinds of details I can't report without running the risk or revealing that I have inside information. After Ultra Woman makes her official debut this won't be as much of a problem, but I don't want to show I have a direct line to her just yet.

I was seen at two of the banks, so Lois Lane's presence as at those places is established. I can use the quotes from the customers at the first bank and my interview with Fred for the

second. For the other two banks, I need to be more careful. I'm tempted to use the names of the bank guards, but I'm not sure I want to take the risk. If one of them happened to be wearing someone else's nametag today, my use of their name would reveal that I have information that might have come from Ultra Woman. I think the best approach is to write up the two banks in detail and simply identify the other banks and note the general similarities of the robbery attempts and how Ultra Woman handled them. I could note the order in which they were handled, but that will be difficult to prove. I think I'll write up the story so it implies an order but I won't present it as a fact. I'll run this by Perry and see how he wants to handle this.

I have the advantage of starting with skeletal story on a disk in my handbag. It has the general outline describing Ultra Woman and gives me a framework from which to start. One of the advantages of using this is the name Ultra Woman never appears. Every reference is simply to 'the woman in purple'. It will serve as a reminder to me of what I'm not supposed to know.

I feel like I've barely gotten started when there is a commotion over by the door. I see Jimmy break free of the people crowded around him and head my way. He's carrying something that looks like it might be the photos from earlier. From the look on his face, I get the feeling they turned out well.

"Lois, you've got to take a look at this!" He opens a folder and... well, there I am. The shot came out better than I would have expected. I was flying with my arms at my sides. They're near my body but not pressed so close that it looks uncomfortable. What can I say, that seems to be the most comfortable way to fly. Unless I'm reaching or carrying something in my arms, that just feels like a natural way to fly. The photo is clear and there is no appreciable sign of blurring from either motion or focus errors. Jimmy really did a good job to get this shot! The gold 'S' looks great against the dark purple. Finally, in this shot I'm looking right into the camera and smiling. All those things that work to make this a great picture aren't what I like the most. The best part of all is, despite the quality of this shot, I don't see how anyone could tell this is me.

"Jimmy, this is a fantastic shot! This picture alone will sell the papers. I'm not sure I even need to write the story."

"Lois, I know you better than that. With you writing the story, I just hope this picture is good enough. I'm going to take this in and show the Chief."

As he turns away, I know as soon as Perry sees the photo he's going to start asking about the story. It's coming together, but I still need to frame the story correctly. It doesn't matter how fast I can type using super speed if I haven't decided what to say. I remember asking Clark about using super speed to turn out a story in less time. He reminded me that it still took time to think of what to say. When we are at super speed, we can think a lot faster. However, it takes so much concentration to stay at high speed and control any physical movements that it's difficult to focus on complicated issues. Clark is better at this than I am, but he says it took him years to master the art of complex thinking at super speed.

A short time later, I hear Jimmy beside me. "Lois, the Chief wants you in his office."

"Jimmy, would you please tell Perry the story is almost ready and it'll be in his in-box in just a minute."

"Um... Lois, I think you need to see what he wants."

Jimmy's tone was a bit odd. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. I thought he'd be pleased at having a shot like that for the front page. He kept the picture and just sent me out of his office. He's been sitting in there just staring at it ever since. A minute ago, I was near his door and he waved me in. He said to tell you he wants to see you in his office. Lois, from the tone in his voice, I'm sure he means right now."

There's something going on here that I feel like I'm missing.

Whatever it is, I know Jimmy well enough to understand he's not exaggerating. Perry wants to see me now and he's not going to be sympathetic to my standard set of excuses.

"Okay, Jimmy. Thanks." I get up and focus on composing myself as I walk toward Perry's office. I need to get that story finished. I'm nervous about what might be happening in the city while I'm preparing the article. I haven't heard any alarms, but I don't trust my hearing. Maybe if I stress how good the story is going to be, he'll let me get back to it quickly.

I open his door and address him with as much Mad Dog Lane brusqueness as I can muster. "Chief, can't this wait! I need to get the story on the purple woman finished. Jimmy got those great shots and we need copy to back them up!"

He looks up at me with a calm that leaves me even more flustered. "Lois. Come in and close the door." That's his "we have some very serious issues to discuss," voice.

So much for the high-energy approach. As I enter the room, he just goes back to staring at the picture. I sit down and just wait. Finally, I can't handle the silence. Since he's so interested in the picture, I just have to break the ice. "Quite a day isn't it? What do you think of her?"

He casually sits the picture on his desk and looks up at me. "Lois, I think the question is, 'What do you think of her?'"

"Well, she's, um..."

He cuts me off before I can mutter any more. "Lois, how about if I frame that question a little differently. How do you feel about being her?"

Chapter 12

As I'm sitting here with my mouth hanging open, one thought keeps running through my mind.

This isn't fair!

Clark went all those years and never had an, "I've got you dead to rights" moment like this. I've only made one appearance and Perry is calling me out. This is plain *not* fair!

My mind is still spinning when I hear Perry's voice again. "I guess it's a good thing I didn't say that as some sort of test. You would have failed miserably. Now, are you going to explain what this is all about?"

"Perry, I..." Even as I consider trying to lie my way out of this, I realize that even if I could, I don't want to. Perry is one of the very best friends Clark and I have. He wouldn't have approached me in this way unless he already knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what was happening. So, the lie I'm attempting to formulate dies in my throat and I take another tack.

"Please don't tell me the new suit is that bad of a disguise," I plea.

He looks mildly surprised at the obvious distress in my voice. "No Lois. If I hadn't already known that Clark was Superman and you had been Ultra Woman last time, I don't think I would recognize you based on seeing you in the new suit. By the way, it's a great look. Where did you get it?"

"Um, Clark's mom made it."

He look is one of amusement and a touch of shock. "You're kidding!"

"No. Actually, Martha makes all the Superman suits."

He's just smiling and shaking his head as I ask, "Perry, how long have you known?"

Now his expression shifts to something that brings to mind smug satisfaction. "Honey, I've known for a few years. I have the advantage of having been watching Clark ever since he started. In a way, I'm embarrassed I didn't figure it out sooner. I mean, those lame excuses he was always giving back in the early days. Then when you two started getting serious about each other, it was hard to miss that all of the sudden you were helping to make up those excuses when he needed to make a sudden exit. I do have to admit that somehow I didn't recognize you as Ultra Woman when

you appeared the first time."

At this, Perry stops and gives me a particularly odd look. "By the way, what are you doing with powers like Superman? I've seen you hurt before and I know you didn't used to be super powered."

"Perry, it's a long story. I promise if you'd like, Clark and I will give you the whole thing later. Please tell me if you think my identity is blown based on what happened today. If my appearance has revealed Superman's identity to the world, I need to take steps for all of us to disappear immediately."

Now he looks shocked! "Are you serious? You would just disappear?"

"Not just us. The Kents will have to disappear too. To be honest, we didn't think about my family. The Kents raised Clark and too many crazies might go after them for either being traitors to the human race or just because they're his parents. We always figured that since my parents were only in-laws, they wouldn't be so much at risk. Now that I've appeared again as..."

"Lois calm down. I haven't seen you babble like this in a long time. You're safe. The new disguise is very good. I think it's much better than the old Ultra Woman costume."

"If the disguise is so good, why are we having this conversation?"

"Like I said, I've known who Clark was for a few years."

I just have to ask. "What tipped you off?"

"I think it was a lot of things. Right off the bat, I was always wondering about those lame excuses and his sudden exits. I think the point where I really put the pieces together was during the New Kryptonian thing. You and Clark were finally about to get married. Then, Superman had to leave for New Krypton and Clark disappears as well. The next thing I know you show up dressed as a harem girl with Superman. I mean really Lois, what was I supposed to think?" Now he's giving me a, "Give me credit for some intelligence," look.

"I thought everyone bought the idea I did it just to get the inside story on the Kryptonians."

"I think most people did. But I saw how you had been acting during the time after Superman left. I've never seen you so distraught. It was hard not to notice that Superman and Clark disappeared at the same time. Then I saw how much your spirit lifted when Superman came back. Honey, I'd been watching you around Clark, and your spirit lifted in a way that seemed like you had your fiancé back. Since then, there have been a few things that I didn't understand, but on the whole the pieces all fit."

"But Perry, how did you figure out I was Ultra Woman? You said you didn't recognize me the first time and you didn't think anyone would be able to tell it was me today."

Now the relaxed smile is back. "Well, that was a long time ago. When I was trying to prove to myself if Clark was Superman, I pulled out the best photos of Superman from our archives. Then I compared them to the pictures from one of the 'Hottest Team in Town' publicity campaigns we ran. When I looked at just his face, it wasn't hard to see that Superman and Clark are the same person. The photo archives of our Superman shots also had our few pictures of Ultra Woman. I happened to pick up her photo while the Lane and Kent shots were also right in front of me. It was mostly by accident. I was holding the picture of Ultra Woman and happened to pick up a Lane and Kent photo and just sort of muttered 'And what happened to her?' to Clark's picture. My eyes wandered over a few inches to your face and I just about fell out of my chair."

I still can't get over how casually he's taking this. Then I realize he's been sitting on possibly the biggest news story in the world. "Once you figured it out, were you tempted to tell the story?"

"Are you kidding? You two are family. Even if I would have figured it out at the very beginning, I'd like to think that after

considering all sides of the issue, I'd have killed the story. By the time I knew what was going on, you two were together. I knew immediately it would ruin your lives if Superman's identity got out."

It was time to get to the heart of the matter. "Perry, why are we having this talk now?"

Now he seems to get particularly serious. "Last time you appeared as Ultra Woman, it was for a short time. But even then, for that week I noticed all the sudden you were the one making up bad excuses and running off. At the time I just thought it was a combination of coincidence and your trying to get the first interview with the new hero in town."

Perry stopped suddenly as if he just remembered something. "Lois, what was that all about? It never made any sense and could you at least give me a brief explanation for what happened then?"

"I guess the short answer is that Clark's powers were temporarily transferred to me. Ultra Woman was only around until Clark got his powers back. If you think carefully, Superman didn't do anything 'super' while Ultra Woman was around."

Perry looked as happy as if someone just told him an Elvis story he had never heard before. "Really! That's amazing! But I know Superman is in Guatemala. Who's powers do you have this time?"

"These powers are my own. Look, Perry, like I said, it's complicated. You remember the bomb attempt where my car got blown up in the parking garage?"

"Of course. I just figured Clark had saved you."

"No. Clark was some distance away and playing with Lara when I triggered the bomb. I only survived it because I had already... I guess 'acquired my own powers' is the easiest way to say it." We've wandered off-topic. I'm answering questions when I need to be asking them. "Can we get back to the matter at hand? Why did you decide to tell me what you know today?" My voice was probably more forceful than necessary but I need to know where Perry is coming from.

He gets a very calm look on his face. "Lara."

"What about Lara?"

"Lois, what happens if something comes up and somehow both Superman and Ultra Woman are needed?"

"Our idea was to have my mom or dad pick her up. We're hoping it won't come to that. Besides, well, Ultra Woman will be announcing she is only available on a part time basis."

"But what if something were to happen to the two of you when you are off doing... your 'super' stuff? Lois, I love you kids, and when I saw you were back in *that* business I just felt I had to let you know I was in on the secret. I only mention it because someday there might be a situation where I can help, if only you and Clark know to ask. Like I said, I can at least be available to help out with Lara."

He is so sweet. I think it will make some things easier right away. Perry is already on the list of people allowed to pick up Lara. We've even done it a couple of times just to make sure Lara knows that sometimes other people take her to visit their house before she comes home. And, not having to make excuses to Perry sure will cut down on the lame-excuse count. Then it hits me that my last excuse was of no value at all.

"You knew all along Clark didn't go to cover the Guatemala story!"

He just smiles casually back at me. "Of course."

"Then why did you give me all the flack about questioning our judgment on this? You knew that he had no choice."

"But you didn't know I knew. Lois, I've worked hard to respect Clark's secret. I know you two maintain it for a reason. Right after I figured it out, I decided that until you either told me yourselves or found out I knew, I would do my best to go along with your cover stories. You have to admit that my reaction was

appropriate based on what I was supposed to know."

He's right. Even now that I know he was in on the secret, all of his reactions over the years still seem to be correct. "So, where do we go from here?" I ask.

"Darlin', I didn't break the secret to cause a problem. I did it to make sure you know that both of you can count on my help when you need it, without having to worry about what you might be revealing. It was mostly about that little girl down in the day care center, but I want you to know I'm here to help in any way I can."

"Thanks, Perry."

He picks up Jimmy's picture again and stares at it for a moment. "I've got this fabulous picture. I don't imagine Ultra Woman was quite so accommodating for any other photographers."

"Um... no, she wasn't."

"Good. I need a story to go with this and somehow I think we might have the best information available on her debut. So why don't you go and finish that story."

I stand up to leave. "Thanks — for everything. And, for the record, I'm glad you know."

He actually starts to blush at this. "Well, I expect a long sit-down with you and Clark before too long where I get the rest of the story. I especially want to know how you ended up with powers like your husband. But for now, get out there and finish my front page!"

"Right Chief!"

Chapter 13

After the revealing talk with Perry, I'm completely off-track to do any more writing. Since I've been back at the office, I haven't heard any alarms or cries for help, but with me that doesn't mean very much. Since I'm so distracted, I figure this is as good a time as any for a quick pass through the city.

I'm only a few steps out of Perry's office when I pivot and head back. I can see he's still looking at that picture so I just open the door and stick my head in. "Chief, I need to head out for a few minutes to follow up on one or two issues for the purple woman story. I should be back in less than half-an-hour."

He just nods his head. "Sure Lois. If you get tied up in something, do we have enough story to run with?"

That's a good point. I don't think I'll find anything that will delay my return, but with the story so close to finished, I'd hate to miss the deadline for something unexpected. "The story is almost done. Before I leave, I'll take a second and send the file to your in-box. That way, if something does come up, you'll have a story. But if someone else does have to finish it, please don't give it to Ralph."

"You know me better than that. If you get delayed I'll finish this myself."

"Thanks, Chief." I hurry over to my desk and send the file to Perry. Then I'm off to the stair well and heading for the roof.

In just a moment, I'm flying again. Taking off from the Planet is convenient, since we're in the heart of the city. Clark has warned me the location can also present a problem. The potential for eyes and cameras nearby can't be ignored. He's refined the process for exiting the top of the stairwell in this, or for that matter, any building. Clark's approach is to stop at the top of the stairwell and x-ray the top of the building. If no one is there, change inside the door and make the exit at super speed. By first making sure you don't bump into someone standing on the other side of the door when you exit, the process is far too fast to see.

Once I'm up in the air, I'm in a better position from which to hear any about emergencies. During my first loop around the city core, all I see are a few fender-bender type accidents. I might be able to help with these, but I don't want to get distracted by

things that can be handled without my intervention. It's amazingly quiet considering how it was earlier today. I think the Metropolis underworld has already given us its best shot.

Suddenly I hear a whistle-like sound that seems to be making the inside of my ears itch. I'm not hearing the sound as much as feeling it. Clark has told me about some new silent alarms he's been encountering lately. In addition to the regular police call, a whistle-component acts like a super-loud dog call. The advertisers claim the benefit is that it will cause all of the dogs within a city block to start howling. It acts as an extra level of generating attention. Whatever else it may do, it's damned irritating! If what I'm feeling is anything like what these devices do to dogs, I'm going to write a product safety report. It must be murder on the poor animals.

The source of the noise turns out to be a convenience store robbery. At first glance, it looks like your basic robbery with a young man waving a gun around. I've had so much success today with the high-speed interventions, I figure I'll just stay with that approach. In the blink of an eye, I have the man on the ground with his hands tied behind him. The only person present is the clerk behind the counter. I shift back to normal speed to see if there is anything else to do.

As he registers my presence, his mouth drops open. "You're her!"

I guess I'm going to get a lot of that for a while. "Are you all right? Did anyone get hurt?"

This seems to shake him out of his shock. "No, I'm fine. Nobody else was here." He points over at the thief. "It's like he didn't want anything. He just came in here and started waving his gun around telling me he was going to rob the place. The strange thing was that he never made a move to try to take anything."

I turn to look at the thief and find him looking up at me expectantly.

"Hi!" he says.

"Excuse me?"

He continues. "I'm sorry about this but I saw the news and just had to meet you. I wasn't going to really rob anyone. The gun isn't even real."

This is getting stranger and stranger. I walk over to the gun and look at it closely. Sure enough, it's a toy. I turn back to the thief. "You did this to meet me?"

"Yeah. You're amazing! Do you have a boyfriend? Will you go out with me?"

"Are you telling me you staged this on the off-chance I would stop the robbery and then I would go on a date with you? Who do you think I am?"

His voice sounds almost frantic. "I figure you must be Superman's younger sister. I'm really a nice guy! I saw you on the news and just had to meet you. I just knew this would work! It's fate that led you here."

I think he's crossed the line from infatuated to crazy. Although I have to admit he scored a point with the "younger sister" comment. I'm trying to figure out what to do when two of MPD's finest arrive. The older officer looks me over and utters a now familiar, "You're her."

Either I need to announce myself to the world soon or I'd better get used to that. I turn to the older officer. "Loverboy here staged a fake holdup. The gun over there is a toy. I'll leave it to you to figure out what to do with him."

He glances at the gun and the suspect. "Thanks, um... Miss. Even if the gun was a fake, this is still a robbery attempt. We'll take it from here."

"Thanks officer." I can't resist turning back to my misguided admirer. "I don't fraternize with clients." Then I shift back to high-speed and go.

As I make one more loop around the city, I can't help but think I need to have a press conference to introduce myself as

soon as possible. I'm having visions of young men trying to find ways to get my attention just like that poor idiot back there. Now that I think about it, I don't remember women doing stuff like that to get Clark's attention when Superman first appeared. Maybe I went a little too far with the suit.

Now it's all quiet again. Since I don't seem to be doing much good out here, other than possibly ruining some poor misguided kid's fantasy, I figure I can get back to the office and put a wrap on my appearance piece.

Getting back into the building is the same process as getting out and in less than a minute, I'm inside. I swing by Perry's office and, when he looks up at me, I simply mouth, "I'm back." He just nods his head and goes back to what he was working on.

When I reach my desk, I realize I've been gone less than ten minutes. The use of super speed really does confuse time. There's another thing that I need to talk about with Clark. I pull up my story and start back through it again. It was very close when I left, and the final parts come together quickly. Just before I submit the story, I wonder if I should add a section about 'lover boy' and the fake robbery. It only takes a second to discard that idea. It has a tabloid feel to it, and I worry it might spawn some copycats.

I make one more pass through the article to make sure I'm happy with it, and then send it off to Perry. There are a few other stories I've been following that I should get back to, but with all that's been going on I'm just not interested in spending time on them just yet. I can't stop thinking about the way the city quieted down after my appearance. That feels like something worth pursuing. It'll make a good companion piece to go with the Ultra Woman debut. I'm reaching for my phone to make some calls when it rings under my hand.

I pick up the receiver and answer, "Lois Lane."

"Lois, I just saw the news. What's this all about?" It's my mother.

"Hi, Mom. What are you talking about?"

"That woman! You must know about her. She's wearing Superman's 'S'."

"Yes mom. I saw her flying around the city. We'll have an article on her in the morning paper. I can't wait to find out who she is." I'm trying to remind my mom that we never say anything on the phone that might reveal the secret, in case someone is listening in.

"Lois. Clark must know who she is."

I feel like yelling at her to think about what she's saying on the phone. "Why would Clark know? I've told you before that Clark and I were never as close to Superman as everyone seems to think. Since we've been married, I don't see Superman except when I interview him. Mom, I'm sure I've told you this several times."

The long pause makes me think I've finally gotten through to her. "Oh. Is there anything about this woman you can tell me?"

"Not really. I'll tell you what. As soon as I find out anything, I'll make sure to let you know. Clark's in Guatemala covering Superman's rescue efforts. Why don't you come over for dinner when he gets back in a day or two? By then, we'll probably know more about this woman in purple." I'm not sure I want to face her without Clark there to back me up.

Another long pause. "Okay. Let me know as soon as he's back and we'll get together."

"Good. Lara will love seeing her grandma. I have to go. As you can guess, this is a busy day. Bye, Mom." As I hang up the phone I can't help but think Clark is going to have a difficult time avoiding saying, "I told you so" on the whole tell-the-family-about-your-powers thing.

I end up spending the rest of the day on the Metropolis day-of-crime piece. I never do reach Bill Henderson but am able to get some other information from MPD sources that help round

out the story. I also make a few trips out to talk with some of my street contacts about what happened today. It's surprising how little they're willing to say. I get enough to put a general story together but there is a lot more here to find. I can just feel it.

By the time I send that story off to Perry, it's getting late. I never have to make another Ultra Woman appearance. The end of the day is strangely normal given all that's happened. I spend the evening trying to find some information about how Clark is doing in Guatemala. There's more coverage of that disaster than I normally would have expected. Many of the reporters are using Superman's activities there to explain and speculate about my appearance in Metropolis today. I'm seeing enough about what he's doing to know that Clark will need some major comfort-time when he gets home. He tries so hard to help, but in these types of disasters, all too often, all he can do is help dig out the bodies. There are a few successes but he gets ground down by the death.

When I finally go to bed for the evening, I just lie there for a minute wishing I had more control over that stupid telepathy we share. I want more than anything to reach out and tell Clark how much I love him and to try not to be overwhelmed by the tragedy that is certainly all around.

Chapter 14

I was hoping be woken up by Clark getting home. Unfortunately, it's just the alarm clock. Waking up alone is a triple-whammy. First, it means Lara has to go another morning without seeing her daddy. Second, it means I'm going to have to go for at least part of another day without my partner and husband. Finally, and most importantly, it means Clark is still down there dealing with all that death and tragedy.

On the way to work, I get the chance to see how our competition did on reporting my debut yesterday. I have to admit I'm pleased by the fact that I see many blurry purple pictures. About half of our competition seems to have gone with over-blown-up images of me in front of police headquarters with the armored car. Others have various images of me in flight that are either blurry from my speed or from the same over-enlargement problem plaguing all the others. Then there's Jimmy's shot. I guess I was cheating a bit but I'm glad he's going to get credit for it.

As soon as I arrive at the office, I can tell this is going to be one of those celebration mornings. National and international wire services have picked up the story along with the picture. They're running together all over the world. I'm glad our story is the one getting the play because it means most of the more outlandish speculation stories are being left on the sidelines. Even so, there's plenty of guesswork to go around.

The prevalent opinion is that this is the return of Ultra Woman. Obviously that's reasonable, and we ran our own version in a separate article as the Planet's speculation as to my probable identity. I was only slightly surprised at the other ideas I found. There seem to be many people who share the opinion of my misguided admirer from yesterday that I'm Superman's sister. The next most common idea is I'm another Kryptonian, not Ultra Woman, that's taken up residence on Earth. There were even a few who think I am a female clone made by replicating Clark's X-chromosome. There were some other ideas, but they made the clone suggestion seem reasonable.

A few brave reporting agencies actually got the other part of my identity correct. I was hoping no one would guess that I'm Superman's wife, but I knew that wasn't realistic to expect. I wondered if we should go with this angle, but argued against it in a short talk with Perry yesterday. We don't need to be "ahead of the curve" on this news. Our front page is strong enough without having to worry about being "right" on this ahead of time. Besides, it's purely speculative and would have the potential to raise the unwanted question of "How did you know?"

I spend the morning trying to keep an ear on the city, but it seems the calm, which descended yesterday afternoon, is still holding. There are a few police reports but nothing like before. I should check with Henderson later and see if I can find out if there have been any more looking-for-a-date criminal acts. I still don't intend to write that story but I would like to know if it is going to be a pattern.

It's a quarter to eleven when I finally get the call I've been hoping for all morning.

"Lois Lane"

I hear a weary, but oh so sweet, voice. "Hi honey, I'm home."
"Clark! I'll be right there!"

I have to remind myself to leave the office at normal human speed, but once I hit the stairwell all bets are off. This is super-speed air-Lois all the way from the Planet stairwell to our balcony and I don't stop to switch into the suit. Only a second or two after hanging up the phone, I'm in our living room. Clark is in street clothes sitting on the sofa next to the phone. He looks so worn down.

I move over to him and sit beside him. I'm trying to decide whether I should just hug him or say something when he solves the problem for me. In a movement conveying a great weariness, he reaches out and pulls me into a gentle hug that seems to radiate both physical and emotional fatigue. I shift around so our embrace is more comfortable and do my best to return his silent but intense greeting.

After a moment, I hear barely a whisper in my ear. "I missed you."

I hope my reply conveys the same level of feeling. "I love you so much. I'm glad you're home."

A few seconds go by before he speaks again. "I don't know how I ever did this without you."

"You did it because your real strength doesn't have anything to do with what's in your blood or what planet you come from. Your strength comes from your heart, and no one has a bigger heart than my Kansas farm boy."

He seems to ponder for a few seconds before bringing his lips to mine for the "welcome home" kiss I've been waiting for since I entered the room. After a few intimate moments spent getting our lips reacquainted, something tells me he's ready to talk some more. I pull back just a few inches so I can look him in his face. "Do you want to talk about the trip?"

He seems to consider for a second. Then his eyes go toward the floor. "Not really. Not yet. I'll want to talk later. Is it okay if we wait on that for now?" He sounds so very tired.

"Clark, why don't you go to bed for a while?"

I see a hint of a grin on his face. "Is that an invitation?"

That's more like it. "Do you want it to be?"

Now I see that killer Clark Kent smile. "Always. But I really am tired right now and should use the bed for rest."

Now I know he'll be fine. "Come on then." One advantage of having those abilities is I get to help my husband stand up when he's feeling this worn down. In his present state, it would probably be easier for me to pick him up and carry him to the bedroom, but I think that would make him feel awkward. Instead of a potentially ego-threatening show of strength, I just put my arm around him and provide encouragement as we make our way to our room.

When we reach our bedroom, I realize there are a few things wrong with this picture. "Darling, you're out of the suit. Why didn't you just lay down in bed and rest?"

He looks a little confused and embarrassed. "I don't know. I guess I was just on autopilot. I got out of the suit and my first thought was that you and Lara are at work and I wanted to see you so badly. When I got changed, I just felt so tired I sat down and called."

He's not thinking straight. If he would have come walking

into the office, there would have been all kinds of questions. I'll remind him of this later but it would feel like nagging if I said anything now. "You seem clean. Did you take time for a shower?"

"No. After I left Guatemala, I took a quick dip in the ocean. That cleaned off just about everything. Then on my way back, I flew through the heart of some severe storms over Georgia. I flew fast enough to scrub off the rest of the grime and rinse away any remaining seawater. A little friction induced heat and I was clean."

He sure looks clean enough to get into bed. He lets me undress him. For an instant my mind flashes back to our exchange downstairs. However, Clark is certainly too tired to follow up on that thought. Shortly, he's lying down and I'm sitting on the edge of the bed next to him. "Please do your best to get a few hours of sleep. It's been quiet so far today and if something does come up, the woman in purple will handle it."

His eye's open just a bit. "Is that what they're calling you?"

"Yeah. Many people have guessed Ultra Woman has returned, but the 'S' has them scratching their heads. My favorite was the second most popular guess. Did you know you have a... um, younger sister?"

This evokes another smile. "Sister, eh? I think we need to straighten this out as quickly as possible. Somebody might think my 'sister' is available."

I lean over and kiss him again before standing up to head back to work. "I'll come home early tonight so we'll be able to have a nice long evening together. Lara has missed her daddy a whole bunch." I'm about to make one more plea for him to try to get some rest when I realize his eyes are sliding shut. My last thought as I leave the room is that I'm a very lucky woman.

As soon as I'm back at work, I head for Perry's office. His door is closed but he signals me to come in as soon as he hears my knock. I enter and quickly shut the door behind me. "Clark's home."

It's funny to watch his reaction now that we both know he's aware of what that really means. "How is he?"

"Tired. These sorts of disasters wear him down."

He seems to be considering just what that means. "Was he working continually the whole time he was gone?"

"I didn't ask, but I think so. Perry, it's not so much the staying awake, it's the stress of the situation. You know how Clark is. From what I've seen on the reports coming out of there, he's spent much of the past day and night pulling bodies out of the muck and rubble. That's the hardest part of the job." My voice had grown quiet. "I know."

Perry's eyes widened a fraction. "That's right. Ultra Woman was involved in a couple of disasters the first time around."

My eyes had drifted down to his desk. When I lift my eyes, I see a look of concerned compassion from my editor and friend. "It's one of the reasons Ultra Woman wasn't going to come back. Perry, it's the hardest thing about being... um, 'super'. You get into situations where you see so many you — can't save."

My eyes have drifted down again. "Darlin', do you need to head home?"

That breaks the spell and I'm fine again. "No. Clark is sleeping and he'll rest better in a quiet house. I'll stick around here for most of the rest of the day." I stand up and reach for the door when I realize Perry may be able to help with another matter. "Perry, the woman in purple wants to call a press conference for tomorrow morning at city hall to introduce herself. Do you have any suggestions as to how to make that happen?"

I swear the look on his face is almost one of shock. "What! You mean The Daily Planet isn't going to get the official exclusive story of her debut?"

I didn't expect so strong a reaction. "I'm sorry Perry, but

Clark and I thought about this carefully. Superman was associated too closely with this paper for a long time, and we've put a lot of effort into trying to get past those early days. Sure, we got some great exclusives but the connection put all of us in danger. We don't want to do that again."

His stern expression breaks and now he's laughing. "I can sure see Clark's influence on you. He could have given me the same speech. I know why Superman has kept his distance and I understand you want to continue to do that. I guess I was hoping... Well, after you posed so nice for Jimmy's picture."

I was wondering if he was going to bring that up. I smile back at him with a blush of embarrassment. "I shouldn't have done that, but this is my paper and you are all my family. I can't give you the coming-out story so I did the next best thing."

"It's okay Lois. I understand. I'll arrange for the press conference in the morning. Do you want to go for 9:00 am?"

"That'll be fine," I reply, as I head out the door.

Once I'm out of Perry office, the day becomes almost routine. I keep listening for emergency calls, but never hear anything. Either the city is unusually quiet or I have a lot to learn about tuning my hearing to pick up those. I spend much of the rest of the day making phone calls relating to ongoing investigations. I'm just about to stop for the day when I get a call from Bobby Bigmouth wanting to meet.

I'm tempted to put him off, but something in the tone of his voice makes me believe I'll regret it if I miss this meeting. He's used to the exotic treats Clark is so skilled at supplying, but I've known what Bobby likes for a long time. A gourmet burger place is on the way to the meeting point and for today, it will have to do.

One of the reasons I decided to meet with him today is the particular location he specified. He's generally not fussy about being seen with us, but when he has something especially important, he's more careful. Today he wanted to meet in an obscure corner of a tiny park at the edge of the city. This is in the oldest part of town, and this park was among the best places for a low-profile meeting. I'm only waiting on the bench for a minute or so when I hear a familiar voice from behind me. "So the hubby is still with super-guy in Guatemala?"

My head whips around just in time to see Bobby coming around to the front of the bench. As he sits beside me, I realize my mouth is hanging open. "How did you know Clark was down there?"

"Lois, you know I never reveal my sources."

This will bear some thought later but for now, I want to get through this as quickly as possible. "Bobby, I'm pressed for time today. What do you have for me?"

He tries to look uninterested. "It depends. What do you have for me?" I can tell it's a line, as it's clear the smell from the food in the bag next to me has already caught his attention.

I lift up the bag. "I have a complete meal from Burgervana. A Master Burger, fries, rings, a side of chili and a triple chocolate shake."

"Well, I guess it will do." Considering what he does, he's a lousy liar. The bag is already in his hands and he's taking the first bite of the burger. After that first bite, he continues to talk while chewing. "There were some people who were very upset by the appearance of the purple girl yesterday."

"Bobby, if that's all you have, then you owe me something for the future."

"Relax Lane. I'm getting to it. You probably already know that the stuff at the end, the banks and the thing with the armored car, was all the same group."

This is getting annoying. "I'm used to better than this from you."

"Well, how about this. It was a test run of a new syndicate. The bank jobs were Intergang and the jewelry job was a new

group. They've been dancing around each other for a month or so when someone high up in Intergang came up with the idea of a cooperative job. The new group has enough money and resources behind it so that even Intergang was looking for an alternative to a war. They each found out the other was planning something for the next time the big guy was out-of-the-way, and decided to plan a joint operation."

This is more like what I expect from Bobby, but I have a feeling there's something else. "Okay, that's better. But for this sort of meeting..." I wave my arm to indicate the park. "I expected more than just that information."

"Lane, you've gotten really demanding since you became a mother."

"If that's all you have then I need to go."

"Fine, but you just might want to take an extra close look at the guys that purple girl snagged yesterday."

"Okay, you have my attention now. What's so special about those guys?"

Now he's wearing a grin that makes me think this may have been worthwhile after all. After a dramatic pause, he answers. "The word is they were so confident this was going to work, that there was a high-ranking guy from each organization mixed in among the rest of the crew. None of the other members of the team knew it, but they were there just the same. If you do a thorough background check on everyone that was captured by 'purple' yesterday, there should be a few diamonds in among the coal."

It's for this kind of information that I feed Bobby. I need to get back to the office and start an investigation. "Thanks Bobby. You're right, this is good information."

"You know I always come through."

I'm about to stand up when my own curiosity gets the better of me. "Bobby, what's the reaction to the woman?"

He just shrugs. "It's a mix. There are stories on the street of a few people trying to get her attention and one guy even managed to have her respond to a robbery attempt. There is a general feeling that with another 'super' in town, Metropolis just isn't worth it anymore if you're in... well, certain professions."

I have to say I like that reaction. "So what do you think of her?"

"It's hard to say much yet. I think she's the same person that showed up as Ultra Woman a few years ago. But, well, she's wearing the big guy's shield. That says a lot about what kind of person she's likely to be. I guess I'll just have to wait to find out more just like everyone else."

I can tell he's fighting the temptation to ask me what I know. I think he would, except he knows that if I do know anything about her, I won't say a word. I need to go if I'm going to do something with his tip today. As I stand, Bobby turns his full attention to the meal on the bench beside him.

"Thanks Bobby. I'll see you around."

He nods at me in reply. "Say hello to Clark for me when he gets back."

My first thought is to head back for the office. In this case, I decide to go with my second idea. A few minutes later, I'm at the downtown MPD building and on my way in the see Bill Henderson. As I enter his office, his greeting isn't particularly cheery. "Lane! What are you here to withhold from me today?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't tell me you didn't know about the girl!"

I have to be careful here. An outright denial will be too obviously a lie. I move slowly to a chair and sit. It takes him a second, but soon he's also seated. "Yes, we knew about the girl. But when and if she ever chose to reveal herself, was something we weren't sure about."

"You could have at least warned me there might be some help." He sounds more hurt than angry.

I meet his touch of anger with my own. "How can you say that? Clark and I are in a unique position to know things we can't share with anyone. We talked about this very issue when we all met the other day. As much as we would like to have told you there might be help, we just couldn't. Besides, you know as well as I do that we weren't even sure anything was going to happen." My voice has taken on a note of pleading. Clark and I have worked to develop the level of trust we have with Bill and I don't want to lose that. There's a lot of truth in what I'm saying even if he doesn't understand the facts behind my words.

He seems less upset now. "So who is she?"

"Bill!"

His reply is immediate. "Don't you think you can trust me?"

Now it's his voice that sounds almost pleading. This has the feel of a point that's going to prove important for our future relationship. "This has to be for your ears only."

His reply is very serious. "I understand."

"Do you remember Ultra Woman?"

He smiles for the first time since I've been in his office. "I knew it was her. She was the only decent Kryptonian other than Superman. So, why is she back now?"

I figure this is as good a time as any to practice the cover story. "You had part of it yesterday. Remember when you asked why Superman cut back on his activities about a year ago?"

"You mean she's been here all this time?"

I don't want to spill too much now. "Bill, please let that be enough for now. I think she plans to announce herself as soon as Superman is back from Guatemala. I'd like to see what she chooses to reveal before I say any more."

"You're right. We got word a few hours ago that she wants to stage a press conference in front of City Hall at 9:00 tomorrow morning."

I put on my best "shocked" look. "You knew this all along and still put me on the spot?"

"I'm sorry Lois, but I need to know that, when push comes to shove, you trust me. Anyway, what did you come to see me about today?"

"Those men that she brought in yesterday... Are they still in custody?"

"Sure. There have been some attempts for bail, but the crimes were too serious with too many witnesses to get out easily."

"I have information from a very reliable source that while most of those men are garden variety hired thugs, there are a couple of high ranking people in the mix. I'll be starting my own background check and I suggest you do the same. One of them is supposed to be a higher up in Intergang, and other is some sort of senior boss in an organization that I have no name for yet."

This news seems to have gotten his attention. "Are you sure? The preliminary checks on these people didn't turn up anything."

"Bill, this is one of my most reliable sources."

"Okay. Like I said, the circumstances make it easy to hold them. I'll have the data collection specialists run a deeper review of our guests."

My eyes wander to the clock on the office wall. It's getting late so I stand up to leave. "I need to get back to the office. I'll let you know if we find anything useful on these guys."

As I reach for his door, he asks one more question. "Are you going to be at the press conference tomorrow?"

"Maybe. It's complicated."

This triggers a laugh. "Now *that* I can understand!"

No Bill, you really don't, I think to myself as I leave his office.

Once I'm back at The Planet, I put Jimmy on a deep background check on those men. Then I spend a few minutes typing up my notes from meeting with Bobby and outline an investigation on this new organization. I didn't plan to put in a full day today, but I'm happy about both of the afternoon

meetings. After a quick stop at the day care center to pick up Lara, we're on our way home to give a proper welcome back to the most important man in our lives.

Chapter 15

I may not be able to hear an emergency call from across the city, but I can sure zero in on Clark. Before I'm even close to our door, I can hear him moving around. I guess being able to hear each other is mutual because as I'm approaching the entryway, the door opens and in front of me is a much more refreshed version of my husband. This time I don't get the first kiss. Lara has missed him almost as much as I have, and she gets there first.

I go through the door and collect my kiss, one that has a promise of much more after Lara is in bed. He seems better, but I know from long experience Clark can hide his real feelings as skillfully as anyone. I hope my tone conveys how glad I am to see him. "You seem to be feeling much better now." I see that familiar farm-boy smile flash back at me, and I know his improved outlook isn't just an act. "Yeah. The sleep helped a lot, and now that you and Lara are here, I feel wonderful."

The tone of his voice as he speaks tells me something else. He's better, but the disaster is still on his mind. I'm almost tempted to ask, but it's probably best to wait. I'll ask him again tonight after Lara is in bed. He's still enough of a heroic lunkhead to try to bury the grief. He's much better at sharing this sort of stress than when we first got married, but sometimes he still thinks he has to carry it alone. For now, we'll stay with safe topics. "You must be feeling better. I heard 'Clark in the kitchen' sounds just a second ago."

"What better way to show the women of my life how much I missed them?"

We spent the next several hours mostly in the kitchen area. It's common for us to spend much of our evening there. Lara can play on the floor and the table is a great place for games. This simple family togetherness is one of the things I never knew I missed so much growing up.

Clark brings the same easygoing style to his cooking that he does most things. Once he finishes the prep work, I don't think he spends more than five minutes actually doing any cooking for most meals. He'll be with Lara or me and it'll be as if a silent alarm goes off. He'll disappear to check a sauce or adjust a burner and then he's back again. When he's done, we'll have a meal that's some kind of halfway mix of Kansas home cooking and exotic foreign flavors. I have no idea how he achieves it, but Clark certainly makes my lack of food preparation skills a non-issue.

The evening is completely normal in so many ways. We probably linger a bit longer over dinner than usual, but before too long Lara is finished with her bath and we're tucking her into bed for the night. Usually we'll spend a few hours in the living room at this time either watching a movie or just being together while we read or chat. Tonight is going to be a bit different. After the lights are off in Lara's room, Clark turns to me just outside her door. "Can we spend the evening in our room?"

"Of course. Are you still tired?"

I get a sense of fragileness in his words. "Not physically. I just... I just want to hold you."

I can't let that go without an appropriate response. Half-a-step later my arms are around his waist and I can hear that special heartbeat up close. The feel of his cheek on my head tells me that he really is fragile tonight. After a few moments, I pull back and make a waving motion with my hand toward our room. "You go ahead. I'll make sure everything else is closed up for the night and be right in." Closing up the house and turning off the lights only takes a moment. When I get into our room, he's on the bed with a thoughtful look on his face. As I lie down next to him, I can't help commenting on it. "You look very serious for someone

who just wants to snuggle."

He reaches over to me and I feel the wonderful sense of rightness that comes from being in his arms. After a brief pause he says, "You feel so good."

I know where this might lead, but he seems to be interested in talking first. "I'm glad you didn't need to answer any calls tonight. Is the city still staying quiet?"

"I did pick up a few calls, but nothing that felt like Superman needed to make an appearance. One of them confused me. A police car was parked nearby for a while this evening and I heard the officers talking about something they called 'lover-boy' bandits. It sounded like these were minor nonviolent robberies where the perpetrator was a young man who waited around for some reason. They mentioned the purple girl. Do you know what that's about?"

I can tell I'm already turning red. "My new look made quite an impression on some of Metropolis's young men. I answered a call where the guy staged the robbery just to ask me for a date. When the police arrived, I said something about 'lover boy' in front of the officers. I guess he wasn't the only person to have that idea."

Clark obviously finds this amusing. "Was he cute?" He barely gets the last word out before he starts laughing. I'm sure he can see the irritation at this situation starting to rise to the surface. "Okay, I'm sorry. I promise that subject is taboo. Besides, I'm not sure I want to know if he's cute. Please tell me more about your debut day. I read your write up in The Planet after my nap, but I want to hear your version."

Before starting, I glare at him once more. His response is immediate. "I promise — no more on that subject."

"Okay. The beginning of the day started out slow. Just before the banks were to open, I noticed an increase in the number of police calls. Right about then, Ralph clued me in to what was happening."

"Ralph!"

The look of shock on his face is priceless. "Yes Ralph. Of course, he had no idea he said anything important. He made a comment about getting to the bank before it opened. That got me thinking about the timing and it all came together. Within a minute of his comment, I was hovering about the city. Sure enough, I didn't have to wait for long. When the bank robberies hit, I knew it was time to act. I took down the first group so fast they never knew what hit them." I pause and look up at him. "The super speed is fantastic for taking care of these sorts of situations. Why don't you use it more?"

"I use it a lot more now than when I started. You seem to have a lot more control over the speed than I did at first. I guess there are two parts of the answer. First, like I said, you seem to have better control at high speed than I do. Second, well, you're better at thinking of ways to take advantage of your speed. My first thought for a solution to most problems, is how to use my strength to fix it. After seeing all the success you've had today with the speed, I think I'll be asking you some pointers on the efficient use of super speed."

"Why you don't carry zip-ties to restrain the people you capture?"

"Lois, I've never doubted your intelligence and creativity. If I ever did, I certainly wouldn't now. I just never thought about carrying anything in my boots. It's pure genius and I'm thrilled you thought of it. I'll start as soon as I can get my boots modified to add a pouch."

He can be so sweet sometimes. Well, most of the time actually. "Anyway, the bank jobs were easy the way I handled them. Of course, then I heard about the armored car. When I first arrived, I spent a few seconds hovering high above them trying to figure out how I was going to get them all at once. The men were so spread out I was afraid even super speed wouldn't get me to all

of them quickly enough. Then it was as if someone sent a signal that it was time to go. All the men just dropped what they were doing and ran to the vehicle. I almost started laughing at how easy they made it for me. I just picked up the armored car and set it on its side in front of MPD headquarters.”

“I saw the pictures of the vehicle after you got the men out.” Clark said. “Did you have any trouble with the steel plating when you broke in?”

“Not at all. Does moving at high speed make that easier?”

Now my husband is chuckling. “I wish I would have had you there to suggest how to handle things right at the beginning. Yes, for punching or cutting through most walls and even armor plate, moving at super speed will make almost any material feel like paper. The one thing you need to be careful about is extra thick reinforced concrete. Up to about a foot thick isn’t so bad but if it’s thicker than that... well, it doesn’t feel like paper anymore.”

The grimace on his face now makes me think this was a painful lesson to learn. “I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, that actually took the most time of the day. Since I was supposed to be out-on-the-street covering the crime wave, I figured I should check in with Perry...” Then it hits me! I forgot to tell Clark that Perry knows.

Clark picks up on my break immediately. “Lois, what’s wrong.”

“Perry knows.”

Now he looks worried. “What does Perry know?”

“You... Superman... Ultra Woman... everything.”

Clark looks dumbstruck. “He figured all that out from your appearance yesterday?”

“No, he says he’s known for a long time. Ever since the time you left as Superman to go off to New Krypton. When he talked to me yesterday, he said he was concerned that if we are both going to go into the super business, we might need extra help with Lara. He wanted us to know he’s there if we need him, and we don’t need excuses to explain when we need to rush off.”

Clark is just staring at me. After a moment, his expression softens and he says, “I’m not worried about Perry knowing the truth. He’s much more than just a friend, and I’m sure he understands that some secrets need to be protected. However, it does make me wonder who else might know.”

That reminds me. “Is there any way Bobby Bigmouth would know you were in Guatemala?”

“Possibly. Why?”

His calm reaction gives me hope that we aren’t going to have to deal with the problem of Bobby knowing Clark’s secret. “When I talked with him today, he made a comment about you being in Guatemala.”

“I don’t think it means anything. Yesterday, at around mid-day, there was a brief break, so I made a few appearances as Clark Kent. I made sure that I appeared in the background of some television shots and even gave a few interviews. As the only representative from Metropolis, they asked me to comment on Superman’s activities. If Bobby happened to see the right television broadcast, he would have seen me down there.”

“That’s a relief. After what happened with Perry, I’m wondering if all our friends know you’re Superman and are only humoring us. I was talking with Bill Henderson and it seemed like every other phrase might be a veiled hint that he knows about your identity”

“I think the secret is safe,” he replies. He pauses for a moment. “Do you have plans for an Ultra Woman’s official announcement?”

“Yes. I figured if Perry was in on the secret anyway, I might as well take advantage of it. I asked him to arrange for a press conference at 9:00 am tomorrow morning. How do you think we should handle it?”

“That’s really up to you. However, since you ask, I think you

should arrive alone and do most of it that way. Would you like me to come in later as Superman?”

I’m glad I’d spent some time thinking this through. “I think a joint appearance will be best. It’s one thing to say I’m married to Superman but it will look better if we’re there together for at least part of it.”

Clark thinks about this for a minute. “I wonder if it would be better to just answer questions instead of offering a prepared statement.”

Now I’m confused. I thought I was going to get to say my little speech. “Why do you think that will work better?”

He looks very serious. “You’re supposed to be an alien with a minimal understanding of Earth culture. How are you supposed to understand that the press will be expecting a prepared statement? If you just show up and let them ask you questions it will give you the opportunity to focus on seeming to be a stranger.”

He may be right. He certainly has experience in these sorts of things. “I’ll think about it. I was so set on making my ‘I’m Ultra Woman and I married Superman’ speech that I’m not sure I want to miss out on delivering it.”

“You’ll still get to make your speech. It’ll just be by way of answering questions.” Now he looks mischievous. “I think you could have some real fun with it. Remember how formal some of the Kryptonians were and how much trouble people had trying to ask them questions.”

Clark is right. Letting the press dig for my identity may have its advantages and could be fun. “Okay, I’ll think about it, but I probably won’t decide until I get there on how to handle it.”

After that, we’re silent for a few minutes when I remember the other subject we need to address. I roll over so I’m on top of my husband. He’s on his back looking up at me. I sense some amorous feelings from him but we still have something else to do first. “Clark, I think you need to talk to me about Guatemala.”

I can practically hear the walls fly up. “Lois, I...”

I cut him off. “Don’t even go there mister. You need to talk and I need to hear what happened. I wish I could pretend you’d be fine, but we both know the truth. Let me be here for you.”

He just stares at me a second or two before saying, “I love you so much. I don’t deserve you.”

“You’re right, but then I don’t deserve you either.” I bring one hand to his cheek in the gentlest caress I know. He needs to recognize I’m forcing this for his own good. “Please Clark, tell me what you saw.”

We both shed our share of tears before we went to sleep.

Chapter 16

I’m hovering high above city hall looking at an overflowing crowd of press. There seems to be a significant number of non-press here as well. When I hear the clock chime out 9:00, I realize I have a serious case of butterflies. I can’t remember being this nervous before. Of course, this is the first time I’ve make a public announcement of myself in an alternate identity to the whole world.

As the clock finishes chiming the hour, I descend to the line of microphones that has been set up in front of city hall. When I land and step up to the microphones, the group goes silent. It’s at that instant I finally decide to go with Clark’s idea of having them ask me questions. I take a deep breath and begin. I have to remember, think alien! In a deliberate and somewhat monotone voice I say, “I am here to give you the opportunity to ask me questions.” Then I just wait.

Clark was right. This could be fun. After about three seconds, every reporter in the crowd tries to yell out a question at once. I let it continue for a few seconds before I address them in the sternest and most mechanical tone I have. “I can not respond to many questions all shouted at once. If you can not speak to me in

a way that will allow me to respond, I will leave now.”

At least they stopped shouting. After a second, a woman I don't recognize raises her hand. This may work after all. I point at her. “Are you Ultra Woman?” she asks.

“When I visited your planet several years ago I used that name. You should continue to call me that.”

Now there are many hands raised. I point at a man in a different area. “Do you know Superman?”

I can't believe anyone from the press would ask such a poorly formed question. “Yes.” And I point at a woman.

She seems to get the hint to make the best of her opportunity to speak. “Why did you come back?”

“I came to see Kal. The one you call Superman.”

I take the next question from a man. “When you were here before, you wore a different costume. Now you're wearing different colors and the same 'S' as Superman. Why the change in uniform and why are you now wearing the 'S'?”

“I have matured since I was here before. As for the symbol you call an 'S', it is the symbol of the house of El. It is proper for me to wear the symbol of the house of my husband.”

That got their attention! First is a silence so extreme I almost believe I can hear crickets in the background. Then the dam bursts and they are shouting at me again. Fortunately, that only continues for a short time and they go silent. I swear every hand is in the air. I started picking people from the crowd almost at random.

“Do you mean you are married to Superman?”

I hate dumb questions. “Yes”

“How long have you been back?”

“I have been on your planet long enough to come to know Kal and marry him.”

“What kind of wedding did you have?”

“A private one.”

“Where were you married and who performed the ceremony?”

We knew there would be questions I would not want to answer. I simply look away and say, “Next question!” If this doesn't work, my plan is simply to leave.

“You said that Ultra Woman is the name we should use. Do you have another name?”

“I am Lor, now of the house of El. You should call me Ultra Woman as was done before. It is not proper for you to use my true name.” I can see how well the excess formality works. As long as I keep a picture of a female hero from another world in my mind as I answer the questions, it's very easy. At the same time, I don't sound anything at all like Lois Lane.

“Are you going to be stopping crime and making rescues like Superman?”

I'm glad some of the people here had good questions ready. “My activities of two days ago were an exception. The tasks to which you refer are the responsibility of my husband. I provided assistance because there was a need and he was unavailable. In the future, if similar circumstances arise, I may appear again. However, it will not be my primary activity as it is with Kal.”

“Are you going to be staying on Earth?”

“I will stay as long as Kal chooses to make this his home.”

“Do you plan to have children?”

“Yes.”

That answer triggered a minor gasp from the crowd. “Have you met Lois Lane?”

I knew the tabloid questions would come fairly quickly. “I have not met Ms. Lane.” Well, I haven't. You can't really meet yourself. “I know of her to the extent that when Kal first appeared she was the member of your news organizations that had the most interaction with him.”

Another reporter seizes on this thread. “There were stories that their relationship had become personal. Do you have any

comment on their history?”

I knew I was going to have to deal with this. “I look forward to meeting her. As for any past relationship between Kal and Ms. Lane, anything that may have happened is irrelevant. I understand that she has been married for several years.”

This same reporter jumps in with another question. “But there were stories that she had been in an affair with Superman after her marriage. Would you comment on that?”

It would be so easy to lose control of the heat vision just enough to send a message about dangerous questions. I lower my voice a bit for emphasis. “No.”

Clark and I had agreed to let me pick the time for him to make his appearance. These questions are as good a reason as any to change the direction of this session. I glance up toward the point in the sky where Clark is hovering high overhead. I hope the movement is too subtle to be noticed as a signal. In only an instant Clark is approaching as Superman from a different direction. I let the crowd's reaction to his approach trigger my response. As their heads pivot to watch Clark's approach, I turn enough to see the final portion of his entry. His landing is the signal for the most stressful moment of this whole show. As he touches down beside me, he leans in close and we kiss.

Part of the reason for a joint appearance is to make our relationship as clear as possible. We figured a kiss... a *real* kiss, in public, should drive home that point. We've never kissed on a public stage like this before. The closest we've come to this was the kiss that I surprised Clark with when he headed off to the Nightfall asteroid. This is fundamentally a “stage” kiss and, right at the beginning, it feels like it. Then I feel his arms around me pulling me into a more genuine embrace. It takes a few seconds but then it happens. The rest of the world fades into the background and it's just us. I still miss him from the time he was gone and I can feel it in my reaction. After another second or so, I feel Clark starting to pull back. It's probably just a well he did, or the world may have learned we tend to float in times like this.

Then he turns to face the crowd of reporters. “Hello, everyone. I just wanted to drop by in case you have any questions for me about my wife. Before I take any questions, I'd like to thank her for covering the city while I was away yesterday. I'll be happy to take one or two questions while I'm here.”

“Why didn't she help out with the bridge collapse last month?”

Clark's face turns somber. “We were caught off guard. That incident was the motivation for making her appearance now. I don't want to speak too much for her, but we both regret not being ready when that earlier tragedy occurred.”

“How do you feel about being married?”

Clark pauses for a moment and then his expression takes on an odd mix of seriousness and joy. “I don't think you can understand. The people of this world have been wonderful to me, but the very differences that enable me to help so much have left me terribly alone.” Right at the end, his voice turns very somber. Sometimes I forget what it was like for him before. After a brief pause, Clark turns to face me and continues in a voice loud enough for the microphones. “I'm not alone anymore.” Now I see tears starting to flow. On pure impulse, my arms fly around him. Within a few seconds I'm reminded kisses aren't necessarily required to blot out the world. By the time awareness returns, I realize my face is wet with my own tears. I also realize we're floating at least six feet above the podium.

“Kal, we're floating.”

He was still lost in dreamland. “Oh, sorry.” We drift back down to the podium together. As our feet touch down, Clark steps back up to the microphones and, with a straight face says, “I like being married.”

After the display we just put on, I'm not surprised at the combination of cheering and laughter that follows. Clark waits

for the clatter to die down and says, “Thank you all for the wonderful greeting you’ve provided for my wife. However, I’m needed elsewhere now.” Then he turns to me and says, “Lor, I’ll see you later.” He leans in for a very quick kiss and departs straight up until he is out of sight.

I figure I’ll give someone one more chance at a question. I step back to the microphones and let my voice take on a softer tone. “I will take one more question.” I look around the throng and notice a young woman that for just an instant reminds me of myself a few years ago. When I point at her, she drops her notepad and I wonder if we have much in common after all.

“Ultra Woman, I had some questions about your origins but somehow I don’t think that’s the real story today. You may not appreciate it, but you have married the most sought-after man on this planet. You’re the first person we have ever been able to ask, so please forgive the personal nature of the question. What is Superman like when he’s not saving people and stopping crime?”

Now that’s a question on which to end. I’d better make this good. “When the other Kryptonians came here a few years ago, you saw what can happen when people have Kal’s abilities but lack his morality and compassion. Now consider what Kal has done and continues to do as Superman. Ask yourself what kind of person uses their abilities such as my husband does for no reason other than to help in ways only he can. I spent much of last evening comforting Kal, because he was grief stricken at his inability to have saved more people in that disaster. In private, Kal is the kindest, gentlest and most wonderful person I have known. He is one among billions and you — and I, are supremely fortunate to have him.” With those words, I copy Clark’s departure.

Chapter 17

When I arrive at The Planet, Clark is busy working on his Guatemala story. I’m still a little unsettled from the appearance as Ultra Woman so I just go over to say hello. As he senses my approach, he stops typing and looks up at me. “How are you?”

The practically deserted state of the office means I can speak freely. “Jittery. I had no idea it would be so stressful.”

“At least you only have to do it once. Since you’ll only be doing this on a fill in basis, there shouldn’t be a need to appear in public very often. There certainly won’t be a repeat of this particular press conference.” He must see something in my expression because the next thing I know he reaches out and squeezes my hand. “You did fine.”

“Did you hear everything?”

“I heard everything up until I left. I figured you were just about done when I took off, so I came straight here. Based on when you arrived, you couldn’t have said much more. Did you answer any more questions?”

“I answered one more.”

“What did they ask?”

“They asked about you. What kind of person you are at home.”

“You didn’t tell them that sometimes I leave the toilet seat up, did you?”

“I should have.”

“So what did you say?”

“I guess you’ll just have to read tomorrow morning’s paper to find out.” With that, I step over to my desk and go about the motions of starting to work. A moment later, I can feel Clark’s eyes on me. When I look up, there he is with the most adorable “What did you say?” look on his face. I stick my tongue out at him and return my attention to work.

After a few minutes, it seems like half of the staff comes roaring into the office. Jimmy is in the lead and certainly the loudest. As soon as he catches sight of us, he hurries over.

“Lois, CK, I can’t believe you missed Ultra Woman!”

I try my best to look surprised. “So she is Ultra Woman.”

“Yeah. She said she came back to be with Superman. Except she calls him Kal.”

“Well his name is Kal-El.”

“Well, she would know. They’re married!”

I’m still trying to look surprised. “You’re kidding.”

I think Clark can sense I’m struggling. “Jimmy, are you sure about the married part?”

“Positive! First, she said so. That’s why she’s wearing the ‘S’ now. It’s the symbol of Superman’s house. She said her name is Lor of the house of El. I guess that would make her Lor-El. And finally, a little later, Superman showed up and talked about her as his wife.”

I’m surprised Jimmy is taking this so well. “Jimmy, are you all right? I seem to remember that you had a crush on her when she was here a few years ago.”

“Maybe a little, but one look at them together and you can just tell she should be with Superman. You should have seen it when they kissed! And later, someone asked Superman about being married and... well, he got kind of emotional and she hugged him and they floated. I think it was the most romantic thing I’ve ever seen. How can I feel bad after seeing how happy they are? Anyway, I got some great shots of them together. I need to get this film to the photo lab.”

As Jimmy disappears my phone rings. “Lois Lane”

“Ms. Lane, this is Gerald Samms at the Metropolis Star.”

“What can I do for you Mr. Samms?”

“What’s your reaction to Superman being married to Ultra Woman?”

I’m not sure if it’s just bad timing or something in the tone of his voice, but for some reason this question hits me exactly the wrong way and I hang up the phone. Apparently, I do so with a little more force than necessary because I find Clark looking over at me. “What was that?” he asks.

“You won’t believe this. This guy...” My phone starts ringing again. “Lois Lane.”

“Ms. Lane, I represent the National Whisper...” This time I slam the phone down. Now I have the attention of a large segment of the office. I also have a broken phone. Clark comes around and kneels beside me. “Honey, what are those calls about?”

“You didn’t listen?”

“You know I don’t do that unless you ask me to.”

“It seems I’m now the jilted lover in the Superman triangle. We worked so hard to get past that and here it is again.”

I can see a look of “I’m sorry” in his eyes. “What did they say?”

“Well, the first just asked for my reaction and the second... well, the second was the National Whisper and I didn’t wait for the question.”

He looks thoughtful for a second. “Please don’t get angry, but think about it from their perspective. You do have a public history with Superman. You are the person he carried back after his debut with the space transport. You’re the one who kissed him during Nightfall. And, whether we like it or not, there were those pictures. Honey, I’m sorry but you have to admit there is a legitimate question here.”

How can he take their side? “Clark, this is a matter of privacy!”

“But Superman is a public figure. There’s no one else the general media can ask for a personal reaction.”

I want to snap back a reply but the words just won’t come. I’m not sure if I’m angrier because it’s an invasion of privacy or if it’s because Clark’s right. I should have anticipated this, and my reaction was inappropriate. After a moment, I realize Clark is still there waiting for me. Finally, he breaks the silence. “This has to be your call. You know I’ll back whatever you want to do.”

We both know the answer. He wants me to say it. “I’ll type up a statement. If I don’t, every hack sleaze sheet in the country will be putting words in my mouth.”

I feel Clark’s hand on my back moving slowly in small circles. “I think that’s the best answer. You do realize that some will go with sensationalist sleaze anyway?”

“Yeah, but I don’t see any way to stop that. At least this way I have a chance to have my say and I can act professionally, even if others don’t.”

With a squeeze of my hand, Clark heads back to his desk. I’ve completely lost my train of thought on my story anyway, so I save off that file and get to work on a statement congratulating Superman and Ultra Woman on their marriage. I feel like I should ask Clark to help. This should be all touchy-feely and that sort of writing is his strength, not mine.

A few minutes later Jimmy is back in the office and heads for my desk. “Wow, Lois, what happened to your phone?”

“One too many questions about what I think of Superman being married.”

He seems to mull this over for a minute. “Well, to tell you the truth, I wanted to ask you myself. I mean, I remember a time...”

My glare stops him cold. I need to get used to this. I take a deep breath and force my face into a smile. “It’s all right Jimmy. I need to get used to the question. After that...” and I point at the broken phone, “Clark reminded me that in the early days I was Superman’s most obvious, um, groupie. I put myself in that position and I’m still paying the price. However, I hope the appearance of Ultra Woman will be the real end of the Lois and Superman speculations.”

Jimmy’s still looking jumpy. “I know you and Clark are happy together but... I expected more of a reaction from you than this. I mean, you and Clark go really well together, but you seemed so calm at the news that Superman married her.” As he’s looking at me, I see a proverbial light come on and his eyes widen. He leans in closer and lowers his voice. “You knew!”

I practically jump out of my chair and hustle Jimmy into the conference room. I get the door shut and turn toward him only to see a look of terror in his eyes. “Jimmy, are you okay?”

“I’m sorry. I promise I won’t tell anybody.” The fear in his voice is palatable. In a way, I guess it’s nice to know I can still inspire that kind of reaction even when I’m not wearing the suit.

I try to inject a soothing tone in my voice. “Jimmy, it’s fine. I just didn’t want to have anyone else hear this conversation. I promise that neither I nor Clark will be mad, but please tell me what you think you know.”

He’s better, but clearly still nervous. “I was wondering why you and Clark didn’t cover the press conference. I figured it was because he had been out of town and you were helping him with his story. Still, this was going to be big news, and considering you wrote the story on the bank robberies, it didn’t feel quite right. Then, when I came in and said this was Ultra Woman, you just didn’t look very surprised. Then, when I said she was married to Superman, well, your reaction didn’t feel quite right that time either. Just now, when we were talking it all added up. You already knew.”

I make a show of composing myself before responding. “Yes, Clark and I have both known Ultra Woman was married to Superman for some time now. Up until recently, she wasn’t planning to do the ‘super’ thing again. It was only after the bridge collapse that she decided to put a suit back on. You have to understand that Superman values his privacy. Having his private life become more public can lead to things like that mess with those photos a few years ago. One of the reasons that I didn’t cover the press conference today was to try to minimize the tabloid potential of the event.”

He looks relieved I’m not mad at him. “I understand,” he says. Then he looks thoughtful for a moment. “Is there anything

you can tell me?”

“I wish I could, but we promised to protect their privacy as much as possible.” He starts to head for the door and I can’t resist. “Jimmy, how do you think it went for her today? I can tell you that she was nervous.”

He looks surprised at this. “Really? She didn’t seem nervous at all. At first, she was kind of stiff. She reminded me of those other Kryptonians. Then Superman showed up for a few minutes and she seemed like a different person. Actually, he seemed like a different person too. He talked about being lonely and... well, I’m really happy for both of them. Anyway, after Superman left there was a question to her about what he was like at home. When she answered, she seemed much more natural than before. I came away thinking that they deserve each other.”

“I’m sorry I scared you when I dragged you in here. I just didn’t want to take a chance that anyone else might hear. Clark and I have worked hard to keep our public distance from Superman the last few years.”

“Lois, it’s my guess that you shouldn’t have too much problem with that after today. You should have seen them. In a strange sort of way, it reminded me of how you and Clark look together. To tell the truth, I was surprised by some of what I saw.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Like I said, Superman talked about being lonely. I never realized he felt like that. I mean, who knew? And when they floated, it was so romantic. It was like they were in their own world. I think the whole crowd could feel it. After what happened today, I don’t think there will be any doubt about who Superman is spending his time with.”

I need to get back to my public statement. “I hope you’re right. Now I need to write my congratulations.”

Before I can get out the door, he gets out one more question. “Lois, are you sure she’s not even a little bit jealous of you? I don’t think I would want her mad at me.”

I actually laugh a bit at this. “Trust me. She knows there is nothing for her to be jealous about between me and Superman.”

I dart out the door before he can ask anything else.

Chapter 18

The statement takes longer to pull together than I anticipated. I’m happy to be able to take advantage of Clark’s touchy-feely skills for the final draft. As part of the statement, I make a point to apologize to Ultra Woman for missing her press conference. My official reason is that I feared my presence would prove to be a distraction. Based on some of those questions, that justification will hold up. Eventually I get it to the point where I can stand to read it and I take it in to Perry. I’m half-expecting that he’s going to say The Planet was no place for something like this, but he surprises me. When I hand him the piece he glances at it and says, “It’s about time. I was afraid I was going to have to ask you for this.”

“Really, Chief? At first I hadn’t been planning to write anything like this at all.”

“Lois, because of your history with Superman, you have to give the public something. I’m planning to run this as a side-bar with the Ultra Woman press conference report.”

Between the Ultra Woman article and my note of congratulations, I was wondering if we were going to push Clark’s Guatemala story completely off the first page. I should have had more confidence in both Perry and Clark. The Guatemala story takes advantage of the fact that as Ultra Woman I had described Superman’s feelings of distress the previous evening. It makes me especially happy that I came clean about the last question to Ultra Woman. Clark reports a very tastefully done interview with Superman that supposedly took place just before heading back to Metropolis. It has all the elements that make Clark’s stories so emotional to read. By the time I finished

it, I was in tears. This feels like another Kerth nomination for my husband. The presence of something from both of us on the front page should further head off any questions of why we didn't cover the Ultra Woman press conference for The Planet.

The rest of the day passes uneventfully. I do manage a call to Henderson and verify that the "lover-boy" crimes have stopped. Apparently, the very public demonstration that Ultra Woman was "spoken for" had the desired effect in that regard. I talked this over with Perry and he thinks it might be worth considering as a potential story for tomorrow. A lot will depend of what kind of Ultra Woman coverage our competition runs, and if any other news outlet runs a report on these crimes. Perry did ask me about an interview, either with Ultra Woman or with her and Superman as a couple. I asked that we wait until some of the newness wears off. These conversations are *so* much easier knowing Perry is in on the secret.

We leave the office at the usual time. We've barely picked Lara up from day care when Clark gets his first Superman call of the day. He doesn't say what it is, but from the look on his face, it must be serious. He disappears into the stairwell just as Lara and I get on the elevator for the ride to the parking garage. The drive home is uneventful and as I approach the front of our home, I'm half-expecting to see Clark waiting for us. There is someone waiting — it isn't Clark. My mother is standing by our door with an impatient look on her face.

"Hi, Mom. I didn't expect a visit today." I'm happy to see her and have some company until Clark gets home. It only takes an instant to realize she is not in a good mood.

In a gruff, almost angry tone she replies, "Lois, can we go inside? We need to talk."

I'm wondering if she and dad have had a falling out. They haven't remarried yet, but Mom once confided to me she liked the feel of dating and was afraid if they remarried, some of the magic that was back in their relationship would be lost. Well, whatever she wants to talk about will have to wait until Lara is settled. Fortunately, Mom seems relaxed enough to help and in only a few minutes Lara has dozed off in the front room. We move into the kitchen so we can talk without disturbing her.

"What's bothering you? Would you like some tea?"

"Are you divorcing him?" The angry tone is back and now has a note of challenge.

I'm sure I look completely dumbfounded. "What!"

"I asked if you're divorcing that bigamist husband of yours."

Good grief! After all this time and all the worrying I did about telling my family about my powers, I still managed to blank on this. With all that has been happening the last 48 hours, I didn't think about the impact the press conference would have on her. "No, I'm not planning to do anything. There's a simple..."

She won't even let me finish. "Lois, don't tell me that wasn't your husband I saw kissing that purple... slut. Not only was he kissing her... and doing so in a very provocative way... they both said she's married to him."

"Mom..."

"God Lois, it was hard enough to deal with the fact that you husband is an alien from outer space. But now he has an extra wife."

I try again with a little more volume. "Mom!"

I have no luck with that either as she continues. "Sure, Clark seemed like a nice guy. I mean, he is Superman and all, but how can you let him do this to you?"

"Mom! He not married to anyone else."

At just that instant, the front door opens and Clark comes in. I'm not sure this is a good time but given the nature if this "conversation" I don't think there is a good time.

The door accomplishes what I have been unable to do and Mom pauses. Clark comes immediately to the kitchen and sees

her. His greeting is a cheery, "Hi Ellen."

"Don't 'Hi Ellen' me. How could you do that to my daughter?"

He looks confused. "What did I do?"

"I saw you kiss that Ultra Woman slut!"

I wish she would stop using that word.

"You... You have a wife and child!"

She turns to me. "I want you and Lara to come home with me right now!"

I'm trying to think of what to say when Clark addresses me with what I swear is an I-told-you-so tone. "Lois, I..."

I think he's really about to say, "I told you so." but seems to realize this is not the time. His voice stutters for an instant and then picks up again. "Honey, would it be better if I get Lara and wait upstairs while you two hash this out?"

"No. I'd rather you stay here for this." I need to get Mom calmed down so I can give her the rest of the story. "Mom, please sit down. I need you to listen for just a minute."

She does seem a little confused at how calm both Clark and I are. I get the impression she thought she was going to find me heartbroken because of my two-timing husband. "Okay," she says. "But I don't understand how you can be so calm about all this. I saw him on television." She points at Clark. "Did you see them together? He's in love with that purple — person. It was unmistakable!"

She sure is making this hard, but at least she didn't call me a slut again. "I know he is Mom."

Now she looks positively shocked. "But..."

I cut her off. "Please give us a chance to explain."

Even with her right in front of me, this isn't easy. "Mom, I'm her."

She just looks confused. "What?"

"I said I'm Ultra Woman."

She's just staring at me with a blank look on her face. I feel like I might have well said I have two heads.

"Lois, don't try to protect him. I saw her flying in that... that skin-tight... thing!"

Okay, here goes. "Mom, watch this." I spin into my suit.

I guess I really didn't know what to expect from her when I did this. I had hoped for a positive reaction. She's just sitting there with her mouth hanging open. When she does react, it's not quite as positive as I had hoped. She jumps to her feet and charges at Clark. She starts pounding on his chest with her fists while screaming, "What have you done with my daughter?"

He grabs her arms and I can tell he's holding her as gently as he can. "Ellen, you have to stop hitting me. You'll hurt your hands."

I pull the mask part of my suit off my head so there should be no doubt about who I am. "Mom, it's really me."

She won't even look in my direction. Now her voice is interrupted by sobs. "My daughter isn't an alien and doesn't have powers. Who are you, and what happened to Lois?"

I can't believe this is happening. This was my "nightmare" scenario but I never really expected this extreme of a reaction. This is the second time she's used the "alien" word. I never realized how much it bothered her that Clark wasn't exactly human. I'm realizing my mother has a streak of prejudice I never knew was there. Whatever she ends up believing about me, I'm worried about how she's going to think of Lara. "Mom, it's me. You know me!" My voice has taken on an air of pleading.

She still won't look at me. "My daughter is human."

That hurts. She may feel like she's lost her daughter, but I'm the one standing here being rejected. For the first time I can remember since I got the powers, my whole body feels heavy. I pull out a chair and sit down. The feeling of tears on my face makes me realize I'm crying. I can't believe how badly this has gone. She's finally stops trying to hit Clark and she's just

standing there, staring at the floor. I make one more try. “Mom, it is me. Can’t you tell I’m the same Lois I’ve always been?” My voice catches once or twice. The powers don’t help you talk any better when you’re crying.

No reply. She doesn’t even bother to look up. I need to end this, at least for tonight. “Ellen, please leave.”

She finally looks up at me. “What?”

How can she be surprised? “You’re welcome back when you are ready to talk about my... change. As long as you don’t think I’m your daughter, then there’s no reason for you to be here.”

Now she’s staring at me with a look I can’t quite read. She gathers herself and starts slowly for the door. Her movements are lethargic. Then it hits me that she’s in no condition to travel on her own. “Clark, please make sure she gets home safely.” Then I address her slowly retreating back. “Mom, please don’t do anything to hurt yourself. And *please* don’t use this as a reason to take a drink!”

With that she just stops. After a few seconds, she turns and, for this first time since I spun into the suit, she really looks at me. Finally, she begins to speak. “When you were seven years old I got you something special for Christmas. This was a toy you wanted very much and had made a special point to ask for. After you got it for Christmas, you and I spent a lot of time together with it. What was it?”

“Mom...”

“Lois, please. I need something to believe.”

It hits me that she called me Lois. Maybe we can salvage this disaster. “You got me an Easy Bake Oven. We did spend a lot of time with it but all I learned was that I hated to cook. I had never asked for it, and stopped using it as soon as you let me.”

She’s just standing there. Sometimes she can be as impossible to read as anyone. After a few seconds, she starts toward me. When she reaches where I’m sitting, she reaches out and gently places her hands on my cheeks and lifts my face so that I’m looking into her eyes. After only a second or two, her arms practically fly around me and I’m her daughter again. I can’t remember ever being so happy to be hugged by my mom. This must have gone on for nearly a minute before she pulls back and sits down beside me.

“Honey, I’m so sorry. But I don’t understand. Did you get some kind of genetic modification or something to be more compatible with Clark?”

It’s so nice to have her smiling at me again. “Well, yes and no. There have been some modifications, but I didn’t ‘get’ them, at least not deliberately. Believe it or not, in some ways the powers are sort of like a disease.”

“You mean you caught... super... from Clark?”

“Actually, according to our doctor, I was infected by Lara.”

“What?”

“You see, there are things in Clark’s body that give him the powers. Normally they can’t pass from one person to another because generally they can’t live outside of Clark’s body. That was why Clark and I had so much trouble getting pregnant. Once I did get pregnant, they were passed to me from Lara. It took the entire pregnancy for the, um, infection to take hold and then another year for me to develop powers. They only showed up a few months ago. Remember the car bomb a while back? That was when we found out.”

She’s struggling to keep up but my mom is a smart woman. “But Lois, if you’re Ultra Woman now, who was Ultra Woman a few years ago.”

“Um, that was me too.”

“But you just said...”

“Mom, it’s really complicated.”

“But Lois...”

“I promise I’ll tell you everything. First, can you please help me figure out how to tell Dad and Lucy? I think I’d do just about

anything to avoid going through this again.”

Chapter 19

It’s amazing how much better the evening gets after Mom accepts that I’m really me. Once she’s past that big step and believes I really am still Lois, her Lois, her medical background surfaces and she starts wanting to talk about what the changes are and how they happened. I’m just starting to struggle with explaining things when Mom cuts me off.

“Lois, have you told your father yet?”

“No. Clark kept telling me that I needed to tell both of you and Lucy, but I kept putting it off. I guess I was dreading the possibility of just what we went through earlier.”

Now she looks apologetic. “I’m sorry I reacted so badly. You have to admit, you gave me a series of shocks. First, I see your husband very publicly declaring he is married to a super woman. Then, you turn out to be her. You have to admit that you aren’t from Krypton.”

Clark clears his throat. “Ellen, my planet was called Krypton. Krypton is a brand of paint.”

I glare at my husband. Is he trying to convince my mom that I need to go home with her anyway? He pales under my gaze and quickly decides that discretion is called for at this time. He glances around nervously and says, “I think it’s time for Lara to get her bath,” then departs.

After he leaves the room, I try some damage control. “Please forgive Clark on the Krypton thing. It was his home after all.”

She actually laughs at this. “Don’t worry about it. I think it’s genetic that men have to correct their in-laws whenever possible. Like I was saying, we need to get your dad over here. He’ll probably react better than I did anyway, and he’ll love hearing the science behind what’s happened to you.”

While Mom calls Dad, I go up to check on Clark and Lara. As soon as I’m in the bathroom, I get the apology.

“Honey I’m sorry about the Krypton — Krypton thing. How mad is she at me?” He delivers this little speech with his primary attention still on Lara.

I move up beside him and give him a kiss on the cheek. “Apparently a certain level of clueless behavior is expected in son-in-laws from whatever planet. Mom just shrugged it off. She’s trying to get hold of Dad and I’d appreciate it if you are extra careful the rest of the evening.”

“I will be.”

It’s fifteen minutes later when Dad arrives. Mom and I are playing with Lara when he comes into the room followed by Clark. After the usual greetings, which include a kiss for Mom no less, Dad turns to me and asks, “Is this about the appearance of Ultra Woman?”

I know he’s quick but I didn’t expect this. “Um, yes.”

“Are the powers for real or is it some kind of trick?”

“Daddy, I don’t understand the question.”

“Lois, I saw your press conference as Ultra Woman. By the way, your costume is very striking. Anyway, do you really have powers just like Clark?”

I turn to my mother. “Mom, did you tell him on the phone?”

She looks confused. “No. I know the rules. Never say anything about Clark or powers or any of that stuff on the phone.” She turns to daddy. “Sam, how did you know it was Lois?”

“I didn’t, at least not until Clark appeared. When Ultra Woman first said she was Superman’s wife I thought she was someone trying to, I don’t know, blackmail Superman or something. Then Clark appeared and I knew Ultra Woman was Lois.”

I’m sure I have a stunned look on my face. “Daddy, how did you know?”

“Well, the television coverage of your press conference was

good. They showed a close-up of the two of you together. Princess, I've seen how Clark looks at you many times. As soon as I saw the expression on his face when he looked at Ultra Woman, I knew it was you inside the purple suit."

He pauses for a second as Clark reaches out and squeezes my hand. Daddy sees the gesture, and points at our now clasped hands, and continues. "See? It's little things like that. You two should probably be careful when you're together in public as Superman and Ultra Woman. If you make many appearances, I suspect your friends that see you together often might notice the same thing I did."

That got me thinking about Jimmy's comments. "I think one of them almost picked up on it." Then I proceed to tell everyone that Jimmy had mentioned that seeing Superman and Ultra Woman together reminded him of Clark and me.

When I'm finished Clark says, "We need to think about bringing Jimmy in on the secret."

While I'm considering a reply, I notice Mom looking particularly glum. "Mom, what's wrong?"

She sighs a heavily. "Your father knew it was you. Even your friends that don't know Clark is Superman noticed the similarities. I feel more awful than ever that I didn't see it and then overreacted so badly."

"What happened?" Dad asks.

Before I can reply, Mom jumps in. "I didn't recognize that Ultra Woman was Lois. After seeing the news and the pictures from the press conference, I thought Clark was involved with someone else. I came in here on a tear and... Well, I made a real mess of things. I'd rather not get into the details but if you really want to know, I'll tell you about it later in private. For now let's just say that I made a fool of myself because I didn't trust either Lois or Clark."

Now Dad speaks up. "Ellen, you shouldn't feel too bad. You were thinking about protecting your daughter. I'm the one that's still sorry every day that I'm the source of so much of your distrust."

There's a moment of awkward silence until Dad turns to me and asks, "So are you going to explain to me how you have powers like Clark?"

We spend much of the next hour working through what we can explain. We have enough of the information to cover the generalities but not the details that Dad wants. Finally, I ask Clark the question that's been in the back of my mind for some time. "Do you think Daddy can talk with Dr. Klein?"

He thinks this over for a minute. "I can ask. But, well I'm sorry Sam, but with your background I don't think you can get a clearance to have official access to Star Labs."

Daddy looks so disappointed, but then Clark continues. "However, we have cultivated a public friendship with Bernie Klein. We can invite him over for dinner some evening that you were also invited. I'm sure he'll be happy to bring along some of our confidential medical files so you can have a look."

He perks up considerably at this. "Do you think so?"

Now it was my turn to be upbeat. "Clark's right. Bernie's a nice person and you'll love talking shop with him. Although, sometimes he tends to start running on and on about the physics of how the powers work."

Dad is practically giddy. "I'd love to try to keep up with all that."

There was another break in the conversation and Mom asks, "What about Lucy?"

My head jerks around and I find Clark staring back at me. "What should we do?"

His reply is a simple, "Call her. If she's home alone we can fly out and talk to her tonight."

It's already 9:00 pm so there's a good chance Lucy is home. After I dial her number, I only hear two rings before she picks up.

"Hello?"

"Hi Lucy, it's Lois. How are you?"

"Great!" She sounds excited. "I saw the news from Metropolis today. What do you think about that woman?"

"Maybe we can talk about her later. Clark and I just finished talking with Mom and Dad about some private family matters. There are a few issues we'd like to talk to you about, but not right now. Are you going to be at home for a while?" I hope she can figure out what I'm driving at.

There is a brief pause. I guess she's thinking through what I'm really trying to say. "Yeah, Sis. I'll be at home all evening. I don't have any company or anything so we should be able to talk whenever you want."

"Thanks, Lucy. We'll talk in a little while."

When I hang up the phone, I realize everyone in the room is waiting for me. "She saw the press conference. It would probably be a good idea for us to zip out there and tell her what's going on. Mom, Dad, would you mind watching Lara while we go tell Lucy?"

They exchange looks and sort of nod in unison before Dad answers. "We can stay, but I hadn't planned to stay overnight. How long do you expect to be gone?"

"I don't know, maybe half an hour or so."

They both look surprised at this. "Will that leave you any time to talk to Lucy?" Mom asked.

"Sure," I reply. "If it's just the two of us we can get to California in only a few seconds."

They both look a bit stunned at this but the only reply was an "Oh," from Mom. It takes considerably longer to get ready for the trip than the actual flight. It might have been quicker but this was the first time Dad had seen the spin-into-the-suit trick and he asked to see Clark do it a few times.

In less than five minutes, we're ringing Lucy's doorbell. When the door opens, she doesn't seem at all surprised to see us. "Come on in and sit down," she says.

"I'm glad you were able to figure out what I was trying to say in the phone call," I say.

"It wasn't too hard. I remember your rules about that stuff when talking on the phone. I was surprised you got here so quickly. I didn't realize you could go coast to coast that fast."

"Yes, we can. So, do you want to ask questions or would you rather us just try and explain?"

"This is about Ultra Woman, right?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply.

"I have some ideas but why don't you tell me and then if I need to, I'll ask questions to fill in the blanks."

"Well, I'm Ultra Woman. And I do have powers just like Clark. It turns out that under just the right conditions, the abilities can be passed on to another person." I pause for a minute. She sure seems calm.

Finally, with a note of typical Lucy impatience she says, "Well, what else?"

Now I'm surprised. "What do you mean, 'what else'? Isn't that enough?"

"I guess so. But I figured all that out before you phoned. I thought you had some big shocking news to tell me."

This finally moves Clark to speak up. "Lucy, we thought this was 'big shocking news'. You should have seen what happened with Ellen."

Lucy perks up at this. "Now *that* I want to hear about."

Now I'm confused. "You mean I develop super powers and take up the 'hero' business and you aren't curious about the details?"

She just shrugs. "Sis, I figured out a long time ago that your life was just plain crazy. I mean, even before you met Clark and got involved with Superman, how many times were you almost killed?"

“Well...” I start to reply but she cuts me off.

“Think about it. In the last half-dozen years or so, you almost married one of the richest men in the world who turns out to be a criminal mastermind. Then, you take up with your partner who turns out to be Superman. You told me you’ve been to other dimensions and you’ve traveled through time. After all that how can you possibly expect me to be surprised you now have super powers?”

I guess she’s right. I’m struggling to find something to say when she leans forward with a mischievous look on her face. “So, you’ve got to tell me what happened with Mom! I want all the details!”

Later, as we’re heading home, I’m still in shock at how calm Lucy had been about the whole “super powered sister” thing. I had been sure we would spend a long time talking about Ultra Woman and powers but all she wanted to talk about was Mom. She kept going back and forth on if it’s funnier that Mom thought the Clark had married a second wife or that she thought I was some kind of fake-Lois. I have to admit that after seeing how both Lucy and Dad reacted to my being Ultra Woman, it did make Mom’s reaction seem even more over-the-top. The good thing about Lucy’s under-reaction to the news was that it makes it easy to get back to Metropolis on time.

Chapter 20

For the second morning this week, the start of the day in the Planet bullpen is like a celebration. The pictures Jimmy shot for the front page provided a perfect visual to go with the three-part story. Perry keeps saying that this edition will be one of those “special” ones that people will talk about for years. On the strength of the Ultra Woman report, my note of congratulations and Clark’s Guatemala piece, Perry decided last night to risk a double production run. He seems to have guessed right because the early indications are that even the double run is going to sell out.

I’m finally having some success in getting back to the investigations I sidelined during the Ultra Woman debut. However, there is one report that I don’t think I’ll be revisiting. While sorting through my project list, I run across the notes I had prepared about the men committing crimes to try to meet Ultra Woman. I scowl at them before getting up and heading for the shredder. After the substantive pieces in today’s paper, this feels like tabloid trash. I wonder only briefly if I should check with Perry, but I’m sure he’ll back me on this. An instant later, to the accompaniment of a buzzing and grinding sound, the lover-boy notes are no more. I have to admit that I’m looking forward to regular journalism again.

At about 10:00 I hear my newly replaced phone ring. I had received a stern lecture from Perry about office etiquette and a less stern caution about trying to be careful until I’m used to the enhanced strength. In all honesty, he’s letting me off easy for the broken phone. I’ve resolved to be polite and professional toward anyone who might call with Superman or Ultra Woman questions today.

As I reach for the phone, I prepare myself for a tabloid-type call. In my most professional tone I answer, “Lois Lane”

“Hi Lois, it’s Bernie.”

“Hello, Dr. Klein. What can I do for you?”

“I’ve completed those tests you and Clark asked me to perform. When will the two of you be able to come by so I can show you the results?”

Bernie uses a phrase like this when he wants to talk about something related to Superman or Ultra Woman. Since he’s calling me instead of Clark, I have to guess that he has discovered something else about my newly changed metabolism. “How will early afternoon work for you? We can come by at

around 2:00.”

“That will be fine. I’ll see you then.”

Although I can’t help but be curious, I’m sure Bernie would have said he needed to see us immediately if it was anything critical. I manage to get back to my work and the rest of the morning flies by.

A few minutes after 2:00 pm, Clark and I arrive at Star Labs. Based on how quickly Bernie comes out to the reception area, he was clearly waiting for us. He never says very much in the lobby when we come by, and this time is no exception.

Once we get into his office, Bernie immediately becomes both more friendly and animated. As soon as the door is closed and we’re seated, he asks excitedly, “What do you know about the aging process?”

I’m not sure what I expected today but this wasn’t it. I can see that Clark is as confused as I am.

“Not much,” Clark replies. “I remember the mess with that Doodsen woman and the youth stealing machine. I also remember you said that I don’t seem to age like a normal human and I might live for a very long time.”

Bernie shakes his head in a dismissive gesture. “That machine didn’t have anything to do with real aging. And you don’t need to remind me that at the time I said it did. Once I had the time to perform a more detailed analysis, I found that the effects of that machine only appeared to be aging at a superficial level. That machine had an energy draining capability we still haven’t quite cracked. As near as we can tell, it drained the vitality of the victim and transferred it to the recipient. The people that died didn’t die of old age. The draining process was a shock to their systems and they had no energy reserves to recover. If they hadn’t been drained to such an extent, her victims would have recovered on their own. Think about it, if she was truly turning back the age clock, why was the result so temporary?”

I think Bernie’s forgetting something. “What about Jimmy? And I remember the way Conner Schenk reverted to a baby.”

“What happened with Mr. Olsen proves exactly my point. Once you restored energy to his system, he appeared to be back at his proper age. As for the ‘reverting to a baby’ incident, we still don’t understand precisely what happened. However, consider that even then it took the almost unlimited energy of Clark’s biofield to achieve that transformation. Moreover, after all that, Mr. Schenk reverted to his real age in a short amount of time. No, there was no true age modification going on.”

I can see from his impatience that this isn’t what he wanted to discuss. “Bernie, why don’t you tell us what aspect of aging brings us here today?”

Now he looks a little embarrassed. “Sorry.” He takes a deep breath and I can feel him shift into lecture mode. “As near as science can tell, at the cellular level, aging is a combination of an accumulation of errors in cellular replication and a shortening of Telomeres that eventually causes your cells to stop reproducing themselves.”

“What are Telomeres?” I ask?

“They are extensions on the end of your chromosomes. You can think of them sort of like the plastic tips at the end of your shoelaces. Every time a cell reproduces, the Telomeres get a little shorter. Eventually, they completely wear away. When that happens, it serves as a signal for the cell to stop reproducing. In your body, an ever-increasing percentage of cells that don’t reproduce is a key component of aging. When this was first discovered, there were some tests to see what would happen if you could prevent the Telomeres from wearing away.”

“Did it work?” Clark asks.

“Well, sort of. There is an enzyme called Telomerase that will extend the Telomeres. In studies using lab animals where

Telomere shortening was successfully stopped, the aging process was slowed to a near standstill. Unfortunately, it seems that there is a delicate balance between aging and cancer. Telomere shortening is a critical element in fighting off cancers. In those tests, the subjects didn't age, but the cancer rate went way up. It seems that for the most part, aging is a natural defense mechanism against cancer. In normal organisms, aging and cancer seem to work against each other and the best we seem to be able to do is trade one for the other."

Sometimes listening to Bernie can be very challenging. "This is interesting but what's it got to do with us?"

"Back when I first analyzed Superman's cellular structures, I found that in his case there didn't appear to be any Telomere shortening taking place. Normally this would mean an increase in cancer tendencies but that wasn't happening either. That combination of behaviors is why some time ago I estimated Clark would probably live much longer than anyone else on Earth."

I've always hoped Bernie was wrong about this. "Bernie, this can't be right. When the New Kryptonians were here, they had a normal spread of ages in their people. They didn't talk about any ultra-long life spans and seemed to have aged normally."

I can see the defensiveness in his posture before I hear it in his reply. "Believe me, I considered that aspect. I'm not sure I have the whole answer, but I'm convinced it's all part of the fact that they didn't have special abilities until they arrived on Earth. I have some ideas as to the underlying cause but they aren't germane to Clark's longevity. Even in light of what we saw with those people, I'm convinced of the correctness of my projections and, as long as he stays on Earth, I believe Clark will live a substantially extended lifetime."

I've been successful at keeping this out of my thoughts for a long time. "All right Bernie. We've known all this for some time and have tried not to think about it. Clark and I simply resolved to make the best of the time we have together."

Bernie seems determined to stay on this track and continues. "Let me fill you in on the rest of what I've learned and I think you will understand why this is important."

He pauses long enough for us both to nod. I know he can see we're becoming impatient.

"When I discovered this in Clark, I was curious about the cancer problem. At the time, I had no knowledge of KEs. It seemed that Clark's body was just different. Once I discovered the KEs and their role in why Clark is different, I returned to these earlier studies and found the answer. It seems the KEs can detect when cells malfunction and start replicating incorrectly. In those situations, the KEs act to kill off the defective cells. That is the essence of cancer prevention. The KEs also act similarly to Telomerase and keep the Telomeres from shortening."

This is getting exasperating. "Bernie, please?"

"Lois, I have tissue and blood samples from when you first got pregnant. Recently I was doing a comparative analysis of how you've changed. One of the more subtle differences is at the cellular level. Your Telomeres have actually lengthened. They are the length that I would normally expect to see only in a young, but fully mature, adult."

"I don't understand."

"To be honest Lois, I'm still trying to sort it out. If I go by the indicators, there is some evidence that, at least at the cellular level, you've gotten younger."

My reply is almost a shout. "Younger?"

"As I was saying, some time ago, I concluded that the biological and cellular evidence suggests Clark seems locked in a fully mature adult state where he appears outwardly to be in his mid to upper twenties. Recently when I reviewed similar data from your latest round of tests, I saw the same indicators in your system."

Now I don't know what to say. I haven't thought about this

issue for a long time. At first, the idea that I would grow old while watching Clark stay young was devastating. A lot of getting past that was simply not thinking about it. I'm so lost in thought I almost miss it when Bernie continues. "I have to conclude that however long Clark is going to live, you now have the same potential. I hope you like each other, because based on the information I have, you have the opportunity to be together for a very long time."

I feel Clark's hand in mine and look up to see *that* smile beaming at me. After a few seconds, Clark turns to Bernie. "Thanks Bernie. This is wonderful news. We were already married when you first told me that I might remain young while Lois aged. As you can probably guess, it was the source of some distress."

Bernie nods briefly then continues. "There's one more thing. Consider that biologically, you are both... well, stuck at the optimal age for reproduction. Since you no longer have any problems with reproductive incompatibility, and based on how long you are likely to live, unless you take some birth-control steps, you might end up with a great many children."

Now Clark is blushing a tiny bit so I respond. "We never intended Lara to be an only child. However, we will keep your warning in mind. Was this all you wanted to tell us today?"

"There is one more thing that showed up in my last set of tests."

"Yes?"

"Congratulations, Lois. You're pregnant."

THE END