

The Green, Green Glow of Home — Matchmaker Style

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: What if Sheriff Rachel Harris hadn't been there to shoot Trask when he was about to shoot Clark in the back? What if Sherman hadn't turned on Trask and released Lois. What if Herb had stepped in to help? Let's explore the possibilities.

Disclaimers: The characters in this story are property of DC, December 3rd productions and Warner Bros. No copyright infringement is intended. I have just borrowed the characters for a short time.

This story was written in response to a WAFFy challenge. The parameters were — first season, they cannot have been married previously and they need to be married before the end of the story. I hope that this story concept meets with your approval. In this particular story a lot of the dialogue is taken from the script text. I wish to express my thanks to my Beta readers Artemis and Ray Reynolds for their invaluable help. This was a VERY rough draft when it first landed in their hands.

In the first season there were a number of episodes that if they had turned out just a little bit differently could have resulted in major changes in the series. One of those, and I must admit, one of my favorite episodes was “The Green, Green Glow of Home”.

You have to wonder, “What would have happened, if Rachel hadn't been there to shoot Trask?” “What if Clark hadn't been exposed accidentally to the Kryptonite by Jonathan?” “What if Sherman hadn't bucked Trask?” There are any number of what-ifs that you can come up with.

I am going to present here, one of my WHAT-Ifs. Enjoy.

* * denotes emphasis

< > denotes thoughts

As always comments are welcome. (ken.janney@kjanney.com)

Chapter 1

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Universal Locator Designation

Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225

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It was 9:30 on a Tuesday night and Superman was flying over Metropolis on his usual patrol. He mused to himself, <Weather is deteriorating. Looks like it will be raining shortly. Hopefully everything will be quiet and I can just go home and watch a game.> Suddenly a flash of lightning lit up the sky. <Yeah, that's what I thought. About time to head home. No self-respecting crook is going to be out in the rain.> Suddenly, his superhearing picked up a sound. It was a woman's voice shouting, “Help! Help! He stole my car!”

As he zeroed in on the location of the woman's voice he

heard the sound of tires screeching. Looking in that direction he changed course. He could see the woman, who was still screaming, standing in the street, watching as her late model luxury car roared down the street, leaving her in the dust as the first drops of rain started to fall.

The carjacker was looking in the rearview mirror and making an obscene gesture to the owner of the car as he left the scene. When he looked away from the mirror, he suddenly saw Superman standing in the street, right in front of him and in reflex he tramped on the brake, stopping mere inches from the legs of the superhero. He slammed the gear shift lever into reverse and looking over the back seat, attempted to leave the scene; however, he saw that he wasn't moving, yet the engine was revving like he was traveling at ninety miles an hour. Suddenly he realized that the angle of the car was like it was going up a steep incline. He took his foot off the gas pedal as he looked around. The realization that Superman was holding the front of the car up in the air hit him. That and the fact that it was a front wheel drive car told the carjacker that he wasn't going anywhere. He put it into Park, turned the engine off and put his hands up.

As Superman lowered the car back to the ground the carjacker showed that his submission was a ploy because he jumped out of the car and started to flee down the street. He had only taken a single step when suddenly Superman was there in the street in front of him again. He skidded to a halt, pulled out a gun and started shooting.

Superman's hands became a blur of motion as he caught the bullets. When the perp stopped shooting Superman opened his hands. As he did the scene was lit up by another flash of lightning. It glittered with a coppery golden color off the slugs as they fell to the ground, looking for all the world like falling sparks.

Having expended all of the bullets in the clip the perp threw down his weapon in disgust and as he raised his hands said, “Man, don't nothin' hurt you?”

Superman chuckled and replied, “Not so far.” Just then another flash of lightning lit up the sky.

The local beat cop, responding to the cries of the woman and the sounds of gunfire, ran up. Without even being directed to, the carjacker turned around and put his hands on the roof of the car, allowing the cop to frisk him, and put him in cuffs. When the cop finished giving the perp his Miranda warning he turned to Superman and said, “Thanks, Superman. I don't know what we'd do without you.”

Reading his ID, Superman replied, “My pleasure, Patrolman Davis.”

The woman arrived at this point and pointing at the perp shouted, “That's him! He stole my car!”

Patrolman Davis turned to her and asked, “Would you like to press charges, Ma'am?”

“Darn right, I'll press charges.”

Patrolman Davis pushed the button on his microphone, “Davis to dispatch.”

“Dispatch, go.”

“Carjacking suspect in custody, corner of Ninth and Lexington. Dispatch car for pickup.”

“10-4.”

Unobserved by any of those involved, a dapper little man wearing a derby hat and a suit that was a little out of step with the times, was standing on the corner, observing. Smiling, he nodded to himself and turning entered an alley.

The rain that was threatening Metropolis was part of a larger front that covered a good portion of the eastern seaboard. There was another front over the midwest which had similar characteristics. So far there had been a threat of rain, but no

actual precipitation. The concern of the local population was that there would be lightning without rain and that the lightning would start a fire. With the recently harvested crops there was a lot of debris left in the fields that needed to be cleaned up and bundled. The corn stalks lying on the ground would eventually be ground up for roughage.

In this rural setting there was a farm house, neat and well maintained.

As the lightning flashes lit up the surrounding countryside it illuminated a solo individual making his way across a field and approaching the house. The frequent lightning bolts revealed the wizened face of an older man who, by his clothes, it was easy to tell was a farmer or perhaps a mechanic since he was carrying a large tool box.

He made his way across the field and around the barn. He finally climbed the steps to the porch of the farm house and knocked on the door.

A few seconds later, Jonathan Kent opened the door and said, “Wayne! What are you doing out on a night like this?” Then over his shoulder he shouted, “Martha, it’s Wayne. Put on some coffee.” Turning back to Wayne Irig he said, “Come on in, Wayne.”

Wayne shook his head and said, “Not now, Jonathan. No time for that. Better out here,” and he gestured for Jonathan to accompany him.

Jonathan nodded his head, grabbed his coat and stepped out onto the porch, allowing the door to swing closed behind him.

As he shrugged into his coat he asked, “What brings you out on a night like this, Wayne?”

Wayne, never one for much in the way of conversation, cut right to the chase, “Jonathan, you know that big oak tree I got out back? Well, Tuesday’s storm blew it right out of the ground.”

Nodding his head in understanding, Jonathan asked, “Need some help cutting it up? I just sharpened the blade on my chain saw.”

Shaking his head, Wayne replied, “No, Jonathan, that ain’t it. No, uh-uh. I found somethin’ under that tree. It was a rock of some sort and I sent a little chunk off to the state lab to have it checked out. That much was okay, but today I got federal agents asking me a lot of damn fool questions. Now they got bulldozers showin’ up tomorrow. That’s all I know. It has to be about that damn rock, that’s all I can figure. I need you to keep this for me till I know what’s what.” With that statement, Wayne held out the toolbox and Jonathan took it.

Hefting the box, Jonathan noted how heavy it was. He asked, “What do you think it is? It’s as heavy as lead.”

Wayne dismissed his comment, “Nah, it ain’t that heavy. It’s this old toolbox of mine. Handed down in the family. I think it’s made of lead. What’s in it is like nothin’ I ever seen before, Jonathan. Somethin’ weird. Here, see for yourself.”

Jonathan opened the catch and threw back the lid of the box. Inside was a football sized chunk of crystalline rock, glowing as if from an inner light source, seemingly alive with energy. Jonathan’s face reflected the green glow.

Unknown to either of the gentlemen by the house, at the corner of the barn a little gentleman in a suit and derby hat was watching the scene unfold and when Jonathan’s face was lit up by the green glow, he nodded to himself and disappeared around the corner of the barn.

Early the next morning, as soon as the doors to the elevator opened, Jimmy Olsen rushed out and into the bullpen, fiddling with an oversized watch and seemingly oblivious to what was happening around him. He barely missed knocking over a deliveryman with a hand cart full of packages.

Catherine Grant was sitting on Jimmy’s desk with her feet in his chair, her very short skirt displaying her legs to all present.

She looked over a proof copy of her latest article while she waited for him. She saw him approaching and couldn’t help making a comment, “Start being on time, Jimmy, it’ll ruin your reputation.”

Smiling, Jimmy held out his arm to display his new watch for her perusal, “Morning, Cat. What do you think?”

She quipped, “MMmmmm, I prefer ... leather.”

Taken aback by this comment, Jimmy said, “I wasn’t talking about fashion.”

With a sly look, Catherine replied, in a tone reminiscent of Mae West, “Neither was I.” She gave him a little wink.

Trying to bring the conversation back to a serious footing, Jimmy tapped the watch and said, “It’s a S.T.A.R. Labs prototype. The Air Force plans to use it to help in finding their lost pilots, but I was thinking we could use it to get in touch with Superman.”

At the mention of Superman, Catherine’s attitude changed immediately. She asked, “May I see that?”

While Cat and Jimmy were having this conversation Lois, Clark and Perry were at Clark’s desk arguing about a new assignment. Clark was standing on one side of the desk, his jacket was off and the sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled up.

Lois leaned back against his desk, showing a bit of leg. She was wearing a brown business suit which consisted of a brown jacket over a beige shell with a skirt that had a slit on the left front which allowed her leg to show through halfway up her thigh.

Perry sat perched on the corner of the desk. As was his habit, his jacket was off and like Clark his shirt sleeves were rolled up.

Clark pointed out, “So here’s this decent guy — a farmer — who gets thrown off his property by the feds who then start tearing his place up with bulldozers.”

Nodding, Perry replied, “Sounds like a story to me.”

Lois replied, “Let Clark go then. I’ll stay here in Metropolis and watch for Superman.”

Perry had known Lois for a long time and could see the signs. She thought that this story was beneath her and besides, she was fixated on the new superhero. He would have to pull out all the stops to get her on board, “Now, Lois let’s keep an open mind here. ‘The Poisoning of America.’ I’m seeing a Planet special investigation.

Sneeringly, Lois replied, “Really? I’m seeing guys in overalls discussing hog futures.”

Clark got a pained expression on his face as he suddenly heard an ear-piercing beeping sound. He looked around the room, his brow furrowed. Business continued around him as usual. He could hardly hear what Perry was saying as he replied to Lois’ objections, “Private property rights versus the public good.”

Clark could barely hear as Lois replied, “We’ve got that story here in Metropolis. We don’t have to go all the way to Kansas to find it.”

Clark finally spotted what could be the source of the noise that he was hearing. He saw Jimmy and Cat and Jimmy was showing her how the watch worked by pressing a button on its side.

Perry was waxing eloquent on his subject, “Urban and rural. It’s the same story. Same problem. Sometimes it’s easier to understand in a smaller setting. A microcosm ...” Catching sight of Clark out of the corner of his eye, he turned in his direction and concern in his voice, asked, “You okay, son?”

Still having a pained expression, but now, knowing the source of the problem, Clark replied, “Sure, excuse me a minute.” Clark turned away and headed in the direction of where Cat and Jimmy stood.

As he approached, Cat was shaking her head as she moved the watch away from her ear and said, “Big disappointment. I can’t hear a thing.”

Jimmy grabbed the watch back and shook it in the air between them as he replied, “You aren’t supposed to, it’s hypersonic.”

Cat shot back, “The man’s a superhero, not a dog!”

Just then, Clark arrived and grabbed the watch out of Jimmy’s hand. He punched buttons until the sound died. Turning to Jimmy he asked, “What is this thing?”

Jimmy could see that Clark was upset, so in an attempt to calm him down he said, “It’s a signal watch. Superman has super-hearing, right? We need him, we call.”

Shoving the watch back into Jimmy’s hand Clark said, “Maybe you should only use that thing in a true emergency.”

As he was putting the watch back on his wrist, Jimmy replied, “Smooth, CK. Will do.”

While Clark had been confronting Jimmy and Cat and resolving that problem, Perry had been laying down the law to Lois. With a final shrug of his shoulders, he said, “Okay, I’m done arguing.”

Lois had one more argument to try, “But, Perry, it’s ... *Small*ville!”

Perry just shook his head and said, “Yeah, I got you. That’s probably how the first reporter at Love Canal felt.” Then with an I-told-you-so expression he finished with, “Say, I almost forgot ... didn’t that reporter ... pull in a ... Pulitzer Prize?”

Lois didn’t even bat an eye at his statement. She was convinced that this would not end up well, but she could see the handwriting on the wall. This was going to be a disaster and to top it off; she would be a thousand miles from Metropolis and probably miss Superman’s next appearance.

Finally, resigned to her fate, she turned to her partner and said, “Okay, Clark, if we have to do this, I guess we might as well get started. Let’s go pack.”

Clark grabbed his jacket and put it on. While doing that he said, “Oh, I don’t think it’ll be that bad, Lois. It could turn out to be almost like a paid vacation.”

As she headed for the elevator she looked back over her shoulder she said, “My idea of a vacation is Tahiti ... not Smallville.”

When they boarded the elevator there was already a passenger. A dapper little man wearing a suit that Lois thought he must have gotten from the Salvation Army complete with a derby hat. Who wore a derby now-a-days? The oddest thing was the electronic device hanging by a cord around his neck that he was actively fiddling with. They rode down in silence for a time, but then Lois’ curiosity got the best of her and she turned to the little man with a question in her eyes. She didn’t remember ever seeing him in the Planet before, yet she couldn’t shake the feeling of familiarity. Under this scrutiny, he looked up, nodded his head and said in a British English accent, “Good day, Miss Lane, Mr. Kent.”

Lois was surprised and asked, “Do I know you?”

He smiled an enigmatic smile and replied, “No, no you don’t, Miss Lane. At least, not yet.”

Lois was mystified by this comment and was about to ask for clarification, but just then the elevator doors opened and the little man exited, disappearing around the corner before they could see just where he went.

Later, Lois and Clark were seated side-by-side on a plane headed west. Lois had insisted on the window seat and as she was looking down all she saw is farmland. She grumbled, “We’re miles from any big city.”

Clark smiled and in a very upbeat tone said, “This is America’s breadbasket, Lois. I bet that half of what you eat comes from this area.”

Lois wasn’t mollified, she continued to grumble, “Don’t tell me, 4-H changed your life.”

Clark was still being insufferably upbeat as he continued, “I can’t help it if I’m a farm kid.”

Lois, now with a sarcastic tone replied to this sally, “If I ever need a cow milked, I’ll remember that.” Lois was thinking, <For a farm kid he sure can write. It may not exactly be my style, but Perry might be right. Our styles do complement each other. I don’t know how Perry does it. Actually, I guess I do know. Like he always says, ‘I didn’t get this job because I can yodel.’ Much as I hate to admit it, Clark and I are good and together ... According to Perry we could be great. So far he hasn’t tried to take advantage of me. He hasn’t stolen any of *my* stories. In fact, much as I hate to admit it, I’m the one that stole one of his. I hate it that I did that. That’s another thing about Clark, he never casts that up at me. He is so forgiving. Why can’t all men be like him? It’s such a shame, he appears to be unique, one of a kind. I’ve even started to like working with him. If he would just stop disappearing suddenly, frequently.>

The Mustang convertible with the top down turned into a dirt road which wound through a wooded area. Lois was driving while Clark was enjoying the sunshine. Suddenly, rounding a curve, Lois pulled the car to a halt. In front of them was a railroad crossing and there was a train stopped, blocking the road. The gate was down, but this was just a bit superfluous as there was a very solid freight car blocking the road. There were several railroad workers walking around the cars apparently looking for the problem that had caused the train to halt, but also apparently not having any luck doing so.

Clark and Lois resumed the discussion that started on the plane, “You can joke about it all you want, but take away Middle America and what have you got?”

Lois, with a one-ups-man tone replied, “Art, music, theater ...”

Clark interrupted and added, “Crime, drugs, poverty.

Sighing and indicating the stalled train, Lois asked, “How long is this going to take?”

Smiling, Clark replied, “It takes as long as it takes.”

With a sidelong glance, Lois said, “I didn’t know that Zen was popular in the country.” Lois thought, <Maybe this won’t be that bad. There may be more to Mr. Greenjeans than what’s on the surface. Maybe by seeing him in his own environment I can figure him out a little. Maybe he won’t disappear while we are here.>

Clark was continuing his discourse, “It always takes people from the city a while to decompress. Fortunately for you, this weekend Smallville’s holding its annual Corn Festival.”

With a dispirited air, Lois asked, “This is a good thing?” <Hmmm. Maybe I can talk to some of the people that knew him growing up. I might just be able to find out if this is all a put on or if he really is this good. If it’s a put on, then I can keep him at arm’s length. I hope it isn’t a put on. The time we’ve spent, working late nights together ... sharing take out ... ohhhh, that take out. He always gets the very best take out. If he can do that for a working session, I wonder where he’d take me for a date?> She gave a mental shake, <DATE??? Where did that thought come from?>

Clark’s almost insufferably upbeat attitude was abundantly evident as he replied, “Sure. We’ll see the Corn Queen Pageant. The Husk-Off. The Corn-O-Rama. Popcorn, creamed corn, corn-on-the-cob. We’re in luck.”

With a sarcastic tone, Lois replied, “Be still, my heart.”

<Maybe, with a personal guide it won’t be so bad. I hope it won’t be as boring as it sounds.>

Not allowing her negative attitude to affect him, Clark smiled in reply.

The train continued to remain immobile for what seemed an interminable time. The couple in the car was forced to spend the

time in conversation. At times the conversation became rather animated and neither observed the dapper little man who peered at them from between the railcars.

Chapter 2

By the time the Mustang drove up to the barricade at the Irig farm, it was mid-afternoon. On the other side of the barricade they could see various pieces of large earthmoving equipment and workers walking around wearing what looked, to the uneducated eye, like space suits.

One of the individuals in a protective suit, upon seeing them pull up, entered one of the tents that had been set up. Seconds later an attractive African-American woman came out of the tent and approached them. She wore a name tag which read, 'Carol Sherman, E.P.A.'. Without even waiting for them to introduce themselves she flatly stated, "Off limits to the public."

Lois pulled out her press pass and displayed it as she said, "We're not the public, we're the press."

In reply, Sherman said, "We've already issued a statement to the local paper."

Obviously not knowing who she was dealing with and wary of Lois' abrasive approach, Clark took the lead, "I'm Clark Kent. This is Lois Lane. We're with the Daily Planet."

Recognizing the name of the paper, Ms. Sherman was shocked and it was apparent in her voice as she said, "I'm Carol Sherman, EPA Field Liaison. What's a newspaper like yours doing here?"

Seeing that he was getting somewhere, Clark smiled and replied, "That's why we're called the Daily Planet. We cover the world."

Not to be left out, Lois added, "Plus ... Smallville."

Now realizing who she was dealing with Ms. Sherman replied, basically repeating what had been in the press release, "What you're seeing here is an ecological risk assessment. During the sixties, the owner used a lot of pesticides and we're concerned about seepage into the local ground water."

Going along with it, Lois quipped, "Giving the people more than they bargained for at the dinner table?"

Not picking up on Lois' sarcasm, Ms. Sherman replied, "That's it. Public safety. No big story, I'm afraid."

Lois, now becoming more intent on the story because she sensed a cover-up said, "We'll need to speak with the property owner."

Unfazed, Ms. Sherman replied, "Mister Irig's been given relocation money during the testing. He didn't say where he would be going."

Pointedly, Lois replied, "I'm sure you've got that information somewhere. We'll check back." She grabbed Clark's arm and pulled him back toward the car. As they were walking she said, "I think the big impact here is probably that 'Farmer Jones' is off in some motel, eating take-out and watching cable TV on the government's dime."

Clark was opening his door to climb in. He was indignant at her insinuation — it was evident in his voice. "His name happens to be Wayne Irig!" He said as he sat down.

Lois, embarrassed at her faux pas, said, "Oh, that's right, you know him, don't you?" <He is really defensive of people, especially those he knows and likes. That is a good quality in a man. Come to think of it, he's defended me more than a few times. Not that I really needed defending ... well, maybe I did at that. Now that I think about it, that was sweet of him and I have never really thanked him.>

Clark, somewhat mollified, replied, "He's a friend of my dad's. I remember that before his wife died, they used to give out these great caramel apples at Halloween."

Lois was not usually silent, especially so since they had started this assignment. She had been as prickly as a porcupine.

Her displeasure had been coming out as snide remarks and when she didn't respond to his statement, Clark was curious. "Okay, what happened to the joke?"

Lois realized that she had allowed this assignment to get to her. When Perry first assigned them, she had really resented it. Now that they were here and she had been spending all of this time with Clark ... any other time, if she had been stuck at a railroad crossing for over an hour she would have tried to find a way around the blockage, but with Clark and the conversation the time had just flown by. She actually had to admit to herself that she had enjoyed the time. Clark was such a good conversationalist. Sooo very many stories. He was a good story teller and ... amusing. She didn't know when she had laughed so much as while they were waiting for the train to move and ... actually was disappointed when it finally did. With a slightly embarrassed look, Lois asked innocently, "What joke?"

Clark confronted her, "You've made fun of everything else. Let's hear the caramel apple joke."

Lois replied in a childlike voice and with a wistful air as if remembering a happy thought, "There is no joke. I love caramel apples." <I guess that is something we have in common.>

"Oh." Clark just shook his head. He still had a lot to learn about Lois Lane and actually he was having fun doing so.

As they drove away, Lois looked back in the rearview mirror only to see the tents in the background and Carol Sherman watching them leave.

If Clark had thought to use his x-ray vision he would have been very surprised with what he would have seen inside the tents, but there had been nothing to raise his suspicions enough to justify intruding that way.

If he had, he would have seen that the elusive Wayne Irig was in one of them, bound in a chair. He was the object of attention of a man wearing military fatigues, a man by the name of Jason Trask, the paranoid leader of the renegade UFO organization, Bureau 39. Several of his agents were standing guard and they were all heavily armed. A strong, hot light was shining into Irig's sweaty face.

As the good cop, Trask was using an ingratiating tone of voice, Trask was trying to get Irig to give him the information he sought. "We have two possibilities. Either you buried it somewhere on your farm or you gave it to someone. Now, which is it?" It was readily apparent that Trask hadn't watched enough police dramas because he was attempting to play both the good cop as well as the bad and it just wasn't working.

Wayne was demonstrating just how stubborn a Kansas farmer could be, by his continued recalcitrance, "There weren't no more. That's it, all there was."

Trask wasn't buying it. His expression morphed from ingratiating and persuasive to anger. He changed the angle of the light so that it was directly in Wayne's eyes. He could see the beads of perspiration on Wayne's face under the bright light. Then Trask's lunged over the table and grabbed Wayne's arms in a tight grip. He brought his face within inches of Wayne's and he almost shouted, "Wrong answer!"

After watching Lois and Clark depart, Sherman knew that she needed to report the encounter to her boss, Trask. She headed for Trask's headquarters, which was in the other tent. As soon as she entered she saw Wayne Irig, the man she had been told had left. The shock was evident on her face as she stopped, dead in her tracks.

Trask noted a change in his guard and standing turned to see her as she stopped just inside the tent flap.

Trask asked, "Is there a problem, Ms. Sherman?"

Indicating Wayne Irig, she said, "You told me he had been re*lo*cated."

In a sarcastic tone Trask replied, "He has been. *This* is his

new location.”

Sherman was not sanguine with this answer. She challenged, “Since when does the Environmental Protection Agency do interrogations?”

Smugly, Trask replied, “It doesn’t, but Bureau 39 does.”

This revelation was a surprise to Sherman. Stunned she asked, “Bureau 39? What do you do?”

Trask became more businesslike, straightening his posture and placing his hands behind his back, like a soldier at parade rest, but more stern as he replied, “That information is on a need to know basis and you don’t.”

Sherman came to a decision. She said, “I needed a job, but not this bad. I won’t be a part of this.”

With a malevolent stare Trask continued, “Ms. Sherman, I’d reconsider that. No one alive has ever quit Bureau 39. It’s a ... a curse.” He started to smile, but the smile never reached his eyes. Sherman decided that it was the most evil smile she had ever seen. He continued, “You did say you had a daughter to raise, didn’t you, but if you’re determined to leave, I’ll accept your ... resignation ... with regrets.” As he finished speaking, he looked at one of his guards.

Sherman saw the look and looked at the guard also. When she did, she saw that he was slowly reaching for a weapon. She tensed and felt cold chills run up and down her spine. She quailed and said, “No, I’m fine.”

She was watching the guard as she said this and seeing him relax, she released the breath she didn’t even realize she had been holding.

“Good choice,” Trask spat out and then said in a more businesslike tone “Well, then, I assume there was something else you came to tell me.”

She had been watching the guard like a rodent watching a snake that was about to strike and snapping out of her stupor at the question, said, “I just talked to two reporters. A Lois Lane and a Clark Kent from the Daily Planet. They were just outside.”

Hearing this report, Trask was at first surprised and then he started to smile, that malevolent smile of his returned. Then he said, “Oh, perfect. If they’re here, Superman can’t be far behind.” Almost as an afterthought, he said, “Thank you. You may go.”

After Lois and Clark drove away from the Irig farm they headed into town. When they reached the town center, Lois found a place to park right on Main Street. Looking around Lois saw that the public square had been converted into a mini-fairground. Across the way was a grassy area with a gazebo. A banner sign read: “Smallville Corn Festival.” Despite the small town flavor, it was a well-organized affair, complete with a hip logo. The feel was part carnival, part craft fair, and part harvest celebration. Under the gazebo, a country-rock band was playing.

As they were exiting the car, Clark told Lois, “If Mr. Irig’s around, somebody here will know about it. That’s the great thing about a small town.” Clark interrupted what he was saying because he saw that Lois wasn’t really paying attention to him. She was looking around in wonder. He asked, “What is it?”

Lois quipped, “I feel like Dorothy. Shouldn’t a tornado be flying me off to Oz pretty soon?”

Clark had a sour expression as he replied, “Bad metaphor, Lois. Dorothy wanted to get back] to Kansas.”

Thoughtfully, Lois replied, “Technically. No, really. I’ve got this déjà vu feeling. Like I should know this place.”

As they wandered through the crowds, Clark was looking for anyone he thought could give them the information that they needed. Lois was soaking in the atmosphere. There was an outdoor stand set up with boutique clothes. She was attracted to a display, a mannequin with a dress on it. Lois felt drawn to this particular dress and moving over to it stated brushing it with her hand, feeling the fabric. She had a thoughtful expression as she

did this and then she started to smile as if in recognition.

Clark spotted a woman with strawberry blond hair. She had her back to him and was talking to a young girl, telling her to go find her mom. Even with her back to him, Clark thought he knew who it was. He called out, “Rachel?”

Hearing her name, she turned and seeing who it was broke out in a wide smile. Squealing in delight, she shouted, “*Clark*!” and rushing over to him, almost leaped into his arms as she threw her arms around his neck and he pulled her into a hug.

It suddenly occurred to Clark that she was wearing a uniform. Startled at the uniform he asked, “Rachel? Sheriff Rachel?”

Removing her arms from around his neck and stepping back slightly, Rachel Harris said, “Hey, don’t let the uniform fool you. I can still Two-Step and Tush-Push better than anybody else in town.”

As she said this, Clark was cast back in his memory to his high school years and the times he had dated Rachel. The Prom had not been their first date and it was almost the last. Rachel had not said so in so many words, but she had made it clear to Clark that she wouldn’t have objected to a more serious relationship, perhaps even an intimate relationship. The problem was that Clark hadn’t been sure that she was the one so he had held back. Shortly after that he had graduated and decided to travel before starting college. When he left, he lost track of her. It was good to see her again. In reply to her statement, he said, “I have no doubts that you can. You’ve always been a terrific dancer. It’s good to see you again. It’s been a long time.”

She had her western style uniform hat in her hands and those hands were nervously shuffling around the brim, spinning the hat. Rachel had to admit to herself, she’d had a crush on Clark for years. When he took her to the prom, she had been close to heaven. She hadn’t seen him in some time and seeing him now, all of those old feelings came surging up. She didn’t know how to act. She felt like that schoolgirl again on that first date. She chastised herself, <Get a grip girl. That was years ago. There’s been a lot of water that has flowed under that bridge since prom night, but I still remember that kiss. Wow! Nobody can kiss like Clark Kent. I wonder ... maybe, if I play my cards right ...> “How long you gonna be in town?”

“I’m not sure. A few days, anyhow.”

Rachel sidled up to Clark, put her hand on his cheek and smiled even broader at the thought as she asked, “Show ya tomorra night? Old time’s sake?” <This could be my chance. Maybe after the dance I can get him alone. Maybe we can even finish what we started then.>

Lois was an interested observer to all of this. Suddenly she felt a twisting in her stomach. She hadn’t ever felt anything like this before, but seeing this country bumpkin, uniform or not, put her hands on ‘her’ partner was creating an emotional upheaval that she didn’t understand. All she knew was that she had to put a stop to this. She found herself moving up behind Clark.

Clark, sensing her presence, turned to introduce them, “Uh, Rachel, Lois Lane. Lois, Rachel Harris. I guess that’s *Sheriff* Harris now.”

Rachel, keeping her eyes strictly on Clark, was obviously ignoring Lois as she replied and Lois didn’t like it one little bit as Rachel addressed Clark, “I beat Fordman in the last election just by promising to buy a couple of computers.” <Uh oh, who is she? Oh, yeah, the woman he works with. Maybe there’s nothing personal there. Just professional, I hope.>

Lois wasn’t about to let herself be ignored, demonstrating that she had heard what had been said, she asked, “Old time’s sake?”

Rachel continued to ignore Lois, at least as far as acknowledging her presence by looking at her, though there was a hint of pride in her tone as she did answer her question, “We dated some. Clark took me to his senior prom.” There was a short

pause and a worried look crossed her face before she continued, “Are you two...?”

Lois was quick to reply, almost, too quick, and she felt that something was wrong with the answer she gave even as she was speaking the words, “We haven’t! We’re on assignment for the Daily Planet. We *work* together.” She was suddenly moved to add, “But we’re exploring our possibilities.” She slipped her arm between his arm and body, wrapping her arm around his in a possessive gesture.

Clark looked at Lois, surprised by this sudden change.

Rachel, with a look of disappointment said, “Really? Not strictly professional, huh?” <Exploring the possibilities. Maybe I have a chance here. Worth a try, he’s worth the try.>

Clark, not sure where this was going, decided to change the subject. He said, “Rach, see, the reason we’re here is ... do you know where Wayne Irig is?”

Disappointment in her voice, Rachel replied, all business now. “Haven’t seen him. You know how he keeps to himself.” Suddenly she was interrupted by her two-way radio coming to life. She turned away and listened for a second before turning back to Clark and Lois, “Duty calls. Well, Lois, we’ll have to get together and swap Clark stories later.” <Yeah, and maybe I’ll be able to add some new ones tomorrow night, especially if I can get him away from the city girl. After all, I saw him first.>

Lois was still hanging onto Clark’s arm as they watched Rachel walk away. Lois particularly noted the un-sheriff-like sway of her hips as if she were flaunting her femininity even in the uniform. She teased, “Tush-Push?” Inwardly, Lois was furious. This woman had had a relationship with Clark and she didn’t like that. She started thinking, <Where is this jealousy coming from? Why should I be jealous of her? He’s with *me* now.> Suddenly what she had thought hit her, <Wait a minute. He’s with *me* now??? Where did *that* come from?>

Clark could see that Lois was apparently lost in thought. Mystified at Lois’s sudden change of attitude, Clark sought a diversion which would give him time to figure out just what was going on. He spotted his objective and started to lead Lois in that direction. His object was a barbecue pit, sending out plumes of smoke.

As he led her in that direction he said, “Maybe we can get an early taste of the local hospitality.”

Lois was allowing Clark to direct their steps and her pensive expression softened as she said, “You go ahead. I’ll just kind of soak up the ‘atmosphere.’”

Clark was surprised and pleased that Lois was still hanging on his arm and he brought his free hand over and put it on her arm, almost as if to reassure himself that this was really happening. He continued to tease her, “You know, Lois, what you can’t stand is how normal it is here.”

Lois was finding it hard to believe, but she actually was enjoying herself. She felt comfortable hanging on Clark’s arm, something that if someone had suggested it just yesterday, she would have laughed in their face, but suddenly, it felt right, somehow. She knew that he was teasing her and she decided to play along, “Normal? I’ve heard about small towns.” To prove her point she pointed at the man operating the BBQ and said, “See Mister Regular Joe flipping burgers over there? I’ll bet he’s really a cross-dresser.”

Just as Lois finished speaking there was a shout from the side. “Clark!” Clark quickly turned to welcome the newcomer. An older woman with strawberry blonde hair rushed over and Clark pulled her into an embrace. “It’s good to see ya.”

Lois was thinking, <What is it with all the strawberry blondes?> Suddenly a thought hit her, <That’s his mom!>

As if to confirm her thought, while he hugged her, Clark said, “Hi, Mom!”

As Clark broke the hug, Martha held onto both of his arms

and looked around. Immediately she spotted Lois standing at Clark’s side and started to smile even broader. She said, “You *must* be Lois.”

Lois returned her smile as she said, “That’s me. Hi ... Mrs. Kent.” Her hesitation was caused by the sudden urge to call her Martha. <Where did that thought come from? Has Clark ever mentioned his mom’s name?>

Martha had a disappointed look as she said, “Please, it’s Martha. Well, you sure are pretty.” Her hand flew to her mouth as if she wasn’t sure of what she had said, and turning to Clark asked, “It’s okay if I tell her that, isn’t it?”

Clark smiled and said, “I don’t know. Why not ask her? I’d say, it’s the truth, so why not?”

Lois smiled at Martha and said, “Thanks ... Martha.” Somehow it just felt right, being here with both of them. Lois had a warm, comfortable feeling.

Martha smiled in return and said, “You kids must be starved. Let’s get you something to eat at the barbecue pit.”

Clark couldn’t resist teasing Lois once more, “I don’t know, Mom. Lois thinks the cook might be a cross-dresser.”

Martha took a second look and started to laugh.

Suddenly, the wind shifted and blew the smoke away so that Lois had a clear view of the cook. Just as suddenly, she was sure that she knew just who it was. She didn’t know how, but she remembered this man. Lois looked embarrassed. She knew why what she had said was so funny. She realized that it was Clark’s dad. Martha’s next statement confirmed it.

When Martha calmed herself sufficiently she said, “Oh, Honey, that’s Clark’s *father*! And I can’t get him to buy *me* a dress, let alone one for himself.”

Lois, trying to salvage some of her shredded dignity, said, “I was just ... illustrating ... a point ... really.”

Unnoticed by any of them, at the corner of the gazebo a dapper little man with a derby hat stood holding an electronic device. He had been there for some time and after making a few more adjustments he turned and disappeared around the corner of the gazebo.

Martha was still laughing about the idea of Jonathan being a cross-dresser as they moved in the direction of the BBQ pit. Lois had reclaimed Clark’s arm while Martha walked alongside. Martha said, “Wait ‘til he hears that.”

Seeing them approach, Jonathan looked up from his chore, his chef’s hat worn at a jaunty angle. He had a spatula in one hand with a burger on it and a pair of tongs holding an ear of corn in the other. As soon as they were close enough, he addressed Lois, “I feel like I know you already, Lois. Care for an ear?”

Lois’ curiosity got the best of her, she just had to ask, “Sure, I’ll have the corn. Why do you ‘feel like you know me?’”

Jonathan smiled and replied, guilelessly, “Because Clark can’t stop talking about you. How good looking you are ...”

Clark, embarrassed by this frank talk, interrupted, “Dad!”

He no sooner got that out then Martha piled on, “And what a good writer ...”

Again, Clark interrupted, “Mom!” and rolled his eyes.

Lois laughed at his discomfiture.

Undeterred, Martha continued, “Anyway, Lois, welcome to Smallville. We’ve got your room all ready for you.”

Everything had happened so quickly that Lois hadn’t given any thought to a place to stay. Partly, she had been relying on Clark to handle that since it was his home town. Hearing this she was startled and said, “My room? Oh, I wouldn’t think of putting you out. I’ll be staying in a motel.” The statement just was there before she could stop it. She knew that she wouldn’t be in a motel. She knew she would be spending the time with this family and actually, now, the thought of a motel was repulsive.

Jonathan smirked and said, “During the Corn Festival? Every room in Lowell County was booked up months ago.”

Martha added, “Even if there *was* a room, I wouldn’t hear of you staying anywhere else.”

Clark was half afraid to look at Lois to see her reaction, but when he did, she was smiling an enigmatic smile.

Chapter 3

A little later a battered pickup truck and a Mustang convertible pulled off the road and entered the drive leading to a quaint farm house. After parking Jonathan and Martha exited the pickup while Lois and Clark got out of the Mustang. After closing the driver’s door, Lois simply stood there looking at the house while Clark got the luggage out of the back. Lois shook her head because, for some odd reason, this house felt familiar. She knew that she had never been in Smallville before, but she knew this place. <Maybe I saw a picture over at Clark’s place. Yes, that must be it, a picture at Clark’s place.>

Finally, snapping out of her reverie, she followed Clark to the house. As they entered Lois found herself in the family room. Off on one side she spotted an easel with an unfinished painting on it. The painting was in a sort of cubist — expressionist style. Very abstract.

Martha was somewhat nervous about having Lois in the house for the first time. Lois was used to the big city with all of its luxuries and conveniences. What if she ran out screaming because it was so rustic? Martha cradled a dozen ears of corn, wrapped in a red and white checkered cloth that she had brought home from the Festival. As Lois entered, Martha turned to her and said, “It’s just an old farm house, but it’s home.” She saw that Lois was staring at her painting. She asked, “That’s my latest. What do you think?”

Lois had a thoughtful expression as she said, “I like it. Bowl of fruit, right?” <How did I ever figure *that* out?>

Martha smiled brightly and looking at Jonathan said, “You see! I told you!” She turned to Lois and said, “Jonathan has been saying that nobody would ever be able to figure out what it is.”

Clark had been surprised at Lois recognizing the subject of the painting. Trying to return to an even keel, he said, “Uh, Mom, Lois and I need to receive a fax tomorrow.”

In a musing tone, Martha repeated, “A fax ...”

Lois tried to interpret, “Facsimile. It’s a machine. People in one place put a paper in and people in another place can get a copy if they have a fax machine, too. It’s sort of ... technical.” Lois stopped and as if retrieving a memory added, “But you already know that, don’t you?”

As Lois had been speaking, Martha had stepped to the side of the room. As Lois finished speaking, Martha removed a cover from a fax machine. She said, “I was just thinking I better check the paper if you’re expecting something.”

As Martha opened the paper tray of the fax machine, Lois nodded her head, and said, “You have a fax machine, of course you do. I ... I ... I ... didn’t ... didn’t mean ... it’s just ... I ... I ... I don’t even ... have a fax,” as she plopped down on the end of the sofa next to Clark.

Martha explained, “Oh, honey, out here, you’ve got to have one these days.” Martha stopped and thought for a second before she continued, “Now you’re in Clark’s room. Clark can take the couch. Unless you two are ...” She looked at them with a question in her eyes.

Lois looked at Clark with something like shock or panic in her eyes, shock that this lady would ask something like this and panic at the thought of what her answer would be, and said, “No! No, we’re not.” She hesitated for a second and her visage cleared as the panic left and she turned toward Martha before she concluded, “At least, not yet.” <Where did that come from???? Why, all of a sudden, am I thinking about Clark in those terms? What has made this change? Why do I resent the fact that he dated the sheriff? Why is the idea of sharing a room with him

suddenly so appealing? This is going to take some thought.>

Seeing that Lois was deep in thought Martha started to head out of the room. As she did she saw that Jonathan was starting to settle in his favorite chair. Pointedly, she cleared her throat to get his attention and grabbing his arm dragged him along as she said, “Jonathan, why don’t you help me?”

In response to Martha’s urging, Jonathan jumped up and followed her out of the room, leaving Lois and Clark alone.

Clark snickered and said, “Not exactly what you had in mind, huh?”

Lois shook her head in chagrin and started her list, “Well, let’s see. So far I’ve been given a glimpse of ritual crop worship, been treated as your girlfriend, and I’ve insulted your parents. No, I couldn’t have planned this.” She thought for a second before she continued, “There’s only one thing I wouldn’t change ...”

Clark was intrigued. He asked, “What would that be?”

She started to flush at the thought, “Being treated as your girlfriend.” <Why is that thought suddenly so pleasant?>

Clark was stunned. That was the last thing that he would have expected out of her mouth. Early on she had warned him not to fall for her because she didn’t have time for it. Recently she had been dating Lex Luthor. The thought of her with Luthor made his skin crawl. Had she really just said what he thought he had heard her say? “I’m not sure I heard you correctly. Could you repeat that?”

A shy smile played on her lips as she replied, “Yeah, I find it hard to believe myself. I don’t know, all of a sudden, it’s like I’m seeing you through a different set of eyes. It’s like a fog has been cleared from my mind and I’m seeing who you really are.”

<Uh oh, has she figured out my secret? Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound as they say.> “Oh, and just who am I Lois?”

“Oh, you’re still Clark Kent. That hasn’t changed. It’s me.

Now I’m seeing the real Clark Kent. The kind, sympathetic, compassionate, passionate Clark Kent. The man raised by those two lovely and loving people out there that are only out there so that we can be alone, together.”

Relieved to hear that, he said, “It sounds to me like you are actually having a better time than you expected.”

Smiling, she said, “Yeah, I guess I am. How did you figure it out?”

Returning her smile, he said, “Well, along with that ear of corn, you had three hot dogs this afternoon.”

Lois replied to this sally, “That shows how much you don’t know about me. I usually only eat like that when I’m miserable or nervous.” <Actually, that isn’t true. Well, it used to be true. He’s right; I was having a good time. I liked being with him and I love his mom and dad.> “I guess I will now have to add ‘having a good time’ to my list.”

“Well, if you’re miserable or nervous, I have the perfect cure. Come on. Let’s go outside and look at the stars. That will make you feel better and also calm your nerves. If you’re having a good time, it will only make it better.”

Lois objected, “You talk like there are only stars here. Metropolis has stars, too.”

Before they could move outside, Jonathan and Martha returned with a pile of blankets.

Martha directed, “You boys go ahead and make up the couch. I’ll show Lois her room.” Martha held out her hands to Lois, encouraging her to join her.

Lois threw Clark a disappointed look and then nodding to Martha followed her upstairs while Jonathan and Clark started to put down sheets and blankets.

Martha had her left arm around Lois’ waist and her right arm in her right hand as started to lead Lois away she turned and looking over her left shoulder mouthed, “I love her.” to Clark. As they were disappearing up the stairs, Clark heard Martha say, “I

hope you're not allergic to down pillows."

As soon as Lois and Martha were out of sight, Jonathan laid a hand on Clark's arm to stop him. When he had his attention he said, "Clark, when I called you to give you that tip about the Feds on Wayne's farm, I figured you'd come out, but, I, uh ... I kind of expected you to come alone."

Mystified at this Clark asked, "Dad, what's the problem?"

"Trust me; they're not looking for pesticides up the road, Clark. Come with me. I have something to show you." Jonathan led the way through the kitchen, out the back door and into the shed.

Jonathan closed the door after them and turned on the lights as they entered the shed. In the semi-darkness he led the way around bales of hay and bags of seed corn and reached behind a rack of tools to retrieve an old tool box. As they were moving Jonathan had related the story. "Wayne Irig found a rock on his property last week. He sent a sample of it on to Wichita for analysis. Then the Feds showed up. He told me that he found it when a storm knocked over a tree. I remember that tree. He planted it at Nellie's request, just about the time we found you."

Musingly, Clark said, "That doesn't make any sense. Why go to all that trouble for a rock?"

In a conspiratorial tone, Jonathan answered his question, "Because the preliminary report said it was some kind of meteorite. Wayne thought it might be worth some money. He gave it to me for safekeeping after the government types started pushing him around." Jonathan placed the box on top of a hay bale.

As Jonathan finished speaking he opened the lid of the lead tool box and the light coming from the crystal permeated the barn with its sickening green glow. Behind him Clark suddenly stumbled back as pain lanced through his body. He suddenly felt weak and nauseous ... sensations he had never in his life felt, not even when he was vulnerable as a child.

Still looking at the rock and not knowing that Clark was in distress, Jonathan continued to speak, "I figure since it was found a few miles from where we found you that it was probably related." Jonathan lifted the box and turned toward Clark so that he could get a closer look. The closer he came, the worse Clark felt.

Clark held up his hand in a stop gesture and said, in a weak voice, "Dad, I'm feeling kinda strange." As he finished speaking he stumbled backward until he was finally against the wall and couldn't back away any farther.

Jonathan had never seen Clark in any kind of distress before and had no idea as to how to handle the situation. Nervously, he asked, "Clark, what is it?" In his concern for Clark all he could think of was to set the box down, but unfortunately for Clark, he left it open.

Weakly, Clark replied, "I don't know."

Jonathan asked, "Are you sick?"

Unsure and confused, Clark replied, "Maybe. I guess. I've never been sick before so I don't know." Grabbing his stomach, Clark bent over and looked like he was about to vomit.

Jonathan looked at the toolbox and asked, "My God, do you think it's this thing?"

Barely conscious, Clark was too far gone to reply. His face was contorted in pain as his knees buckled and he knocked over some bags of seed corn as he collapsed to the floor.

Startled and not thinking clearly at hearing the sound of Clark falling, Jonathan simply turned from the tool box, not thinking to close it, and ran to Clark. Lifting him partly from the shed floor he nervously asked, "Clark! What's happening?"

Not knowing what else to do he shouted, "Martha!" There was no way for him to know that Martha was still upstairs with Lois, getting her settled in. When she didn't come immediately, Jonathan started to drag Clark from the shed. Because of his

higher density it was impossible for him to lift Clark. All the time he was muttering, "My boy ... my poor, poor boy ..."

Eventually, Jonathan made it to the back porch with Clark. As the distance from the shed and the Kryptonite increased, Clark's pain decreased and he started to come around. About this time, Martha came downstairs and seeing that the living room was empty, started wondering where Clark and Jonathan had gone. The most likely place being the shed she headed in that direction. As soon as she opened the back door she saw Jonathan dragging Clark and immediately was at his side. Between them, with what little assistance Clark was able to give, they were able to assist him to stand, each taking one of his arms across their shoulders. They managed to get him into the kitchen and they lowered him into a chair.

Like any mother, the first thing Martha did was to feel his head. When she did, she declared, "Clark, honey, you're burning up." Moving to a cabinet she pulled out a thermometer and after shaking it down placed it in his mouth.

Mumbling around the thermometer, Clark said, "Don't get scared, Mom. My body doesn't work like other people's bodies."

Jonathan moved to the sink and filled a metal pitcher with water and turning around asked, "How do you feel? That's the important thing."

Still mumbling around the thermometer, Clark replied, "Better. I actually think I feel ... better." As he finished speaking the thermometer exploded.

When the thermometer exploded, it startled Martha and she jumped and exclaimed, "Oh!" Then she saw exactly what had happened and said, "Oh, my ..."

Removing the rest of the thermometer from his mouth, Clark said, "It doesn't mean anything, Mom. You know I'm different."

Martha, quipped, "That's the first time I ever saw a thermometer explode. Remind me not to do that anymore."

Jonathan placed the pitcher of water he had just filled on the table next to a glass. As he did he asked, "What do you mean, you 'think' you feel better? Don't you know?"

Martha looked at Jonathan with a how-can-you-ask-that look as she said, "He's never been sick before, Jonathan! It's a new experience for him. He has no point of reference."

Suddenly they all froze in place because they heard Lois' footsteps on the stairs.

Clark, whispered to his parents, "She can't know anything about this."

A few seconds later, Lois walked unconcernedly into the kitchen, even though all she was wearing was a shortie night gown which displayed her legs without a robe, as if it were an everyday occurrence. As if she had to explain her presence there though, she said, "I thought I heard the fax." When she finished speaking she turned and headed for the fax machine.

After Lois disappeared into the living room, Clark tried to lift the water pitcher to pour a glass for himself. His hand was shaking so much with the effort that it was apparent to all that there would be more water on the table than in the glass. Jonathan took the pitcher from him to do the job.

Dismayed, Clark indicated the water pitcher and in a hushed tone said, "I lifted a rocket into orbit, but right now I can't even lift this."

As Jonathan handed him the glass of water, Martha tried to reassure him, "Don't worry, honey, you'll bounce back."

Jonathan mused, "Why would a rock hurt him?"

Martha answered in a matter-of-fact tone, "Because it's poison. Because it must have something to do with Clark's arrival here. Whatever it is ..."

Martha's statement went unfinished because Lois suddenly came through the door excitedly waving the fax she had just received.

Lois almost shouted, "Look at this! This is a working list of

clean-up sites from the Environmental Protection Agency and guess what?" Not waiting for them to answer, she continued in an I-told-you-so tone, "Smallville's *not* on it."

Lois suddenly took in the scene and realized that something was going on. She looked closely at Clark and said, "Clark, you look horrible." She moved over and started stroking his hair, hooking her finger in his front lock and brushing it aside in a tender gesture.

Clark reveled in her touch, but knew that he had to say something, "It's my allergies."

Lois said, "Poor baby, you never said anything about allergies before. If you weren't here with your folks, I'd ask if you wanted 'momma' Lois to take care of you." <Where did that come from? I'm not the nursemaid type. I don't know. Something about taking care of Clark appeals to me.>

Martha took the lead in the reply, "His allergies only act up at this time of the year. Must be the pollens or something."

Jonathan chimed in, "Yeah, real bad this time of the year."

They had seen a play of emotions crossing Lois' face and they were anxious to see if their ploy had worked.

Finally, Lois gently teased Clark. She leaned in, showing some décolletage as she did and whispered in his ear, "I tried to warn you about those amber waves of grain," then standing again she said to Clark, "I'm going to get right on this. You get better."

The strain he was under from the pain and weakness was evident in his voice as he said, "It's late, Lois. Don't you think we ought to work on it in the morning?"

Lois looked at her watch and said, "Yeah, you're probably right. Ms. Sherman probably won't be there anyway. I think I'll go get some more shut-eye. Goodnight."

The last thing that Clark saw as she exited was her legs. After Lois exited, Clark said, "I'm going to be fine, really." This time he managed to pick up the pitcher without the trembling and poured another glass of water. "There, you see, better already. At least I'm not as weak as I was."

Early the next morning Lois came downstairs wearing a pair of brown slacks, a beige top and the jacket from the suit she had worn the day before. The brown complemented her hair color. When she came in, she saw that Clark felt a lot better. After a hasty breakfast prepared by Martha, Lois and Clark were out the door to pursue the investigation.

Clark was still concerned. He wasn't so weak that a kitten could bowl him over, but he was not his normal self, at least what was normal for him and that concerned him. What would he do if Lois, as usual, didn't check the water level and got herself in over her head? In his current condition, there was no way he would be able to rescue her and that really concerned him. Especially now when it seemed she was becoming interested in him as Clark. He was happy that she insisted on driving and that she liked having the convertible top down. It gave him a chance to bask in the sunshine, though, this early in the morning it wasn't nearly strong enough for his liking. Since the Irig farm was so close to the Kent farm the trip between the two was relatively short.

In typical Mad Dog Lane fashion, as soon as they rolled to a stop, Lois was about to jump out of the car and attack Ms. Sherman, but she noticed that Clark was holding back. She was instantly concerned. Had the allergy problem from last night persisted? Did he need her to take care of him? Concern in her voice, she asked, "You coming? Are you okay?"

His reply was not satisfying, "You go ahead. I'll just be a minute."

She leaned over and put her hand on his forehead. After a few seconds she gave her diagnosis, "You feel normal."

Nodding his head he agreed with her, "I am normal." But he was thinking, <Normal for an Earth man, not a Kryptonian.>

Knowing nothing of his quandary, Lois asked, "So ...

everything's okay, right?" She fervently hoped so. She felt that she needed him and somehow she knew that he needed her.

Even though he knew it was a lie, nonetheless he nodded his head to reassure her, Clark said, "Everything's okay."

Reassured, Lois accepted this and said, "Okay, then, let's go."

Carol Sherman had seen them as they drove up and had moved to intercept them at the barrier.

As they exited the car, Lois saw her approaching and hastened to meet her. She was therefore between Sherman and Clark as he rounded the back of the car and bending slightly, attempted to lift the back end, unsuccessfully. Once he was sure he couldn't lift it, he followed Lois, shaking his head in disappointment.

As he approached, Lois was confronting Ms. Sherman with the list of active EPA sites that they had received. As soon as she was at the barrier, Lois had addressed Sherman, "It seems that Smallville is not on the EPA list!"

The previous day, unknowingly, Sherman had been lying. Now she was doing it deliberately, because her life depended on it. She knew that she had to play the part flawlessly if she was to live to see her daughter again. Playing the officious bureaucrat she said, "Look, if you want to match paperwork we can do that." She was thankful that Trask had thought of this possibility and prepared her for it. She began flipping through official looking documents on a clipboard that she held. Finding the ones she was looking for she started the litany, "This is our certificate granting access to EPA Superfund status. This is the property rights waiver. Here's the authorization from Smallville City Hall. And this ... this is the *up*dated list of what you've got. See? There's Smallville right there." She pointed at a line item on a list.

Clark was now close enough to see the forms. The sheet she was pointing to sure looked a lot like the one Lois had and sure enough, there was 'Smallville' right where she indicated. He said, "She's right, Lois."

Refusing to give up that easily, Lois asked, "May I see those?"

Ms. Sherman said, "Sure," and hoping that the forged documents would hold up under Lois's scrutiny, handed the clipboard over.

Clark was now sure that there was a problem here so while Lois was looking at the forms and comparing them, Clark slipped his glasses down his nose. He tried to use his x-ray vision to see what was in the tents, but he failed in the attempt. In fact there was actually pain associated with the attempt. With a disgusted grunt, berating himself for failing to do that the previous day, he pushed his glasses back up his nose.

Seeing that the fakes seemed to be fooling Lois, Sherman, feeling on solid ground, began to elaborate on the story, "It always takes Washington about six weeks to figure out what the people in the field are up to. I can make a call if you like." This was pure bluff and she knew it, but she had less to lose if Lois figured it out than if Trask was displeased.

Lois was angry at being thwarted like this and it showed in her voice as she replied, "Do that. And while you're at it, we definitely want to talk to Mister Irig."

Somewhat exasperated, Sherman replied, "I told you. He's been relocated during the disruption." Now, unlike the previous day, she knew this was a lie, but she had to follow through with it, or else.

Lois challenged, "But you didn't tell us where."

"Because I don't know. Probably one of the motels," Sherman replied with exasperation.

Lois started to smile like the cat that had just caught the canary, because she knew that she had Sherman. The inside knowledge she had gained by being with the Kents was now going to pay off, big time. She challenged, "I doubt it. Most of the rooms around here were booked up months in advance, or

maybe you've never heard of the famous Smallville Corn Festival."

Sherman, realizing that she had been caught, had to come up with an explanation and all she could come up with was, "The government has pull."

Going for the kill, Lois challenged, "All right, then, which one?"

Sherman decided that she would need to bluff this pushy woman again, "I don't know. I'll try to find out." She hoped that the stall would make them leave. She turned and headed for the tents.

She was disappointed when Lois shouted after her, "We'll wait."

Chapter 4

Ms. Sherman was worried. Her skin crawled each time she had to meet with Trask, but she had no choice. These pushy reporters were forcing her hand. As she entered the command tent she saw Trask watching as a couple of his guards unloaded a crate which had, 'J'39/ULTRA' stenciled on the outside. The markings meant absolutely nothing to her, but she noted it none the less. She decided to get this over with as quickly as possible. Knowing that he would know exactly who she was speaking about, she said simply, "They're back."

Trask transferred his attention to her long enough to ask, "And ..."

"I think they believe me, but they still want to see Irig."

"Tell them that he'll be in touch." He dismissed her by turning his back on her and returning to the unpacking.

Sherman was about to exit with that message, but she was not satisfied with this response. She said, "Look. If I'm involved in this, I have to know what's at stake, in order to do my job."

Trask turned back around and faced her again. After a moments consideration he said, "Fair enough. I have reason to believe there's a very important meteorite here in Smallville."

Sherman was even more surprised at this answer. She blurted out, "Meteorite? Why do you need to keep it such a secret?"

Trask, as if explaining the concept that 2 plus 2 equals 4 to a two year old, said, "Because if I don't, I will lose the element of surprise over Superman."

Startled and confused at the mention of Superman, Sherman asked, "What's Superman got to do with this?"

She was looking at Trask, but Sherman could see that behind him, the guards had succeeded in removing the top of the crate.

Gesturing at the crate behind him, Trask answered, "This, Ms. Sherman, was retrieved in Smallville, Kansas in 1966, not far from here."

As he finished speaking, without the top holding them in place, the sides of the crate finally fell away and there was revealed to her sight a small spacecraft. On the nose she saw a familiar sigil, the same symbol that she had seen on the chest of the superhero. Her surprise at the sight caused her to take a gasping breath.

Trask continued to speak while Sherman stared at the small craft, "The meteorite probably landed here at the same time but wasn't discovered until a recent storm. It seems reasonable to assume that it comes from the same source as Superman. The planet Krypton. It's all in this report here." Picking up a folder from the table with official type markings 'FOUO — TOP SECRET' and opening it he rifled through some sheets of paper and then finding the correct one started to read, "Not of Earthly origin. Periodic element 126. Emits an extremely high band radiation that doesn't seem to affect humans." As he finished reading Trask was smiling. He closed the folder and looked up at Sherman. "However, my theory is that if a Kryptonian were to be exposed to a significant piece for any length of time, the result could be ... lethal." He smiled that very unpleasant smile.

Sherman was shocked at the thought that anyone would wish to harm the superhero. All he had done was help mankind. She challenged, "But why kill Superman? He hasn't done anything hostile."

Sherman was shocked by the look in Trask's eyes. It was the light of fanaticism or insanity, she couldn't tell which.

With total conviction Trask said, "His very existence is hostile. He's the ad*van*ce man ... the public re*la*tions guy. He's here to soften us up ... for the hordes to come. *Now* do you understand?"

Yes, now she understood, only too well. Now that Sherman had heard this directly from Trask she knew which it was. The man was insane, a maniac and she was beginning to have serious doubts that she would actually survive this job. If all of the guards that worked for him were as mad as he was, her hours were numbered. All she could do was play along and hope for the best. Maybe she could escape or else be rescued. She returned to the barrier and relayed the message to the reporters.

Lois gave Sherman her cell phone number and then she and Clark headed for the car. Lois asked, "Are you hungry, Clark?"

Nodding his head, Clark said, "I could use a bite to eat." He was extremely hungry. Usually he derived most of his energy from sunlight, but ever since being exposed to that rock he had needed to eat and drink to keep up his energy.

With the air of one forming a plan, Lois said, "Let's go into town. Maybe we can find someone who knows something for a change and then we can grab a bite to eat."

The day was bright and sunny and for once Lois took her time driving which gave them plenty of opportunity to talk and for Clark to soak up some sunlight.

Their first stop, after Lois had parked, was City Hall. After that, they strolled around town for a bit, asking questions of those people that Clark identified as local residents. Eventually they ended up in Maisie's Café. Clark led Lois to an empty booth and stood as he waited for her to sit down.

Even though Lois was in a grumpy mood because of what had happened outside, she noted Clark waiting for her and thought, <Ever the perfect gentleman. If we were sitting at a table, I'm sure he would hold my chair for me. So sweet. How can I stay mad at him? But, what he said!> Looking around she thought, <This place looks like something out of Norman Rockwell. Red and white vinyl checkered table cloth, sugar container, salt and pepper shakers, and a ketchup bottle, like ketchup is the only condiment you would want.>

Lois dug into her bag, pulled out her cell phone and threw it carelessly on the table. She reached in again and this time found what she had been after, her notebook and pencil.

While she was doing this, Clark grabbed a potato chip and crunched on it then said, "All right, four hours at city hall and all we know is that in twenty years, there were no permits and no citations issued on the Irig property."

She slammed her pad down on the table interrupting him. The incident that had just happened outside was still digging at her. She crossed her arms on the table and giving him a look that he recognized as irritation.

He asked, "What's the matter?" and then crunched another chip.

In an irritated tone which matched her look as she mocked him, "'Don't mind my friend, Lois. She's from *Metropolis*.'"

Clark leaned across the table and said, quietly, "You were coming off a little ... 'intense'."

Defensively, Lois replied, "Look Clark, intensity might be a crime in Smallville, but in Metropolis, it's a survival skill."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Lois flipped to a fresh page and started to write. She spoke to herself as she wrote, "No activity that would attract the attention of the federal

government.”

She was interrupted by the arrival of Maisie, a good-looking, blonde, middle-aged waitress who placed a couple Dixie cups of ice water on the table.

As she was placing the water on the table, she recognized who it was that was sitting in the booth and in a happy tone said, “Clark Kent! Your mom said you were here for the Daily Planet.” Pointedly she looked at Lois and gave her a sharp appraisal. She wiped her hand on her apron before she offered Lois her hand and said, “So this must be Lois.”

By this time Lois had become accustomed to everyone knowing who she was. Still she asked, in a sarcastic tone, “How’d you guess?”

Undeterred, Maisie pressed on, “I’m Maisie. How’s the writing coming? I just love to read a good romance novel.”

Lois just couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Her novel was one of her deepest darkest secrets. If looks could kill, Clark, especially in his present condition, would have died a thousand deaths.

Clark had just reached into a basket of chips and taking one placed it in his mouth. He had just crunched down on it when Lois looked at him accusingly. Chagrined, Clark swallowed and then tried to make an excuse, “I must have,” he cleared his throat, “accidentally ... mentioned it to ... my mother. She may have ...”

Lois almost growled as she finished for him, “Accidentally told the whole town.”

Maisie could see what was brewing and it wasn’t the coffee. There was a storm brewing and it was her fault. She tried to defuse the situation, “Oh, that’s just Smallville for you, honey. Everybody knows everything about everybody else.”

Lois was quick to pick up on that. It fit right in with her desires. She wanted to know if Clark was for real. Claude had been a fake, a fraud that had cheated her, seduced her and stolen her story. She needed to know if Clark was like that or not. Here was Maisie giving her the perfect opening. She stared straight at Clark as she asked, sweetly, “If that’s so why haven’t I heard any dirt on Clark, here?”

Maisie looked back and forth between Clark and Lois, finally returning her eyes to look at Lois and in a very sincere tone answered her question in a straightforward manner, “Honey, I’ve known Clark all of his life. You can trust me, with Clark, here, what you see is what you get. He’s *always* been Mr. Straight Arrow.” Taking a couple of menus out of the pocket of her apron, she handed them to Lois and Clark and then hearing another customer calling said, “Here you go. I’ll be back in a jiff.”

As if this was a big revelation, Lois repeated in an almost mocking tone, “What you see is what you get, hmm?” However, Maisie’s statement had started a chain reaction of thoughts and emotions within Lois and after Maisie turned away, Lois took a close look at Clark with a new appreciation. After a few seconds of this contemplation, she looked at her menu.

While Maisie had been speaking, Clark had reached for the pad and started reading. As Maisie walked away, he flipped back to Lois’ notes. As he did he let out an exclamation, “Ow!” Surprised and confused, he looked at his finger. It was cut and bleeding. He was thinking, <How did I get cut? Oh, no, I’m not only weak, I’m ... vulnerable. That actually hurt. That rock!> Out loud in a shocked tone, he said, “I’m ... bleeding!”

Looking up from her menu, Lois asked, “Haven’t you ever had a paper cut before?” <Why is such a little thing bothering him? You’d think he wasn’t used to being hurt.>

Still staring at the blood seeping from his finger in fascination, he said, “Not that I can remember.”

Half distractedly as she was trying to decide what to order, she said, “Put it in your mouth, Clark and suck on it.”

Following Lois’ orders, Clark put his finger in his mouth and

sucked on it.

As he did, Lois’ cell phone began to ring. Forgetting about the menu, Lois reached for it.

Forgetting about his finger, Clark reached for it.

It was inevitable that as Lois reached for the phone she would knock over one of the glasses of ice water and it would naturally land in Clark’s lap. It was impossible to tell if it was an accident or deliberate.

While he reacted to this Lois picked up the phone, looked at him and said, “Oops, sorry.” Flipped the phone open and extending the antenna, answered it. “This is Lois Lane.” Hearing the voice on the phone she blurted out, “Mr. Irig? Where are you?”

He responded, “I think I’m just outside of Salt Lake City.”

Incredulous, Lois repeated what he had said for clarification, “Salt Lake City!?”

Wayne replied, “I just got in my Winnebago and decided to go visit my sister. Been on the road so long, hardly know where I am.”

Lois didn’t like what she was hearing. It just didn’t sound right. She said, “Mister Irig, I’m going to put you on with Clark Kent.”

She handed the phone to Clark and he immediately brought it to his ear and spoke, “Hello, Wayne. Can you give me a phone number where I can call you back?”

For a few seconds there was silence and then he was back, “I don’t see one here. I’m at a truck stop.”

Clark was practically shouting, the connection seemed to be really bad and Wayne sounded really confused. Clark persisted with, “What did the EPA guys tell you about the work they’re doing on your property?”

Wayne replied, “Just that they needed to do some digging.”

Worried, Clark asked, “Wayne, is everything okay?”

Wayne’s reply was not really convincing, “There’s no problem. Looks like somebody else needs this phone now. Goodbye, Clark.”

As Clark shouted, “Wha, wait, Wayne I ... “ the line went dead.

In the command tent on the Irig farm, Trask took the field phone from Wayne’s hand and dropped it onto its pouch as a telephone operator hit a switch on a field switchboard to kill the connection.

The guards that had been standing around started to relax.

Trask then took the index cards which he had used to write out the script that Wayne had followed. He was irritated that Wayne had started to improvise, but then there hadn’t been much choice. Trask hadn’t anticipated every possible question. He actually thought that the Winnebago was a nice touch.

In a questioning tone, Clark said, “Salt Lake City?”

“That’s where he said he was calling from. He couldn’t wait to get off the line, could he?”

Shaking his head, Clark said, “Wayne’s never been much of a talker.”

Thoughtfully, Lois said, “He said he was calling from Salt Lake City, but he could have been ... anywhere.”

Picking up on where Lois was taking this train of thought, he suggested, “You mean like here in Smallville.” Looking at Lois he asked, “What did he say to you?”

“He said that he had just decided to visit his sister, hopped into his Winnebago and started driving.”

With a shocked expression, Clark said, “I think you’re right and he was giving us a clue.”

“Huh, what do you mean?”

“Wayne doesn’t own a Winnebago.”

With a nod of dawning understanding, Lois said, “It sure

looks like it is possible.” Looking out the window and across the street at the Corn Festival activities, Lois said, “I’d suggest that we go mingle, but I’d like one of Maisie’s burgers and a chocolate shake first. Real ice cream, yum.” <How did I know that? It didn’t say anything about that in the menu.>

When Maisie returned, they placed their orders.

When they were finished, Lois said, “That was wonderful. Okay, now we can go ‘mingle’. Let’s see what we can find out.”

As soon as they left Maisie’s Diner they could hear the music from the gazebo and followed that as they crossed the street to the square. Stepping onto the square they found themselves on the outskirts of a crowd cheering on an athletic competition. Lois shouted to make herself heard over the cheering crowd, “What’s going on? Is it a prize fight?”

Clark shook his head and placing his lips near her ear so that she could hear him, he said, “No, this is a husk-off.”

Pulling away, she gave him a mystified look.

He moved close again and said, “Teams try to see who can shuck the most ears in a minute!”

Again she moved away. This time she shouted, “This is a team sport?”

Clark nodded his head enthusiastically.

Lois just rolled her eyes in response.

When they left the area of the competition they saw Clark’s mom and dad. Lois and Clark moved over to join them. Lois said, “Look, Clark, you still look like your allergies are bothering you. Why don’t you sit a while with your parents and I’ll mingle.” Without waiting for him to answer, Lois moved off, notebook in hand.

Clark, Jonathan and Martha found a picnic table that was unoccupied and sat down. Watching Lois as she moved off and started talking to people, Jonathan said, “That girl never stops working, does she?” Then he turned to Clark and lowered his voice. “About that rock, maybe those Feds’ll look for a while up at Irig’s and when they can’t find it, just give up. Then she’ll give up on the story.”

“I doubt it, Dad. We just spoke with Wayne. Dad, he lied to us, I think deliberately. We think he’s in trouble.”

Hearing this, Martha was even more concerned about Clark’s physical state because she knew that his powers might be needed. She said, “We’ve got to get you to a doctor, that’s all there is to it.”

Clark replied, “Mom, what’s a doctor going to do? I’m fine now. Fine ... but I’m normal.”

Martha rebutted, “Normal for Earth.”

Clark replied, “But this is Earth. Normal could be good.” Looking around, Clark realized that he had lost sight of Lois. He didn’t think it would be a big deal, after all what could happen here in town, but that didn’t keep him from worrying about her.

As Lois wandered around interviewing people she suddenly found herself at the boutique booth again. Seeing that the dress was still on display she wandered over to it and started stroking it thoughtfully again.

The salesgirl stepped up to her and asked, “Can I help you?”

Lois said, “I think you can. Do you take credit cards?”

“Sure we do.”

“Good. How much is this dress?”

“The one on the mannequin?”

“Well, do you have one like it? I’d need to make sure it’s my size.”

“Miss, that’s a one of a kind, an original. It was handmade so that’s the only one. You’d have to try it on.”

Lois replied, “I don’t think I need to. Just take it off the mannequin. I’ll take it.”

While the salesgirl was removing the dress from the display,

Lois looked around for footwear.

Once she paid for her purchases she took the packages and went back across the street to Maisie’s Diner and entered the ladies room, or at least she assumed it was the ladies room. On the door was a stick figure in a dress, but the word was Heifers. Glancing at the other door she saw the corresponding stick figure and the word Bulls. Shaking her head she thought, <You’d think we were in cattle country. Obviously someone’s feeble attempt at humor.>

As she was entering one of the stalls, she thought, <Well, this is appropriately named. Don’t they keep cattle in stalls?> Smiling to herself at the joke, she quickly removed her pants outfit and pulled the dress out of the package. She was now standing in the stall wearing just her bra and panties with the door closed as she held the dress up to look at it. Her mind made up, she unbuttoned the dress and slipped it on over her head. As she smoothed it down over her hips she felt the soft fabric and a sense of rightness. Quickly she buttoned the dress up and as she was sure would be the case, it fit like it had been made especially for her. She next slipped into her new footwear and putting her pant suit into the bag exited the ladies room. Knowing how the dress felt and how she felt wearing it which was very feminine, she was feeling like anything other than a Heifer.

She stopped at their Mustang and put her bags in the trunk. Almost as an afterthought she placed her precious work bag in with the clothes and then she headed back to the festival to find Clark.

While Lois had been shopping, Clark and his parents had continued to discuss the situation.

Jonathan added his two cents, “I think you’re both jumping the gun. You can’t go all your life with powers and then, poof, they just disappear.”

Clark replied, “Well, It’s happened, Dad.” Looking around he spotted a test of strength attraction. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

As they approached, a girl was just accepting a pink Teddy Bear from the barker which her date had won for her.

The barker shouted, “Ring the bell and win a prize!”

Clark stepped up to the device and, in return for a ticket, the barker handed him a wooden sledge hammer.

Looking at the test of strength he saw that the bottom level read ‘Wimp’ and then scaled up to the top which, if you rang the bell it use to call you ‘Top Dog’, but that had been crossed out and it now declared you to be a ‘Superman’.

Clark said over his shoulder to his mom and dad, “Here goes!” Clark gave a lusty swing and a grunt the hammer came crashing down on the lever, but the weight only rose to the level of ‘Better Luck Next Time’.

The barker asked, “Want to give it another shot?”

With a dispirited air, shaking his head, Clark handed the hammer back to the barker and said, “No thanks. That was enough humiliation for one day.”

Martha and Jonathan watched this display with obvious concern and then they exchanged worried looks.

Just then, Lois walked up and put her arms around Clark. Trying to be sympathetic she said, “Don’t worry about it. Maybe you should try corn husking instead.”

Disconsolately, Clark just shook his head then he noticed something was different. Stepping back away from Lois so that he could get a good look, he said, “My, don’t you look nice. I don’t remember seeing that dress before.”

“That’s because you haven’t. I just bought it. I felt, I don’t know, a little ... out of place. What I was wearing just wasn’t right. When in Smallville ...” As she finished speaking she let go a little embarrassed giggle at her little play on words. She thought, <It was too ... citified.>

All Clark could do was stare at her. Lois was gorgeous! He

had never seen her in a dress so becoming. He had seen her dressed for work and casually, but for some reason, this outfit sent his mind into a whirl. It was a long brown dress which had a light flowered print and a deep wide 'V' neckline. It was very flattering to her figure, accentuating her narrow waist and full bosom. She had also purchased a pair of western boots to complete the ensemble which showed through the slit in the front of the skirt. With the look of a hungry dog staring at a steak, Clark said, "All I can say is ... Wow!"

Smiling at his response, Lois did a pirouette and asked, "So, you like?"

Clark's response was a heartfelt, "And how!"

Lois' smile broadened, "Good, because I wanted to please you. I wanted to, I don't know, fit in. Be a part of 'your world'."

"Lois, dressed like that you'll be the belle of the ball."

"That's good because I intend to have you dance with me tonight." <Okay Ms. Two Step and Tush-Push, it's time for you to meet your competition.>

A little later, at the dance, Lois and Clark were standing on the fringes watching as a country line dance formed up. As the band started playing, Lois spotted Rachel approaching. Rachel had gotten rid of her uniform and was now dressed in a western style outfit with a short skirt which was designed to show off her form and emphasize her legs and it did a good job of it. Seeing her attire, Lois knew instinctively that she was on the prowl and that her prey was Clark so Lois decided to act preemptively. Grabbing Clark's hand she started dragging him onto the dance floor, as she said, "Come on, Clark, let's give it a whirl."

Clark's reply didn't encourage her, he asked, "You're kidding, right?"

Lois watched as Rachel approached and the closer she got the more urgent Lois' importunities to get Clark on the dance floor became. She said, "No, I'm not kidding. I want to dance with you, but only if you promise not to breathe a word about it to anyone at the Planet."

Clark held up his hand in the Boy Scout salute and said, "I promise," and stopped resisting as she dragged him onto the dance floor and into the lines.

It was immediately apparent that Lois was an experienced line dancer. With malice aforethought she took her place in the line right in front of Clark so that at least half of the time she would be right in front of him.

As the people in the lines started to move, Clark was surprised to see Lois display such skill in the dance and said, "Wow, you really do know how to dance!"

Smiling, Lois had replied, "Last year a girlfriend convinced me that it would be a good way to meet guys."

Surprised, Clark asked, "Was it?"

Lois laughed and quipped, "Define 'guys'."

By her broad smile, Clark could tell that Lois was having a good time.

Rachel could also see how well Lois moved and took up the challenge. <She wants to make this a contest, huh? We'll just see about that.> Joining the line right next to Lois, Rachel tried her best to outperform Lois in the moves of the dance. However, try as she might, whatever move was called for, Lois performed it with, at least equal and most of the time more grace and skill than Rachel. It looked like Lois had a natural flair for dance. Rachel was a little hampered by the fact that she had several buttons of her top undone and was going out of her way to exaggerate some of the moves to show off her bodice and make her skirt flare up to display her legs.

Clark could see the sidelong glances the two girls were giving one another as they danced and he came to the realization that they were both dancing for him because they were also

looking at him to gauge his responses. As the competition proceeded it became more and more energetic and Clark was surprised when he actually broke a sweat, an unusual occurrence for him. The girls were undeterred as the dance continued, vying to outdo one another. Clark couldn't help, but admit that Lois was the superior dancer and as the song came to an end even Rachel had to admit that she had met her match.

After the dance, Rachel addressed Lois, "You know, for a city gal, you sure can dance!"

Lois couldn't help rubbing it in a little and said, "You're not so bad yourself, but when you 'Tush-Push', you need to add a little," she demonstrated, "at the end."

Rachel was mortified; this city girl had the gall to tell her how to dance! She just stood there and watched as Lois wrapped her arm around Clark's and they moved off. She was so mad she felt she could spit nails! That was supposed to be *her* walking off with Clark.

A little later, Lois was eating a caramel apple and hanging on Clark's arm as they wandered around a bit talking of inconsequential things and laughing frequently. Finally they were approaching the test of strength booth that Clark had failed at so miserably earlier in the day.

With a look of pure orneriness, Lois said, "Okay, Clark, let's make this a day to remember." She pulled out a ticket and handed it to the barker. Lois said, "Here you go, sir," as she handed him the ticket. In return the barker handed the hammer to Clark.

Clark looked at Lois and then at the hammer and said, "Oh, no! You know I didn't do well with this earlier."

Lois was strongly convinced that things would turn out differently this time; in fact she was sure of it. She encouraged him, "Come on, Clark. It's only a ticket. What do you have to lose? Give it a shot."

Her enthusiasm helped him overcome his fears and he hefted the hammer. It was still something of a struggle for him to wield it. The result was encouraging. As they watched, the weight climbed to 'Better Luck Next Time' and kept going, pausing at the 'Hercules' level before falling back down. The realization that he had spent most of the day in the sun hit him and encouraged him.

Lois was clapping enthusiastically at his performance and with that encouragement he pulled another ticket from his back pocket. As Clark handed it to the barker, he said, "Can I try that again?"

He took a good wind-up and whacked the pedal a good stroke. The weight passed 'Hercules' and reduced the distance between that and 'Superman' by half.

Lois pulled out another ticket said in an upbeat tone, "Okay, that was very close. One more," as she handed the barker the ticket.

A swing and a grunt and this time the weight traveled the distance and with a loud 'clang' rang the bell! Clark was surprised and pleased. <My strength must be returning.> Dropping the hammer, he threw his arms up in victory.

Lois squealed in delight and jumping up and down, clapped her hands. She shouted, "I knew you could do it!" and running to him threw her arms around his neck. <I did know he could do it, but how?> "You did it!"

The next thing that happened was an even bigger surprise to Clark. The barker picked up two toys, a Superman doll and a black and white Teddy Bear with a red ribbon around his neck. He said, "You get your choice."

Clark was chagrined at the choices Lois was being offered and deep down in his gut he was sure he knew what her choice would be. Her infatuation with his alter ego made the choice almost certain. Her hesitation as she looked back and forth, weighing the options, made him even more certain of the

eventual outcome, but to his total surprise, as she reached for and took the bear she said, “I already have my Superman. I’ll take the bear.”

To his total amazement, she cuddled it to her breast and again reached for his arm. As she did she laid her head on his shoulder and said, “Why don’t we head home?”

Clark smiled when she called the farm ‘home’ and said, “Anything my lady wishes. I am yours to command.”

“Then, take me home. That’s all I want right now.”

Nodding, Clark started walking to where the car was parked while Lois hung on his arm with one of hers and cuddled the bear with the other.

Unknown to them, a couple of Trask’s men had been watching them.

Unknown to Trask’s men, they were in turn being watched by a smallish man in a derby hat.

Trask’s men watched Lois and Clark climbed into their car to depart and hurried to their car so that they could follow only to find that their car wouldn’t start. The driver got out and opened the hood to see if he could determine the cause of the problem. His companion brought a flashlight and shone it into the engine compartment. The driver spotted the problem immediately. The wire from the coil to the distributor was missing. This was an obvious case of sabotage. Trask wasn’t going to like this, not one little bit.

The dapper little man stepped over to a trash receptacle, dropped a black wire in and then disappeared into an alley. As he did he was thinking, <Things are progressing nicely. This way they will have the privacy that they need.>

Chapter 5

Clark drove the Mustang while Lois relaxed and played with her bear on the drive back to the farm. When they arrived, Clark noticed that the pickup wasn’t there. After exiting the car he went around and opened the door for Lois. She took his hand as he assisted her from the car. He was thinking, <Something has to be happening here. She usually doesn’t wait for me to get her door, let alone wait for me to hand her out.> As he was closing the door he received yet another surprise because she again took his arm. With her on his arm they strolled leisurely up to the porch. When they reached it, Lois said, “Let’s sit on the swing. I really don’t feel like going in just yet.”

Clark smiled and led her in that direction. Once she was seated he sat next to her. He received another surprise when she reached over and, taking his hand, pulled his arm up across her shoulders. Going with the flow he wrapped his arm around her and cupped her shoulder with his hand. She sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder. She was still cuddling her Teddy Bear. Holding it out so that she could see it better she directed his attention to it and asked, “Do you want to know his name?”

Clark played along, “What is it?”

Smiling, she said, definitively, “Clarkie Bear. Clarkie Bear, this is Clark. Clark this is Clarkie Bear.”

Clark nodded his head and said, “Pleased to meet you, Clarkie Bear.”

Lois giggled and said, “You know, I think you are the only guy I know that would play along with me on something like that.” Her tone became thoughtful as she continued, “You really are unique. A one of a kind.” She was silent for almost a minute as she was making up her mind. “Clark, I had a good time today. I mean ... I had a really good time. Probably the best time I’ve ever had on a date.” Shocked at what she had just said, she asked, “Do you mind if I call it a date?”

Smiling, Clark said, “I don’t mind that at all.” He thought for a few seconds before he asked, “If this was a date though, do I get a goodnight kiss?”

“Only if you really want one.”

“Oh, I do,” he said with feeling.

Lois shifted around so that she was facing him and closing her eyes leaned forward and puckered up.

Clark leaned in and gave her a very chaste, quick kiss.

Lois didn’t move after he broke the contact. Her eyes remained closed and she maintained the pucker for almost a minute. Slowly she opened her eyes, one at a time, and asked, in a disappointed tone, “That’s all?”

Surprised, Clark stuttered, “I didn’t know how ... I didn’t want to take ...”

This was just sooooo Clark. He didn’t want to take advantage of the situation and didn’t know how much she would allow. She decided that she would have to take the lead. She said, gently, “I know, because I know you.” She leaned in and brushed his lips with hers. She came back and brushed his lips again. This time she lingered and slowly added pressure to the contact. She felt it when he followed her lead. Slowly she parted her lips and used her tongue to brush his lower lip.

As he parted his lips, her tongue circled his mouth. She released a sigh of satisfaction when she felt his tongue touch hers. Their tongues started a dance. Left, right, twirl. Lois deepened the contact and Clark continued to follow her lead. When she needed a breath she broke the contact and took a gasping breath before attacking his lips again. The next time she needed a breath, instead of attacking his lips she started kissing his cheeks, chin, and forehead and anywhere else she could reach. In his turn he kissed along her neck. She released a sigh and tilted her head so that he had easier access. He continued up to her earlobe which he sucked into his mouth and started to nibble on it. As soon as he did this Lois felt a thrill move down her spine and a heat start to build in her lower abdomen.

Making up her mind, Lois dropped Clarkie Bear on the swing and shifted her position. She sat on Clark’s lap, wrapped her arms around his neck and twined her fingers in his hair, pulling him back into another open-mouthed kiss.

They had been making out like this for almost fifteen minutes when the headlights of the pickup lit them up.

The young couple jumped apart like a couple of teenagers caught making out on the living room couch in the dark by the girl’s father.

As Jonathan and Martha stepped up onto the porch, Clark still had his arm across Lois’ shoulders and Lois had her hands folded demurely in her lap. Martha was giggling and Jonathan said, “Don’t let us interrupt. We’re going to bed. You kids have fun.”

In better light his parents would have been able to see the kiss-swollen lips and the red flush in both Lois and Clark’s cheeks, but it wasn’t the flush of embarrassment, it was a flush of desire and excitement.

As soon as the door closed behind the senior Kents, Lois returned to her place in his lap and attacked his mouth with hers again.

After several minutes they separated and still sitting on Clark’s lap, Lois laid her head on his shoulder. She released a happy sigh and said, “Why did we wait so long? We have wasted so much time that could have been put to better use.”

“What time, Lois?”

“All of the time we’ve been together.”

“I really can’t answer that question. I mean, we have been together.”

“I know, but we could be so much further along in our relationship by now.”

“How were we to know we were going to start a relationship?”

“How does anybody know? When Perry teamed us up it was like a blind date. How does anyone on a blind date know how things will work out? They go out and see if they get along. We’ve been together now for months. We’ve done stakeouts

together. We've shared take out. We've watched movies together. I've even slept over at your place and this is only our first official date. As far as I'm concerned, it's not the last. I have to admit, I was being cautious ... very cautious. Especially after what happened with Claude ..."

Gently, Clark interrupted, "I'm not Claude."

Lois pulled back and placed her hands on the sides of his face, making sure he was looking directly in her eyes as she said, "I know you're not. You couldn't be more different from Claude if you tried and the nicest thing is, you don't even have to try. All you have to do is be you, Clark Jerome Kent, the one and only. The most gentle, caring, honest man I have ever met. Do you want to know the truth?"

"You can always be honest with me, Lois. You know that."

"Yes ... yes, I do. Truly, I thought you were too good. You were too good to be true. I had a hard time believing that anyone ... any guy could be as good as you appeared to be. I was afraid that one day the mask would fall off and you'd be just like every other guy I've been involved with. I'm not afraid of that anymore."

"What changed your mind, Lois?"

"Not what ... who. Maisie. When she said that about you all of my fears disappeared. Here was someone that has known you all of your life. I had been worried that you were playing a game. Pretending to be someone you weren't. I just knew that sooner or later the mask would come off, it had to. I knew that if someone is playing a game, they could do it for days or weeks, maybe for a year, but all of your life? I don't think so. If she can say 'With Clark, what you see is what you get.' I just have to believe her. You, Clark Jerome Kent, are the real deal."

Clark said, "I'll have to be sure and thank Maisie the next time I see her."

Smiling, Lois said, "Ever since Claude, I've been afraid to let my guard down. I built these walls around my heart to keep others out. Since I met you ... since I started getting to know you ... those walls have been slowly coming down. Your gentle assault on those walls has made them crumble like so much cardboard. Until now, I've been fighting ... fighting hard ... to keep them up; now, I realize that I don't need to. I have a confession to make. I'm going to say something that I never thought I'd be saying to anyone. I think I'm in love with you, Clark Kent."

She could barely make out his smile in the dark as he said, "Lois, I too have a confession. Remember, early on, right after we were partnered, you told me not to fall for you?"

Lois bobbed her head in agreement. "I remember. It was too soon ... too soon after Claude. The wound was still too raw."

"Your caution came too late. I had already fallen for you. I fell for you the first moment I laid eyes on you. I was in Perry's office being interviewed and this beautiful, brunette tornado swirled in and took my breath away. From that moment on, I was yours."

Lois smiled and said, "Really? I have to admit, I was attracted to you too, but that just made me put the walls up higher. I refused to let that attraction affect me, in case you turned out to be just like Claude." Lois sealed this revelation with a kiss.

He didn't know if it was a result of the exposure to the green rock or if it was just being normal, but he suddenly realized that he was tired, actually, he was exhausted. Reluctantly breaking from the kiss, Clark said, "I don't know about you, but I'm tired. I think we need to get some shut-eye. Tomorrow could be a big day. I think we need to go back to the Irig farm again and this time snoop around some."

"I agree with you, partner." She disentangled herself from his neck and stood up. Reaching down she retrieved Clarkie Bear saying, "Come on little guy. Clark's right, it's time for bed."

Clark chuckled and opened the door for her and hand-in-hand

they entered the house. As she headed upstairs she paused on the bottom step, released his hand and said, "Goodnight, Clark," and leaned in for a final kiss.

As they kissed Clark reached up and touched the side of her face in a gentle gesture and when they broke the kiss, he said, "Goodnight, Lois. Sleep tight."

In the dark, he couldn't see her thoughtful expression as she ascended the stairs.

Once she had disappeared upstairs, Clark removed his shirt and after shucking his jeans pulled on a pair of sweats. After he lay down on the couch he went over the happenings of the evening in his mind, a very broad smile playing on his lips.

Just as he was about to drift off to sleep, he heard the soft footfalls of a woman coming down the steps. In a quiet tone he asked, "Mom, is that you?"

For long seconds, there was no answer and then he felt soft hands on his. In the near darkness he saw a vague form of soft pastels. A baby blue shortie nightie, pink legs and arms. He blurted out, "Lois?"

She hissed, "Shhhhhhhh. Not so loud. Come with me. I need your help with something."

Lowering his tone, he asked, "Is there a problem?"

"Yes, and I need your help to solve it. Come on." Hand-in-hand they ascended the stairs. They followed the familiar path to his old bedroom. After they entered, Lois closed the door.

Once the door was closed, in a hushed tone, Clark asked, "What was the problem? How can I help?"

She replied by moving into his arms. She put her arms around his neck and brought her lips close to his ear. He could feel her soft form pressing against his and her breasts crushing into his chest. He could feel her hot breath on his ear as she whispered, "I couldn't sleep."

He could feel his body responding to the contact and knew that he was going to have to exercise super will power if he wasn't going to make a major mistake. Willing himself to be calm, Clark sought furiously for a way to buy himself some time to regain a measure of control, he asked in a low tone, "Would you like a glass of warm milk?"

Shaking her head, she replied, "That won't help."

Feeling his control slowly crumble and knowing that he had to get some space and trying to distract himself by being solicitous of her well-being, he asked, "Are you cold? Would you like more blankets?"

She whispered in his ear, "No. There's only one thing that will help me get to sleep."

"What is it? I'll get it for you," Clark asked, thinking that he needed to get away from her before she detected his body's response to their proximity. If he could just get some distance, for a few minutes, he could get himself back under control.

In response, she pulled her body into even closer contact with his and not only whispered into his ear, but as she finished whispering she kissed the side of his neck. "I've already got it. More accurately, I've already got him. If I'm going to get any sleep, I need you in bed with me." She started dragging him in the direction of the bed.

Clark could feel himself losing the battle for control. If she was serious, he could be in big trouble. After the necking they had done on the swing, his emotions were at a high pitch and his whole body was vibrating like a tuning fork at her contact. The way she was dressed only added to his problem. She was wearing little more than a bathing suit as far as the amount of skin that her nightie covered. Nervously, Clark asked, "Uh, are you sure that's a good idea?"

Innocently, Lois responded, "Clark, I'm not proposing that we do anything other than share the bed. I just want to snuggle up to you so that I can feel your presence. To know that you're there. It'll help me sleep."

Hoping that he would be able to exercise enough control and thanking his lucky stars that he had sweats on and not his usual silk sleep shorts, he replied, “Okay, Lois, if that’s what you want.” They moved to the bed and they lay down, together. Lois scooted back and spooned with Clark while he wrapped his free arm around her. He kept his body half turned so that she wouldn’t detect the problem he was having with his rebellious anatomy. After he had reached for and thrown the quilt over their joined bodies she sighed in contentment and in a rather short time her rhythmic deep breathing told Clark that she was fast asleep apparently still in ignorance of what she was doing to him.

As he lay there enjoying being in bed with Lois he heard her start to talk in her sleep. He believed that she must be dreaming as she said, “Clark, just look at him, Clark Junior. Isn’t he beautiful? He’s perfect. A little brown haired, brown eyed copy of you and he’s ours. Now we’re a family of more than two. I’m so happy. I love you so much.”

What she said startled him and he mulled it over. After a time, marveling at the turn of events, he also fell asleep.

In the morning, Martha and Jonathan tip-toed down the stairs so as not to disturb Clark. They moved into the kitchen and Martha put on the coffee.

When it was ready, Jonathan peeked into the living room to see if Clark was stirring and if he wanted some coffee. To his utter amazement, the couch was empty. He called Martha over without saying a word. As she looked into the living room she spotted the empty couch and casting her eyes upstairs smiled a Cheshire cat smile. She said, “Unless he’s out in the barn, he has to be upstairs. After what we saw last night, I’m not too surprised, are you?”

Jonathan was chuckling as he replied, “Not in the slightest. It looks like our boy has himself a girlfriend after all these years.”

A short time later, Clark came downstairs, by himself. As he entered the kitchen, Martha smiled and asked, brightly, “Where’s Lois?”

Clark’s hair was mussed and he hadn’t realized it, but while they had been kissing, it had been dark and Lois had left her mark on him. There were lipstick smears on his lips and cheeks. Nonchalantly he replied, “Oh, she’ll be down shortly. She’s getting dressed.”

Jonathan handed him a cup of coffee and indicated that Clark should sit at the table. Clark started spooning sugar into the coffee as Jonathan received his from Martha and moved to the table.

Once they were both seated, Jonathan asked, “What are your intentions with her, Clark?”

As Jonathan was asking this question, Martha pulled out a small mirror and handed it and a cloth to Clark. He looked at his mom questioningly.

Smiling, she reached over and held the mirror so that he could see himself. As soon as he saw the red smears he looked embarrassed and started rubbing them off with the cloth. As he was doing this he answered his father’s question, “I want to marry her, Dad. Last night she confessed that she loves me, Clark me. Not a word about Superman.”

Jonathan looked at him and smiled before he said, “That’s good because, you may not realize it, but you’re already married.”

It was a very good thing that Clark was still busy cleaning his face and hadn’t started drinking his coffee yet because when his dad said that if he had been it would have been all over. “WHAT?!?!?”

Jonathan snickered and said, “Yeah, there’s an old law, still on the books. The only reason I know about it was that it made the papers. I think it was while you were in Borneo. This young

couple, they were ‘romantically’ involved. Well, they decided to go camping. They wound up on public lands. The Game Warden found them, partially clothed in the same sleeping bag. He hauled them before the Magistrate. They were really worried, thought they were being arrested for being on public lands. The Magistrate asked for their ID and told them to sit over in a corner and wait. About an hour later he came back in and said, ‘I’ve got some papers for you to sign.’”

“Now, the boy, he wanted to find out if they were going to have to pay a fine or if they were being arrested and he asked as much. The Magistrate chuckled and said, ‘Once you sign these papers I’ll let you know just what your sentence is.’ They were in pretty much of a blind panic so they just signed where he indicated. Once everything was signed the Magistrate said, ‘Now for your sentence. The sentence is . . . life. You may now kiss the bride.’”

“What? He married them?”

“Yep, the forms he had them sign were a marriage license and a certificate of marriage. You see, the law says that if you spend the night with a girl, you are married to her. It is an old law, dates back to the early days of the settling of Kansas. There weren’t many Justices of the Peace in those days and it made it easier that way. Technically, you and Lois are now married.”

“But, I don’t want it that way!”

Jonathan chuckled and said, “Only the four of us know. Your mom and I won’t be saying anything.”

“I plan to ask her, but I need to tell her about myself first.”

Martha had been an interested listener and as she had listened she had moved over to sit on another chair.

Smiling, she reached into her apron pocket and produced a little paper wrapped packet which she placed on the table in front of Clark. She said, “I think you can use this.”

Clark opened it and found an antique engagement ring.

Martha explained, “After what we saw last night, I knew that something had changed and you’d be needing it. I’ve been saving that for you for a long time. It was your Grandma Clark’s ring. I’m sure she’d want you to have it.”

Clark looked at it closely and with appreciation he said, “Thanks, Mom. I’m sure she’ll love it.” Hearing Lois coming down the stairs, Clark quickly wrapped the ring up and stuffed it into his pocket.

As Lois came through the door, she took in the tableau, a close loving family at the table and it brought a tear to her eye. This was something that she really hadn’t realized that she missed until she saw it being modeled in front of her and she wished, with all of her heart that someday, this would be what her family would be like. Lois had decided to wear her new dress again because to her it represented the changed relationship she now had with Clark. She smiled weakly at Clark and noting that he was still in sweats and a T-shirt, said, “Don’t you think you should get dressed, partner. We’ve got a big day ahead of us.”

Clark stood and said, “You’re right. I’ll be right back.”

As he was exiting, Martha asked, “Lois, would you like some coffee?” She hesitated for a second and added, “It isn’t one of those fancy lattes or anything, just plain home brewed coffee.”

Lois smiled and said, “Martha, you’re a life saver. Yes, I’d love some. Thank you.”

Jonathan asked, “So, what do you and Clark have planned for today?”

“We’re going to try to find Mr. Irig. We think he’s still around Smallville, somewhere, but first we need to call the chief.”

Jimmy answered the phone on Lois’ desk. “Daily Planet, Jimmy Olsen.”

“Hi, Jimmy, It’s Clark.”

“Hi, CK! How’s the investigation going?”

“We’re getting the run-around from the government types.

Same as usual. Is Perry around?"

"Sure, hold on, I'll get him." Jimmy pushed the hold button and hung up the phone before heading for the Chief's office.

The door was ajar so he just pushed it open and walked in. When he did he saw Perry, in a yoga-like posture on the floor, listening to what sounded like bird calls, falling rain and insect chirps. As Jimmy moved into the office, he stopped. A very curious expression crossed his face. With a hesitant tone, Jimmy asked, "Chief?"

Without breaking his pose or even opening his eyes, Perry said, "The Rain Forest, Jimmy. The sounds of nature promote harmony in all living things. There are no wild animals with high blood pressure.

"Still stressing, huh?"

Irritation and anxiety was evident in his voice as Perry denied, "Stressing? I am not 'stressing'!" His voice rose half an octave and became more stern as he bit out, "What do you want?"

"Clark's on the phone."

Struggling to unbend from the position he was in and giving up in frustration, Perry shouted, "Olsen, give me the phone!" Jimmy grabbed his desk phone and pulled it down so that the chief could reach it, "Kent? What have you got for me?"

In Smallville, Lois and Clark were both sitting at the kitchen table. Lois had her notepad open so that she could pass notes to Clark as he talked. "Chief, we might be onto something. We spoke with Wayne and he may have tried to pass us a message that he's in trouble. The 'EPA' may or may not really be involved in this. We're going to be looking deeper into it."

"Are we talking 'cover-up' or what?"

"That may be it. The EPA could be a cover for what's really going on. We're going to find out."

"In other words, this is a bigger story than we first thought."

"Could be, Chief."

"Okay, keep me posted." Perry hung the phone up. Slowly, with Jimmy's help, Perry unfolded himself from the position he had been in and moved around behind his desk. He thought for a few seconds before speaking, "Uh, Jimmy, I think I need a photographer out there.

Jimmy smiled; he could see his big break on the horizon, "Ready, Chief!"

Perry continued as if Jimmy hadn't even spoken, "Let's see. What's Johnson up to?"

"Johnson's in Utah, but I'd sure ..."

Perry interrupted, "I got it, Sevinson?"

"Winnipeg."

"Photographers! Just when you need one, you can't find one."

Jimmy offered, "Maybe there's a new guy looking for an opportunity."

"No, I don't want to take the chance."

Jimmy offered, "Somebody had to take a chance on you once, didn't they?"

Perry looked up at Jimmy, weighing this small insurrection, but appreciating the desire behind it. Finally he said, "All right, all right. You can go."

Jimmy's face broke out in a wide grin and he impulsively hugged Perry, "Thanks, Chief."

Perry pulled away and said, "You're welcome, but don't ever ... ever ... hug me again."

Jimmy smiled again and left before Perry had a chance to change his mind.

Chapter 6

While Lois and Clark had been on the phone with Perry, Martha had prepared an old fashioned country breakfast. When they hung up they joined Jonathan and Martha at the table. Lois was surprised that she was able to eat as much as she did. Most of

the time her breakfast consisted of a donut and coffee so this was a treat. Everything was so tasty that she couldn't help herself and she made sure that she complimented Martha on her cooking, "Everything is just so good! I wish I could cook like you, but cooking has never been my thing. I can burn water."

Martha replied, "If you want to learn, Clark can teach you. I taught him and he's a pretty fair cook."

Lois looked at Clark and smiled at the memory of a dinner prepared by him as she replied, "Oh, I know that. I've eaten his cooking."

Clark didn't notice her looking at him. He was preoccupied because he had an important, nay a crucial decision to make. He had to decide how and when to tell Lois about his secret. He needed to do that before he could consider proposing and he was using the time they were eating breakfast to puzzle that problem out.

After having breakfast and before setting out, Clark asked, Lois, "Can we go sit on the swing for a minute?"

Lois was anxious to get started, but she saw how agitated Clark was. He had been so thoughtful at breakfast that Martha had really been the one to carry the conversation. She didn't know the cause, but she knew that something was bothering him and she wanted to hear what it was. She replied, "Well, if you really want to. I guess we have some time."

Hand-in-hand, Clark led her to the front porch and handed her onto the swing. Once she was settled, he sat next to her. She could tell that he was nervous. His hand had been trembling in hers the whole way through the house. She was becoming worried. This had to be something serious to make him this nervous, or ... afraid. <What is he afraid of?>

The longer they sat there in silence the more worried Lois became. She was terrified that last night had been too much. After a minute, gathering his thoughts, Clark finally said, "Lois, about last night ..."

Lois had been worried about last night and there it was. She was afraid that her worst fears were about to be realized. Knowing Clark and how shy he was about relationships. The fact that he usually disappeared at odd times, especially when she wanted to have a serious discussion with him. She was afraid that she had pushed things too far too fast and possibly scared him off and she really, desperately, didn't want that to happen. She had come to the realization that she and Clark were meant to be together. Sleeping with him last night had been wondrous. It had just felt so natural, being together like that. She didn't want to even think about going back to sleeping in separate rooms, let alone separate apartments anymore. She wanted to be with him so much it hurt to even think about being separated.

Thinking about this and worried that she had really messed everything up she tried to prevent him from saying what she most feared. She thought she knew what was coming and interrupting him she started to babble, "I was too pushy, wasn't I? I shouldn't have assumed that you wanted to sleep with me. I enticed you into bed with me and then all we did was sleep. I led you on and then disappointed you. Really, I just needed to be with you. I really couldn't sleep without you being there. You must hate me ..." As she said this last she hung her head.

As she was speaking, Clark reached and gently placed his hand on her cheek, the touch stopping her flow of words and lifting her face to his. He said, "No, Lois, you didn't lead me on and you could never disappoint me. I loved being with you last night."

Brightening somewhat, but still worried, Lois asked, "Then ... what's the problem?"

"Lois, remember what Maisie said?" Lois nodded her head. "Well, she wasn't entirely accurate."

"What do you mean? All she did was confirm what I've seen. That I've seen the real Clark Kent this entire time."

“Yes, you’ve seen the real Clark Kent, but you haven’t seen all of Clark Kent.”

“I’ve seen all I need to see. I’ve seen the quiet, caring, considerate, fun to be with, emotional, loving Clark Kent. What more could there be?”

“Lois, trust me, there is a lot you haven’t seen, yet.”

“Like what?”

“Lois, I’m going to tell you a secret. A secret that is only shared by me and my parents. A dangerous ... a very dangerous secret.”

In a worried tone, Lois said, “You’re starting to scare me, Clark. What kind of secret can be that dangerous?”

“Trust me, Lois. This is a very dangerous secret. Once I tell you, your life could be in danger.”

Lois smirked and said, “Story of my life. When hasn’t my life been in danger? Sometimes, it seems like danger is my middle name.”

“Don’t make light of this, Lois. I’m serious. This is probably the most dangerous secret in the world. There are a lot of people that would torture you to find it out and that would kill me if it happened, so you can’t even let on that you know it.”

“Okay, my lips are sealed,” and she made a motion like pulling a zipper across her lips. Lois was always eager to be on the inside of any secret and this was exciting her. “What is it?” She felt like a little kid on Christmas Eve waiting to open her present.

Clark took his time and looked closely into her eyes. Finally he nodded and said, “Okay. I hope you don’t get too mad. Maisie only knows half of me. She doesn’t know the secret half.”

Trying to lighten the mood somewhat, Lois interrupted and asked, “What are you, a werewolf, or something?”

Steadily, Clark looked at her and said, “Or something.”

“Oh, come on Clark, those things aren’t real.”

“No, but there is someone who is.”

“Who?”

Clark took a deep calming breath and let it out slowly.

Before he had a chance to speak, Lois interrupted, “Now, you’re really scaring me, Clark. What is it? Come on. You can trust me. It can’t be that bad!”

In a worried tone he replied, “Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

Really worried now, Lois said, “Look, I promise not to be scared.”

“Or mad?”

With a shocked look she replied, “Okay, I won’t be mad either. What is this big secret?”

Before he could have a chance to back down he blurted out, “Lois, my other half. That half that I have kept hidden. Lois, I’m ... I’m Superman.” As he finished speaking, he flinched back, afraid that she was going to hit him.

However, her reaction shocked him. She started to laugh, hysterically. When she calmed down she asked, incredulously, “That’s your deep dark secret? You’re Superman? Come on, Clark. Everyone knows he’s your friend, but really, you can do better than that. Everyone knows that Superman is invulnerable. You got a paper cut yesterday. Your allergies were kicking up earlier.”

Clark was speechless, he couldn’t believe this. He had expected her to be at the very least angry, livid, that he had kept this secret from her all this time. He never expected her to be so skeptical. Now he was going to have to work to convince her of the truth. He had to convince her before their relationship could move forward. “No, Lois. I really am Superman. Look ...” Clark pulled off his glasses.

Lois looked closely and said, “Nice try. There is a slight resemblance, but only a slight one.”

“How about this?” He put his hands up and pulled back his

hair

Lois looked thoughtful and said, “Well, there may be a strong resemblance at that. Maybe if you picked me up and flew me around the farm or back to Metropolis or something.”

Realizing the impossibility of fulfilling her request, he was crestfallen that she had suggested something like that all he could do was shake his head. “Okay, look, Lois, that’s what this whole thing is about. I guess you could call it an allergy, but it isn’t to pollens. There’s this rock. We think it came from the same planet I did. Dad accidentally exposed me to it and it ... it robbed me of my powers. That’s why I’m vulnerable. That’s why I got the paper cut. That’s also why I can’t fly you anywhere. The thing is, this rock is what they are looking for over on Wayne’s farm. That’s not really the EPA. I don’t know who it is, but it definitely isn’t the EPA.”

The tone of his voice was so sincere that Lois had to believe that he was telling her the truth and with more of the story coming out, Lois was starting to believe it and with genuine concern in her voice, she asked, “Who would want to have a rock that would do that to Superman?”

“I can think of several people, mostly criminals, the Boss being prominent among them.”

“Will your powers return?”

“We don’t know. I’ve never been exposed to this rock before. All I know is that right now, until they do, I’m a normal guy.”

Lois was starting to worry now. Her voice was somewhat shaky as she asked, “What does this mean ... about us.” Suddenly panicky, Lois exclaimed, “OhmyGod, I told Superman I was in love with him.” She started to move like she would jump up and run away.

Clark put his hands on her shoulders to stop her and have her look at him and said, “No, Lois, no you didn’t. You told Clark Kent, normal guy, that you love him.” Slowly, Clark slid off the swing and knelt on the porch. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a little paper wrapped item. Once he had it out he said, “Lois, this normal guy, Clark Kent, the guy you said that you love is telling you that he loves you. And he is asking,” he unwrapped the ring and finished, “Lois Lane, will you marry me?”

Lois was too shocked to respond immediately. Without speaking she simply held out her left hand for him to slip the ring on her finger. Once it was all the way on she started to smile and throwing her arms around his neck, found her voice, “Yes, yes, Clark, yes, I’ll marry you,” and she leaned in and kissed him to seal the deal.

The young couple didn’t see any of the watchers, but in the house, there was a couple that was peeking through the curtains and when they saw this, Martha and Jonathan hugged each other and did a little dance around the living room.

When Lois and Clark broke the kiss, she pulled up her hand to admire the ring. “It’s beautiful. It looks old.”

“It is. That was my Grandma Clark’s ring. Mom had been saving it for me, for when it came time.”

Eagerly, Lois asked, “How soon do you want to have the wedding?”

“As soon as you are ready,” was his reply.

“I’m ready right now.”

“Don’t you want a church wedding? What about your family?”

“That’s not really necessary. We’d be just as married if we went to a judge. Mom’s in rehab right now. Dad and Lucy are in California.”

“Do you want to wait until you can get them together?”

“That could take too long. I don’t want to wait. What are the laws in Kansas? Is there a waiting period?”

Clark chuckled, “Funny you should say that.”

“Oh, why?”

“Dad informed me this morning that technically, we are

already married.”

Startled, she blurted out, “What?!?!?”

“Yeah, there’s an old law on the books, here in Kansas that says, if a guy spends the night with a girl, they are automatically married. It dates back to the settlement of Kansas as a territory.”

“So, you’re saying that last night was our wedding night?”

“Technically, yes.”

In a pouty voice, Lois said, “I feel cheated.”

“What? Why?”

“We didn’t consummate the wedding.” She started smiling.

“I think we’ll have the time for that. We can wait for the actual ceremony.”

Lois stood abruptly and taking Clark’s hand looked around. Thinking about the barn she smiled a mischievous smile and started dragging him in that direction.

Startled at this behavior, Clark asked, “Lois, where are we going?”

“I’ve always heard about a ‘roll in the hay’, but I’ve never experienced it. Come on, husband. I want a roll in the hay with you.”

As they rounded the corner of the house, the little man in the derby saw the young couple headed in his direction, he ducked out of sight around the corner of the shed and disappeared. He had a happy expression with a smile as he did.

Upon entering the barn, Lois looked around and spotted the ladder to the loft. She dragged Clark to it and started climbing. Clark had a small preview of what was to come as she climbed. He accidentally looked up her skirt, but as soon as realized what was happening, he blushed and turned his face away and allowed her to finish her climb. After she was in the hay loft she turned and looking down at him said, “Come on, Clark.” So he climbed up and joined her.

Once he had joined her, Lois stood there for a few seconds, looking around and spotting what appeared to be a big, fluffy pile of hay, fell back onto it as if she were falling onto snow to make a snow angel. Clark dove onto the pile next to her and she pulled him into a hug and a kiss. The kiss quickly escalated in intensity and their hands started roaming over each other’s bodies.

Clark kept his hands on her back, her sides and her legs while she felt the planes of his back and chest.

Lois started working the buttons of his shirt loose. Fortunately he was wearing one of his comfortable denim work shirts and being well worn the buttons came open easily. Once the buttons were open she pushed the shirt off of his shoulders leaving him naked to the waist.

Clark enjoyed this, but took no action toward removing Lois’ clothing, content to simply be kissing her. She eagerly participated in this and allowed her hands to roam, but began to feel some frustration as her desire increased and he made no move toward her stated goal.

Finally, tired of waiting for him, she broke the kiss and sitting up started to unbutton her own dress. Once she had enough buttons undone she pushed the top off of her shoulders and down her arms which left her wearing only a very light, lacy bra which did little to conceal her assets.

He continued to lie there and watched as she started to disrobe.

Once she had pushed the dress down to her waist she saw how Clark was looking at her. There was desire, but also fear and trepidation in his eyes. She lay down next to him with her head and one hand on his chest. She asked, in a gentle, but somewhat disappointed tone, “What’s the matter, Clark? Don’t you like what you see? Don’t you want to make love with me?”

Wrapping his arms around her he pulled her into a close hug and said, “No! I love you and I love seeing you. It’s something I’ve dreamt about ever since we met and I do want to make love with you. It’s just ... I don’t ...”

“You don’t what? You don’t think you can satisfy me? You’re afraid you’ll hurt me or disappoint me?”

“Something like that.”

“Clark, I don’t think you could ever disappoint me.”

Worried, Clark asked, “How can you be so sure? What if I do something wrong?”

“What could you do wrong? It’s just like riding a bicycle, once you do it, you don’t forget.”

With an embarrassed look he replied, “That’s the problem.”

With a surprised look she asked, “Problem?”

Still embarrassed he said, “Well, before you can forget, you have to learn, right?”

Shocked, Lois pulled back and said, “You mean ...”

Color moved into his cheeks and his tone held a tinge of embarrassment as he replied, “Uh huh.”

“OhmyGod. You’ve never ...”

“Well, you see, with my special status, I kinda felt that I needed to wait until I was sure that the one that I became ... intimate with ... would be the one I would be with ... for the rest of my life. So I never ...”

“You mean that I’m going to be your first? Wow, talk about pressure.”

“A long time ago I made that decision. I dated some, but I never crossed that intimacy threshold with anyone.”

“That makes me wish I had waited.” Thinking about the previous day, she asked, “You’ve never been intimate, not even with Rachel?”

“Not even Rachel. I think she would have been willing, but I just wasn’t sure. We dated a few times. We kissed some, but that was all.”

“It’s been looking like she wants to make up for missing out before.”

In a surprised tone, Clark asked, “Really?”

“Really. I saw it the first time she saw you the other day and then last night, at the dance. She was trying her best to entice you away from me.”

“She never would be able to.”

As they had been speaking, Clark had started becoming more comfortable with the situation and his free hand had moved to her back and released the hooks on her bra.

As soon as she felt it loosen she smiled and shrugged out of it. In a teasing tone she said, “Are you sure you haven’t done this before? You did that with one hand, like a pro,” and rising off of his chest allowed him to view her upper torso, unencumbered. The look in his eyes as she did put her fears to rest.

This started a session of intimacy.

A bit later Lois and Clark made their way back into the house. Clark was smiling down at Lois with an awed expression and Lois was smiling happily and bouncing on her feet as they swung their arms along together.

Seeing them enter, Jonathan and Martha both smiled. Then Martha started to giggle as she stepped over to Lois and removed a couple strands of hay from her hair. As Lois started to blush Martha opened her arms to her and once Lois had moved into the hug, Martha said, “Welcome to the family. This son of ours has kept us waiting a long time to have a daughter-in-law, trying to find the right woman. We’re glad he finally found you.”

Hearing this, Lois started weeping and returning the hug with something close to desperation. The unconditional love that she felt from these people was like nothing she had ever experienced before in her life. Her mom had been lost in a bottle most of Lois’ life and had not been there for her. She had never felt accepted by her father, especially since she had not gone into medicine the way he had wanted her to. She sobbed and said, “I’m just glad he didn’t give up on me.”

After holding her for a time, Martha pulled back, still holding

Lois' arms and asked, "I know you want to get started on your investigation, but would you like a cup of coffee first?"

Lois smiled and wiped the happy tears from her cheeks as she nodded and looked at Clark who nodded. All four headed into the kitchen.

Later, on the dirt road, near the Irig farm Lois pulled the Mustang off the road and parked. Before they exited the car, Clark asked, "What exactly is our plan?"

Lois, knowing that she was flying by the seat of her pants, as usual, challenged, "You sound like you're one of those people who has to have his whole life worked out ahead of time before he can live it."

"Yeah, I usually do. So, you have a clear plan?"

"Of course, I have a plan."

"Okay, let's hear it."

"Oh, harrumph, as soon as I figure it out, I'll let you know."

After they exited the vehicle, Clark led the way to a secluded area where they could see the Irig farm.

Lois said, "Okay, here's the plan. We know that whatever they say they're doing there is not what they're actually doing. So, we stay here until we see them doing it." Thinking of something Lois frowned, "Maybe we should have brought lunch."

In a very dry tone, Clark said, "Great plan."

Lois turned on him and said, "If you have a better one, speak up."

Just as Lois finished speaking, an individual in a camouflage uniform, his face painted in a camouflage pattern and holding a Colt .45 Automatic, dropped out of a tree next to them.

Seeing this, Clark rushed the guy, shouting to Lois, "Lois, get out of here!"

A second agent appeared out of the bushes, this one was holding an M-16. Lois attacked him, getting in a kick that almost dislocated his knee.

One more, this one with a Mossberg 12 Gauge shotgun with a pistol grip, sprang out of the bushes and shouted, "Freeze!"

Lois and Clark stopped moving.

The agent that Clark had been struggling with took the opportunity to vent his anger by punching Clark in the stomach.

Clark was bent over gasping for a few seconds as a result of the blow. When he straightened up he said, wryly, "Well, there goes the picnic."

Under guard by this crew, Lois and Clark were hustled away and into the back of a cargo van. Two of the guards climbed in back with them while the third drove. A few minutes later they stopped and the back doors were pulled open.

As they were climbing out, Lois said to Clark, "Just in case you were wondering, this wasn't in the plan."

The guards started to manhandle them, pushing them in the direction that they wanted them to go.

Clark replied, "I had a hunch."

Lois started shouting, "Who are you guys? Who do you work for? Do you know who we are?"

As the guards stopped shoving them, Lois stopped shouting. When they stopped, they were facing a tent. Suddenly, Trask stepped from the tent. His men were in a mix of uniforms which was another indication of the rogue nature of his organization. Some, like the ones that had captured them, wore the camouflage battle dress uniform, while he preferred the olive drab jungle fatigue which dated to the Viet Nam War era. He said, "So many questions and from someone in such a precarious position." He laughed as he spoke.

In startled recognition Lois said, "Trask! What are you doing in Smallville?"

Putting his hands on his hips Trask replied, "Now, here I was, wondering the same thing about you."

In an irritated tone, Clark replied, "Our newspaper sent us to investigate an EPA cleanup. Our editor thought it could possibly be another Love Canal."

Smugly, Trask replied, "You're not here for your environmental virtue, any more than I am. You know it and I know it."

The realization of just who they were up against finally hit them and they exchanged looks.

Clark challenged, "What have you done with Wayne Irig?"

Trask, with that malevolent grin said, "Why, I," he threw his hands out in a release the bird type gesture, "... let him go." He paused to let that sink in before he continued, "Yes, you see, small town ties mean a lot. Any other man would have given up their contact in a minute. But this man, this man took sodium pentothal and a couple of broken fingers and he still wouldn't talk. Then it came to me. Let him go."

Just then Ms. Sherman emerged from the tent behind Trask. Spotting her, Lois said, "You're not as clever as you think. I knew she was a fake all along."

Surprised by this remark, Trask asked, "Really? How?"

Lois spat out, "Too competent to work for the government." Lois directed her next question to Ms. Sherman, "How'd you get into this, Sherman?"

Trask moved over directly in front of Lois, so close that Lois could smell his bad breath. His exasperation was showing as he said to the guards, "You are really starting to get on my nerves. Get her out of my sight, now, please."

Trask started to raise his hand as if to strike Lois. Clark was almost mad with anxiety about Lois' safety and he struggled against his captors as he shouted, "Leave her alone, Trask. Don't you touch her, or ..."

"Or what, Mr. Kent? Huh? What will you do?"

The guards were hustling Lois toward the tent and Clark continued to struggle against the ones holding him, but was powerless to break free.

As Lois was being led away she shouted to Sherman, "Did they recruit you? Did you think you were getting into government work?"

Trask shouted at her, "Shut up!"

Lois continued to shout at Sherman, "Instead, you're a thug. Is that what you went to college for? To be a thug?"

Trask, losing his patience completely gestured at the holding tent and Lois was shoved inside.

As Lois disappeared into the tent, Clark, in anguish, shouted, "Lois!"

Trask stepped closer to Clark and said, "Relax, Mister Kent. My business is with you, not her."

Chapter 7

A few minutes later Clark found himself sitting at a table in another tent, separated from Lois. Worry about what was happening to her was eating him up and the fact that without his powers he couldn't even hear her heartbeat to know her emotional state had him in a state. Looking around and taking in his surroundings, he saw that there were several of Trask's agents scattered around, each of them bearing weapons. Once he was seated and the guards had backed away, Trask had moved in and was leaning over the table at his side, his face close enough that when he spoke Clark snorted and almost sneezed to clear his nose of the offensive stench of his breath. Trask, using what he thought to be an ingratiating tone said, "I'm going to make you a deal, Mr. Kent, trusting that your stay in Metropolis has put some sense into your head. Give up the alien and I'll let you live."

Clark, heaving an exasperated sigh replied, "What makes you think I would do that even if I could?"

Trask, as if proposing a solution to a puzzle said, "Superman came to Smallville around the time you were born. There has to

be a connection. Tell me and you live.”

Clark’s reply was disappointing to Trask, “There’s nothing to tell. I’m learning all this for the first time right now.”

Unexpectedly, Trask slammed his hand down on a stack of folders that littered the desk. Startled, Clark jumped and Trask almost shouted in his exasperation, “I’m trying to *save humanity* from an *alien invader*, Kent!”

Clark’s reply was succinct, “You have no proof of that, Trask!”

To Clark’s relief, Trask moved around so that he was on the opposite side of the table from him. Trask pointed a finger at him and said, “There’s another possibility. Perhaps this alien has taken over your mind. Perhaps it has infused you with its power.”

Clark shook his head in disbelief, “Nobody’s infused me with power. Nobody’s taken over my mind, Trask.” The depths of the insanity of this man continued to amaze Clark.

As Clark finished speaking, Sherman entered through the tent flap. Trask noted her arrival and walked over to receive her report.

When he approached, she said, “We got a location on Irig.” She looked significantly at Clark before she continued, “He’s heading down the access road to the home of a Jonathan Kent.”

Trask turned and looked again at Clark. He addressed him, “Clark, why didn’t you tell me this was a family affair? I would have gone easier on you.” Trask swung into motion, shouting orders, “Put him in the van with me. Make sure the phone lines are cut at the Kent house. I’ll take two men with me. The rest of you break camp. Meet at Delta rendezvous at 1800.”

Sherman addressed Trask with a question, “What about me?”

Trask was contemptuous as he replied, “What about you? You’ll stay and help move the operation.”

Sherman, with a resigned expression, turned and left the tent.

Turning to his guards and selecting two of them, Trask said, “You and you, let’s go. Bring him!”

All the time that the guards were applying the shackles Clark had been wishing for his powers and worrying about Lois and her welfare. Trask had said that he was the one he was interested in, but based on what he had seen of Trask, that was no guarantee of her safety. However, Clark had no options. Without his abilities he was utterly powerless in the hands of his enemy.

The guards manacled Clark before taking him out of the tent. They didn’t know it, but as they were hustling him into the back of the van, Jimmy was in the bushes at the side of the clearing. He had been eating an apple as he was taking pictures using a long telephoto lens. When he saw the guards bring Clark out he shoved the apple on his mouth to hold it while he took pictures. He got snaps of Clark wearing shackles and being hustled into the back of the van. He also got a shot of Trask as he came out of the tent. When Trask appeared Jimmy recognized him immediately, his mouth dropped open in shock and the apple he had been eating fell to the ground. He now realized that this situation was worse than it appeared on the surface and he knew he had to get help.

After the van pulled away, Jimmy grabbed his equipment and high-tailed it for his rental car. Jumping in, he drove with abandon for town.

Jonathan and Martha were standing in the shed. The old tool box was sitting atop a bale of hay, open and the green crystals were visible. Even with sunshine streaming in through the windows the sickly, evil green glow of the crystals was still evident.

Jonathan was staring at the offending rock as he addressed Martha, “I don’t know what to do with it. I can’t give it to anybody but I sure as heck don’t want to keep this anywhere near Clark.”

Martha expressed her confusion, “Sometimes I don’t

understand why things happen. How all his life he’s always talked about being ‘normal.’ Now he is. It’s what he says he wants, but ...”

“Martha, it doesn’t feel right, because Clark’s not normal. Normal for him is being super. Until I opened that box ...”

Martha picked up on just what her husband was feeling and moved over to comfort him, “Don’t blame yourself, Jonathan. You didn’t do this to him.”

In a gesture of disgust, Jonathan flipped the top of the tool box closed.

The echoes of the sound of the box closing bouncing off the walls of the shed had barely died when suddenly they were interrupted by a banging on the window and a shout, “Jonathan! It’s Wayne Irig!”

Surprised at suddenly seeing his friend and feeling some relief at actually seeing him after having been told by Lois and Clark that they thought he was in trouble, Jonathan shouted, “Wayne! Where have you been?”

Wayne entered the shed and that’s when Jonathan got a good look at him. He looked battered and beaten. There was a bandana wrapped around his hand which he cradled in his other hand. He was obviously in a lot of pain. Jonathan blurted out, “Wayne! My God, look at you. What did they do to you?”

Typical of Wayne Irig, a man of few words, he cut right to the chase, “We’ve got a problem, Jonathan. A bad one.”

Jonathan was very solicitous of Wayne’s condition and tried to assist him to sit on a bale of hay.

Instead of sitting, Wayne started to pace with nervous energy, Jonathan was sure that if one of his hands hadn’t been injured somehow, Wayne would have been flinging his arms around.

Trying to calm his friend down, Jonathan said, “Okay. All right. I’m with you. Calm down, Wayne.” Then aside, he said to Martha, “Martha, get a doctor.”

Before Martha had a chance to move toward the door, Wayne, in an agitated tone said, “No, I’m all right. But, there’s men up at my place. Men with *guns*. They’re looking for that *rock* I gave you.” Looking around in something as close to panic as Jonathan had ever seen in Wayne Irig, he continued, “We’ve got to get to the police, *now*.”

Jonathan didn’t like this turn. He had just been talking about disposing of the rock in order to protect Clark and keep it a secret, now Wayne wanted to bring in the police. He had to use what influence he had with Wayne to control the situation.

“Wayne, we’ve been friends for years. You trust me, don’t you?”

Wayne looked at Jonathan with a question in his eyes. He couldn’t figure out why Jonathan would ask a question like that. There was actually only one answer he could give, “Sure.”

Nodding at Wayne’s answer, Jonathan pressed ahead, “Then believe me. That green rock is *dangerous*. But we *can’t* call the police and we *can’t* let those men have it either.”

Wayne was confused. Jonathan was saying something, but it didn’t match up with what he had seen. “What do you mean, ‘dangerous’? What does it do?”

“Wayne, you’re gonna have to trust me when I say it makes some people sick, that’s all I know. So no more red tape, you and me, we’re going to go destroy it right now. Somehow ...”

They had been so concentrated on the conversation they were having, that they hadn’t heard the van drive up and the first indication that they were not alone was when Trask kicked in the door of the shed. He was followed by a couple of his agents as he stepped in.

He took in the tableau and then, obviously having overheard, said in response to Jonathan’s statement, “I don’t think so.”

Trask spotted the oversized tool box where it was sitting atop a hay bale. He stepped over to it and opened it. The sickly green glow permeated the entire shed once again.

Jonathan and Martha shared a worried look.

After Jimmy left to get help the camp became a flurry of activity. The workers started packing up equipment. Flat beds started arriving for the bulldozers and other heavy equipment to be loaded on. Guards started removing tables, chairs, file cabinets and other office paraphernalia from the tents and loading them onto trucks.

Ms. Sherman entered the tent where Lois was being held and addressed the guard, “You need to help pack up. We’re leaving.”

The guard glanced at Lois and seeing that she was bound securely nodded and headed out. When the guard glanced in her direction, Lois stopped moving, but as soon as he left she returned to her attempts to get free of her bonds.

Lois addressed Sherman, in a sarcastic tone, “Social call or business?”

Sherman could see Lois was trying to escape her bonds, but didn’t move to assist and at least didn’t try to prevent her as she replied, although reluctantly, “You talk like someone who doesn’t understand the trouble she’s in.”

Lois replied, sarcastically, “I know exactly what’s going on. I know that if Trask hasn’t killed somebody yet, he’s about to. And that’ll make you an accessory to murder.”

Sherman, had been in the process of arranging the files that were scattered over a table prior to putting them in a box for transport, she stopped, turned to Lois and said in a defeated tone, “You’re right. Trask is a madman, but I can’t go against him or he’ll kill me too.”

Lois challenged, “You just now figured this out?”

“No, but I have a daughter to worry about. Look, I’m no thug, but I can’t help you. Trask is a madman. You want to know just how mad he is? He has your friend’s parents. He’s going to make it look like a fire burned the place down with them in it.”

Horrified at this prospect and thinking of the older couple and the man that she had so recently come to love so deeply, in an anguished tone, Lois almost shouted, “Martha and Jonathan! And Clark?”

Nodding her head, Sherman said, “Yes, but Trask has other plans for him.”

“Like what?” She needed to know if Trask suspected Clark’s true nature.

“Trask thinks that he knows how to find Superman. He thinks some rock they found here can kill him.”

Trying to cover her knowledge of it, Lois challenged, “Can it?” <OhmyGod, that’s the rock that Clark told me about. If it can steal his powers, it probably *can* kill him as well. I’ve *got* to get to him.>

“I don’t know. I doubt it. But Trask thinks it can. And he’s a killer. Look, I’m sorry, I can’t help you. I have to think of my little girl. Goodbye.” Sherman boxed up the files that were scattered over the table and carried the box out of the tent.

As soon as the tent flap fell behind her Lois started to struggle even more desperately with her bonds. <I’ve got to get to Clark! He *needs* me!> A few seconds later she felt a presence behind her. Turning her head to see who it was, she saw the dapper little man that she had met in the elevator at the Planet as they were leaving on this assignment.

As he cut her bonds, in a British English accent, he said, “Miss Lane, you need to take a vehicle and return to the Kent farm, immediately. Clark and his parents are in deadly peril.”

She was startled and blurted out, “What? How do you know?”

“Miss Lane, you must trust me. If you do not immediately go to the Kent farm Clark and his parents could very well be killed.”

That was all the confirmation that Lois needed to galvanize her into action. As she was standing she asked, “Just who *are* you? How do you know what’s happening?”

“There will be time for explanations later. Right now you

must go to Clark. He needs you, but be careful!”

Lois nodded and started for the tent flap. He stopped her and said, “Please. This way. There are guards out front. There is a small truck waiting for you out here.”

“Are you coming with me?”

With an enigmatic smile he said, “I have my own means of transportation.”

She gave him a queer look as he held up the canvas of the side of the tent and then ducked under the side of the tent and out into the open. He followed immediately after her and pointed her in the right direction. She took off through the brush and once she emerged she found the truck, with the keys in it. Jumping in she was surprised to find her cell phone on the seat. Picking it up she dialed ‘911’ and was connected to the local Sheriff’s Office. Hurriedly she asked for Rachel. In her haste she actually gave the operator more information than needed because of their prior experience with Trask.

Unbeknownst to Lois or Clark, Jimmy Olsen had been sent to get pictures and had seen a manacled Clark being man handled into the back of a van and had recognized Trask. He had hightailed it in to town to alert the Sheriff.

Jimmy ignored a dozen traffic regulations on his way into town and once in town he spotted a police patrol car parked at the town square. He skidded to a stop and jumped out of the car, barely remembering to shut the engine off, he sprinted to a man in uniform and addressed him, “Sheriff, we got an emergency!”

Rachel, who was nearby overhearing this said, “Over here.”

Jimmy did a double take as the deputy pointed at Rachel.

Rachel stepped over and took the keys from Jimmy’s hand and flipping them to Deputy Cooper said, “Coop, would you put this car somewhere legal, please?”

Coop nodded and headed for the car to move it.

Turning back to Jimmy, Rachel said, “If this is some kind of emergency, you’d better start talking ... fast.”

Jimmy was so excited he was almost totally incoherent as he launched into a Lois-like babble, “Okay, right. There’s a guy, his name’s Trask, he thinks there are UFO’s, I mean, there are UFO’S, but this guy collects them. Anyway he’s here in Smallville and he’s got my friends and we gotta go save them now or they’re gonna be toast. Do you know how to call the Army? The National Guard? We’re gonna need some kind of helicopter ...”

Rachel gave this very excitable and excited young man a close appraisal trying to decide whether to believe him or arrest him. She was torn. Finally she decided to get more information. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

Jimmy, calming down somewhat, replied, “My name is Jimmy Olsen. I’m from Metropolis. I’m with the Daily Planet and my friends ...”

Rachel interrupted him at this point and her face brightening up said, “Clark Kent.”

Jimmy brightened up, she knew them, he added, “and Lois Lane.”

Rachel’s face fell as she said, “Oh. Her,” her face looked like she had just bitten into a particularly sour lemon as she did.

Not picking up on Rachel’s attitude, Jimmy continued, “The guy who’s got them, Trask, he could do anything, including murder them.”

Rachel, seeing how agitated and yet sincere he was, decided that immediate action would be needed. She turned toward the patrol car and said, “Get in.”

As soon as Jimmy was in and the door closed Rachel pushed down on the gas pedal and peeled away. As they started to head out of town, Rachel asked, “Where are they?”

“They were at the Irig farm.”

Rachel picked up the microphone of her two-way radio and

keying the mic said, “Unit one to Base. This is the sheriff. I need back-up. Have all cars report to the Irig farm, ASAP.”

After receiving acknowledgements from her deputies, Rachel put the mic in its clip and then said to Jimmy, “By the way, my name is Rachel Harris.”

“Pleased to meet you, Sheriff.”

She paused for a few seconds before she asked, “How well do you know Clark Kent?”

Jimmy smiled and said, “Me and CK? We’re best buds.”

“Has he ever mentioned me?”

If Jimmy answered it was drowned out by the roar of the engine. Seconds later, before she could ask him to repeat his answer, a call came in on the police radio for the sheriff. The dispatcher said, “Sheriff, I’ve got some woman talking about UFOs and the government and Superman. It’s probably a crank. Should I blow her off?”

Rachel realized, from the description, just who it was and said, “No, it’s okay, patch her through.” Then keying her mic again, she said, “Go ahead, Lois.”

Lois was frantic as she said, “Sheriff, you have to get to the Kent farm, immediately.”

Rachel replied, “Copy that. I’m on my way to the Irig farm to check out the disturbance there.”

Lois said, “Forget that! That’s where I am. They’re packing up to leave. You need to get to the Kent farm ... *now*. The Kents are in danger.”

“I’m on my way!” Rachel put on her lights and siren because to this point she had been code 1, no lights, no siren. A short time later she was halted at the railroad crossing by a long slow freight train. Rachel knew that it would be useless to try to go around. She knew the rail schedule. This was a regular run and it would have all of the alternate routes blocked as well.

She picked up her mic and keying it sent, “All units respond directly to the Kent farm. The freight has me blocked. I’ll get there as quick as I can.”

Jimmy, seeing that they weren’t moving and probably wouldn’t be for some time thought that now would be an appropriate time to try the signal watch and try to get Superman’s help. He leaned out of the car window and holding his wrist up triggered the signal while muttering to himself as if speaking to the superhero he said, “I’ll apologize later, big guy.”

While they are waiting, Rachel removed her revolver from its holster and began to load it.

Jimmy could see that her hands were shaking somewhat so he asked, “You ever fired that before?”

Rachel had a nervous smile to go along with her shaking hands as she replied, “Of course I’ve fired it. But, only on the range.”

Jimmy quipped, “Not exactly a confidence builder.”

Rachel did not reply. When she finished loading, she replaced the gun in her holster and returned to the other topic, “This Lois. Does she love Clark and does he love her?”

“Gee, Sheriff, I don’t think so, unless something has changed, she pretty much loves her work. He might have some feelings for her, but who can tell?”

Rachel smiled and nodded her head.

As soon as Lois closed her cell phone she started the truck up and headed for the Kent farm.

Trask had ordered his agents to bind the three people that were in the shed. He picked up the case and after he had removed the container with the greenly glowing rock, he deposited it where he felt it would be safe.

Eventually the back doors of the van opened. Clark blinked in the sudden light. His movements were very restricted because of the shackles on his wrists and ankles. To top it off the wrist

shackles had been thrown over a brace in the ceiling of the van before being closed about his wrists so that he was literally hanging by his wrists. It was fortunate that the low overhead of the van allowed him to sit on the floor. Trask confronted Clark and said, “Your situation grows desperate, Mr. Kent. I now have your parents.” He was emphatic, but as he continued he became frantic, “What I *want* is Superman. If you want to save them, you’ll tell me what I want to know. I’ll make a deal with you, a trade. You give me Superman and I’ll let them live.”

Emotions flitted across Clark’s features, fear predominating. Fear for his parents’ welfare and fear for Lois’ life. His personal danger never entered his mind. His only concern was for those he loved. In a flash he weighed his options and knew that there was only one answer. He stated, “You have to promise that you’ll let them go. Do I have your word on that?” He had decided on a desperate ploy. He just hoped it would work. The fact that right now he was vulnerable could make or break the situation, but, he had to try.

Eagerly, almost like a child with a toy being dangled in front of him, Trask said, “Oh, I do. I do. I absolutely do. Of course ... you have my word.”

Clark said, “Okay then, he’s right here. I’m Superman.”

Trask just stared at him. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. What Trask was seeing put the lie to Kent’s words. Clark Kent was shackled and helpless, unable to free himself and he was claiming to be Superman. What if he was only acting weak?

When Trask didn’t answer or even move, Clark tried again, “Really, Trask, I’m Superman.”

Trask finally responded by asking in a skeptical tone, “Are you now?” His face didn’t change from one of disbelief as he pulled his sidearm. He preferred a cross-draw holster so his weapon was on the left side of his belt. In this case he used his left hand to pull the weapon out. It was more awkward, but he wanted to emphasize what he was doing for Kent’s benefit. Once the weapon was in his hand, Trask jacked the slide back apparently to chamber a round and then he quickly brought the weapon to bear, pointing it at Clark.

Seeing this action Clark was afraid that he had overplayed his hand. Being vulnerable, if Trask shot him he could actually be seriously injured or even die. Fear took over and Clark cringed back and shouted, “Wait! *No*, Trask, *no*!”

With that malevolent grin on his face at Kent’s response to his threat, Trask pulled the trigger and all that they heard was the metallic click of the hammer falling on the firing pin. There was no explosion because he hadn’t loaded a round into the breech. Clark slumped back as far as the chains would allow, gasping for breath, the fear having rendered regular breathing problematical. Trask laughed as he said, “That was *fear*, Mr. Kent, stark terror. This gun wouldn’t harm Superman so *he* wouldn’t *be* afraid. So much for you being noble and trying to shield Superman. It was a nice try, but I want the real thing. Now, where is he?”

Clark kept his mouth shut even in the face of Trask’s raging menace.

Trask, seeing that Clark was being less than cooperative, decided that additional motivation was needed. He decided to give him some time to think about the situation and slammed the doors of the van closed.

Trask went to the shed to check on the job his underlings had done. He noticed that Wayne Irig appeared to be unconscious, probably a result of all that he had been through and the pain of his broken fingers. Satisfied that they were secure Trask moved over to the van again and opening the doors again, Trask said, “Maybe you won’t talk on your own account, but what about your family?” Seeing that Clark remained uncooperative, he jacked the slide on his automatic again after seating the magazine. “This time I’m not kidding. Now, you tell me just where Superman is or I start on you. First the knees, then the

elbows. Do I need to draw you a diagram? If that doesn't work ...” He pulled out a matchbook and held it up for Clark to see.

Counting on the fact that even Trask wouldn't commit cold blooded murder of innocents in this way Clark kept silent.

In frustration, Trask slammed the doors shut again.

Chapter 8

Trask was becoming impatient. He had been balked at every turn. He had Lane and Kent and the superhero hadn't come to their aid unlike the last time. He walked over to the door of the shed and checked on the unwilling occupants. He signaled to one of his agents. He indicated the gasoline can. The agent picked it up and starting inside the shed, poured gasoline first on the hay and then laid a trail out the door and twenty feet across the yard.

Once the agent dropped the can he headed for the van to join his companion. Trask addressed the Kents, “Remember, you give your lives in the cause of humanity.”

For some time, he stood there looking into the sky, waiting for the superhero to appear.

Signaling to his two guards he said, “Scout the perimeter.” Obediently the guards headed for the road leaving Trask staring into the sky looking for the primary-color-wearing superhero.

In the back of the van, Clark struggled against his bonds, to no avail. His powers had not returned and he had no idea as to just when or if that would happen. At the end of his strength and almost at the end of his rope, he slumped in despair and exhausted from his struggles, dropped into a fitful doze. After a short time Clark suddenly was pulled to wakefulness when he heard an *ear-splitting* beeping noise. He snapped out of his half doze and smiling, said, “I'm back!” Setting himself for another try, Clark grasped the chain linking the manacles and pulled. The links broke! He smiled at this success and broke the shackles off his wrists and then his ankles.

Suddenly Clark heard the rasp of a match being struck. He knew that there could be only one reason for that sound. He had never seen Trask smoke so it had to have something to do with his parents. Quickly moving to the back of the van Clark placed his hands on the doors and shoved. The doors almost exploded outward, completely leaving their hinges and falling to the ground.

Just as Trask was dropping the match on the gasoline trail the doors of the van burst out and he looked up in surprise.

No one had noticed when Lois drove up. She stopped on the other side of the house from the barn and shed, and quickly exited the truck. She didn't even close the door of the truck for fear that the noise would reveal her arrival. She ran into the house, and careful that she would not be observed, looked out through the kitchen windows. She saw the van she and Clark had been in earlier parked near the shed and a few people moving around. She knew that Clark and the Kents had to be out there. She retraced her steps out the front door and circled the house, keeping it between her and the shed. Peering around the corner she saw Trask and his guards busy in the shed. As quietly as she could she scurried across the open space to the side of the barn. Once she was out of the open and she didn't hear anyone yelling she breathed a sigh of relief. She went down the side of the barn and across the back. Peeking around the corner, it appeared that there was no one watching so as fast as she could, she crossed the space to the back of the shed.

So far she had seen neither hide nor hair of Clark or his parents, but based on the level of activity in the shed, that was where they had to be. She listened at the back wall, but she could only hear a murmur, nothing that was distinct enough to make out, just voices.

While she stayed out of sight she heard Trask talking. She

couldn't tell what he was saying, but she recognized the voice. He seemed to be at a distance so presumably he was over at the van. <Clark must be in the van. That makes sense, they would have used that to transport him from Irig's.>

Suddenly she heard Clark's voice; there was fear and panic in his voice. She could hear quite distinctly, “Wait! *No*, Trask, *no*!” Hearing that she almost broke her cover, but hearing Trask laugh and no gunshots she steeled her resolve to stay hidden until needed.

When Trask dropped the match on the trail of gasoline, it ignited and formed a trail of flames which raced toward the shed. That was when the doors flew off of the van and Clark jumped out. Instantly taking stock of the situation, he supersped over and using his super lungs inhaled, sucking the air and the flames from the gasoline, snuffing the flames. Then he exhaled, blowing the superheated air up and away from the gasoline.

Trask was staring at him in amazement, stunned at seeing this. It suddenly dawned on him that if he had actually shot Clark, unless he had been ‘playing ‘possum’, he could have done away with this menace to society. As he watched, Clark disappeared into the shed and remained there. Trask had only one thought now, the rock. He needed to get it and see just how it affected Clark. He hastened to where he had placed it and opening the lid, lifted the rock out of the container.

Lois heard the noise of the doors being torn off of the van. Smiling and shooting her fist into the air, she whispered to herself, “Yes! He has his powers back.”

Then she heard what sounded like a giant vacuum cleaner and smiled. Seeing a disturbance in the air she looked up in time to see flames shooting up like from a flame thrower over the roof of the shed. She felt like dancing a jig, but restrained herself. Nothing was settled yet. She had to be patient, not one of her natural character qualities. Clark might still need her as his secret weapon and the little man had cautioned her to be careful, always a wise move when dealing with Trask.

Inside the shed, Clark was examining the individuals that were bound. He was surprised to see Wayne Irig and noted that he appeared to be unconscious. He started to free Martha and as he did he whispered, “Superman is back.”

Suddenly, Martha saw Trask move into view over Clark's shoulder. She shouted, “Clark, behind you!”

At her shout, Clark stood and spun around. When he did, he saw Trask approaching, still at a distance. Turning back to his parents he said, “Just a minute.” He moved to the doorway, exited the shed and moved to confront Trask.

He watched Trask. Trask was simply standing there with his hands behind his back, looking like a soldier in the parade rest posture.

In a threatening tone, Clark said, “Don't take another step, Trask.”

With a smirk, Trask said, “Fighting words, Mister Kent. Or should I call you, ‘Superman’?” He considered the implications for a second before continuing, “A secret identity. Very clever.”

Slowly, a step at a time, Clark started moving toward Trask. As he closed the distance he was speaking, “You're going to prison, Trask. For murder, for kidnapping, for Official Misconduct. Where's Lois? What'd you do with her? I swear, if you've harmed her, I won't be held responsible for my actions.”

Confidently, Trask tried one final threat, “Oh, but I'll tell everyone your secret.”

Clark was fed up with Trask. In a determined tone he said, “I ... don't ... care. This ends ... now, Trask!”

Trask smirked and said, “I agree, but the question is ... for whom?”

At superspeed Clark closed the distance, intent upon securing Trask for the police. When he was within ten feet of Trask he started to feel the same pain he had experienced the other night when his father had accidentally exposed him to the rock. The closer he got the more intense the pain was. His speed faltered and when he was almost within arm's length the pain was contorting his features. He tried to back pedal, to get more distance, but his strength and speed failed him. Trask followed Clark as he backed away, maintaining the distance. Suddenly, Clark's knees went weak and he collapsed to the dirt.

Seeing this Trask began to smile. Behind his back, Trask had been holding the green rock. Trask was pleased to see that Clark had to fight to even breathe.

Standing over Clark, Trask smiled that malevolent smile and said, "You think you're better than humans, don't you? Flying around, oh so perfect and superior. Well, those days are over now, aren't they?"

Clark gritted out, "You're wrong!"

There was a gloating tone to his voice as Trask said, "No, as it happens, *you* are wrong. It's over now. *I* have *won* and this little piece of *home* is going to be the death of you, Superman."

Clark was holding his stomach like he had a stomach ache and bent over. He craned his head around and looked up at Trask. It took all of his effort to even breathe, let alone talk.

Suddenly, Trask dropped the rock next to Clark and spun, delivering a spinning wheel kick which sent Clark sprawling in the dirt.

Neither Trask nor Clark saw Lois peeking around the corner of the shed. Lois had a worried expression on her face, but she knew that there was nothing she could do just then. She had to watch and wait for her opportunity. If she were to reveal her presence there was nothing stopping Trask from using her against Clark. She just hoped that Trask didn't pull that gun of his and shoot Clark. She knew that because of that rock he had to be vulnerable again, but it was possible that Trask didn't know that and was depending on the rock to do the dirty work.

When he had kicked Clark, the latter had rolled away from the Kryptonite so Trask picked up the green rock and moved it closer to him. As the distance decreased Clark's pain increased exponentially. When Trask had it close, Clark was writhing on the ground in pain. Trask said, with the air of one who has won a major conflict, "I've won."

Trask could faintly hear sirens in the distance. Coming to a decision, he pushed the rock on the ground even closer to Clark and said, "Unfortunately, I won't be able to stay for the services." Knowing that his operations were outside the law, he knew that he had to leave. He only hoped that his adversary would be dead before help arrived. Trask turned his back and headed for the van and escape.

Clark was in so much pain he could only writhe on the ground and was close to losing consciousness. He was totally helpless.

When she saw Trask turn away, Lois saw her chance. <I have to get that rock away from Clark!> She scurried out from her concealment and stooping picked up the rock. As quickly as she could she ran away bearing the dangerous mineral. She didn't stop until she was on the other side of the shed and at least fifty feet from Clark. Using her hands, heedless of what it was doing to her fingernails, she quickly scooped out a hollow in the dirt, dropped the rock in it and then pushing the dirt over it with her hands covered it up again.

As soon as Lois took the rock away, Clark started to recover. He knew that he was without his powers and was vulnerable again, but at least the pain was gone. Knowing that there was only one way to prevent Trask from escaping, he started pushing himself upright and shouted, "Trask!" He had to use himself as

bait to keep him from getting away.

Surprised, Trask turned expecting to see Clark still groveling on the ground, but instead saw him rising to his feet said, "Oh, very brave, and very foolish." He un-holstered his weapon. Waving it negligently around he said, "Now, let's see. Who should go first? You ... or the human traitors who have sheltered you all these years?" Trask decided to save the best for last and headed for the shed.

Perceiving the threat to his family, as Trask passed close to him, Clark charged Trask hitting him like a linebacker tackling the quarterback knocking him off of his feet. Trask had been showboating and as a result, with the collision Trask lost his grip on his automatic and it went flying.

After the collision as they were picking themselves up, Clark appeared to be played out from that effort. He was bent over at the waist trying to catch his breath as if he had run a race.

Trask seeing this sneered and said, "That's okay, Superman, I don't *need* a gun." Trask approached and launched an unarmed attack. He had been given the fundamentals of the martial arts in basic training, but apparently hadn't had much use for it since. His sloppiness was apparent as he launched a kick which lacked the power and thrust of a practitioner, but was still strong enough to bowl Clark over in his weakened condition and sent him sprawling on the ground.

Disdaining Clark's pitiful efforts to prevent him from harming his parents, Trask walked right past him toward the shed.

With a supreme effort of the will, Clark launched himself at Trask's legs and grabbed them, pulling Trask to the ground.

Even in this weakened state, Clark displayed a superhero's courage and proved that it wasn't just super-powers, but a super-heart that made Clark Kent a superman. Clark and Trask battled man-to-man. It quickly became obvious that Trask was the superior street fighter, but Clark had the most to lose.

While they were on the ground they grappled. Trask was finally able to get in a solid punch and Clark released Trask. Clark stumbled back against the side of the shed near where Lois had been hiding. Trask moved in and launched a side-kick which Clark avoided. Clark again tackled Trask, spinning him around and throwing him into the side of the shed, shattering the window. Trask threw him off and Clark fell backwards over a bale of hay. Trask pursued him, rolling over the hay bale, coming up on his feet in a fighting stance. He was too close to Clark though, and Clark managed to sweep his feet out from under him causing him to fall heavily.

Clark could feel himself recovering from the kryptonite exposure and he was very thankful that it was a bright sunny day.

Lois returned at this time to her post at the corner of the shed. She watched the fight, waiting for her chance to enter the fray.

She saw Clark sweep Trask's feet causing him to fall, and gasped when she saw that as Trask got up he had a long handled spade in his hands. Apparently it had been on the ground next to him when he fell. Using it like a baseball bat he took a swing at Clark.

Clark was able to duck under the spade, but Trask wasn't to be defeated that easily. He used the handle of the spade to jab Clark in the stomach. Clark bent over and in reflex grabbed the handle as he did.

Trask tried to wrench the spade free and failed. Thanks to the sunlight Clark's strength was returning and he was able to wrest it from him and toss it aside.

Seeing this Lois did a silent cheer. She couldn't be out there, but she could cheer her husband on.

Seeing a hay fork lying nearby, Clark decided to act preemptively and picking it up, snapped the handle over his knee, near the tines so that it couldn't be used as a weapon and threw the two halves away.

With a roar of frustration, Trask tackled Clark. Because of the

sunlight, minute by minute, Clark could feel his strength returning. As a result, he managed to stay on his feet, but he gave ground. Their momentum carried them out onto a short dock in the pond and then the two of them tumbled off the dock and into the water. There they started trading blows.

Trask was able to get the upper hand briefly and forced Clark's head below the water intent on drowning him. Clark's strength prevailed however and he was able to break Trask's hold and rose, gasping above the surface.

Fortunately for Clark, because of Lois' actions, his exposure to the Kryptonite had been shorter than the time in the shed. Then Jonathan had inadvertently left the box open and that had prolonged his exposure. He didn't have his superpowers just then, but because of the shortened exposure he was still strong and thanks to the sunlight, growing stronger by the minute. His strength was possibly more than that of an ordinary Earthman and Trask unexpectedly found himself on the wrong end of a beating.

Little by little, Clark was able to beat down Trask's defenses and get in some strong blows. Trask was becoming groggy and was at Clark's mercy when finally, they were standing in chest-high water and Clark was poised to deliver a blow that would have at the very least knocked Trask out, if not fractured part of his face. Suddenly Clark saw just a pathetic beaten man, and he stopped abruptly.

Clark stood poised with his fist cocked for what would be the final blow and Trask, seeing all of his plans going up in smoke, said, "Go ahead, Superman. Kill me. I would have killed you."

Lowering his fist Clark said, "That's not the way I work, Trask." Clark grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the pond. He walked him over near the shed as the sirens grew louder.

Not expecting any more problems from his beaten foe, Clark released him and headed for the shed to untie his parents.

As the fight had progressed, Lois had shifted her position so that she could see better. When Clark turned to go into the shed, she saw Trask perform what looked like a feat of legerdemain and a chrome plated double-barreled derringer materialized in his hand. He was leveling it at Clark's back when Lois shouted, "Clark! Look out!" Breaking cover, she ran at Trask.

In response to Lois' warning, Clark started to duck, just as Trask pulled the trigger firing both barrels. Along with Clark ducking, Trask from the corner of his eye saw Lois headed for him and he flinched which threw his aim off. In view of this new threat as soon as he had fired; he reached for more cartridges in his pocket.

As she was running at Trask, Lois heard an exclamation of pain and recognizing Clark's voice she went mad with anger. All she wanted to do was strike out at the author of Clark's pain. Heedless of the danger Trask presented, she closed with him and leapt into a flying side kick. Her right foot caught Trask just under the chin, knocking him off balance making him fall backward, arms flailing.

Lois picked herself up off the ground and quickly assumed a ready stance.

One look at Trask and she relaxed. Her hands, which had been up in a fighting stance, ready to do battle, fell to her sides as she gaped at the scene of what she had done.

Trask would no longer present a threat to Clark, or anyone else for that matter. She was both appalled and relieved at the same time. Appalled at what had happened and relieved that this chapter of their story would now be irrevocably closed.

When Trask had fallen, it had been onto the tines of the hay fork that Clark had cast aside. One of the tines was protruding through the center of his chest with two more flanking it, one through each of the lungs.

Turning away from the grisly scene, she ran to Clark and kneeling next to him, turned him over. She gasped, and started crying and calling his name as if it was a mantra. He was limp

and his left side was covered with blood. She cradled his body weeping despondently.

Suddenly, Jonathan, Martha and the little man in the derby were beside her. She bawled, "Oh, Martha, he's been shot. We need to do something!"

Martha knelt next to Lois and felt for a pulse at Clark's neck. She nodded and placed a hand on Lois' arm. She said, "He's alive."

"But he's been shot! He's bleeding!"

Looking at Jonathan, Martha said, "First aid kit."

Jonathan nodded and headed for the house.

Relief flooded over her when she realized that Clark was alive and looking around she spotted the little man in the derby. She asked, "You again! What are you doing here?"

Martha looked around, not realizing just who Lois was speaking to at first, then realizing who her question was directed at said, "We thought he was with you. He released us from the ropes."

Nodding an acknowledgement, the dapper little man smiled and then turning, walked away.

A few seconds later, just as Jonathan was returning with the first aid kit, a couple of police cars pulled up near them. In the back were the two agents that Trask had sent to patrol the perimeter. Patrolman Cooper stepped out of one of the cars and took in the scene. He said, "Sheriff Harris will be here shortly. We'll wait and see what she wants to do."

A couple of minutes later Sheriff Harris and Jimmy pulled up. Lois was still kneeling on the ground cradling the injured Clark in her lap, crying inconsolably and mumbling Clark's name over and over while Martha applied first aid.

Seeing this Sheriff Harris nodded her understanding of how things stood. Yes, Clark had taken her to the Senior Prom, but that was in the past and she could see that Lois was in his future. Heaving a disappointed sigh over things that might have been she turned to her deputy and said, "Stand by until we have the details." Then she turned and asked, "Okay, what do we have here?"

Jonathan replied, "Well, Sheriff, if you look in the shed you'll find Wayne Irig all tied up. We were in there with him until a minute ago. He's still unconscious. I wouldn't strike any matches around here for a while. Trask tried to murder us by setting the shed on fire. He was about to murder Clark and would also have murdered Lois if he hadn't been stopped. He was obsessed to the point of insanity with the destruction of Superman. He was beating on Clark because he thought that would draw Superman to his rescue."

Sheriff Harris turned to the deputy asked, "Where's this Trask?"

Coop pointed to Trask's body. The gun was near his hand and the extra cartridges were scattered around. Rachel asked, "How'd that happen?"

From where Lois was kneeling on the ground, she spoke up, the anger she still felt came out in her voice as she said, "He *shot* my *husband* and I lost it. I gave him a flying kick and he fell. I didn't know that was there. It was an accident."

Rachel was stunned, Out of everything Lois had said, she latched on to one of Lois's statements and blurted out, "Husband?!?!?"

With obvious love in her eyes, Lois looked down at Clark and said, "Yes, husband. We hadn't told anybody. It was a secret." After a few seconds, Lois was able to speak again and she was nearly frantic as she said, "Sheriff, over at the Irig farm, they are packing up to move. You need to get over there and stop them. Don't let them get away!"

In almost a state of shock at this revelation, Rachel replied, "I have other cars responding to Wayne's farm."

Lois spoke up, "Sheriff, Carol Sherman, the woman over on

the Irig farm, was duped into participating in this. Once she found out the truth, she only participated under the threat of death. She was worried about her little girl. I'm sure she'll testify about what she saw. Maybe she could be classed as a material witness. Go easy on her, okay?"

Rachel said, "I'll do what I can. You may need to testify on her behalf."

Before moving Trask, the medical examiner would have to be called, so the Sheriff went into the shed to check on Wayne Irig. The Sheriff needed to see what was there so that she could give eye witness testimony. She called Jimmy over, "Mr. Olsen, do you have your camera handy?"

Jimmy replied, "Yes I do, Sheriff. What do you need?"

"Could you take some crime scene pictures for me?"

"Sure thing Sheriff, just tell me what you want."

Rachel had Jimmy take pictures of Wayne before she untied him and the gasoline trail as well as Clark in his wounded, depleted condition.

When Wayne came around he said, "That fella Trask, he wasn't EPA! He was with something he called Bureau 39, I overheard them talking. He injected me with some kind of babble juice and when that didn't work he started busting my fingers."

Rachel said, "Wayne, now, I want you to get yourself into the hospital and get those fingers taken care of and tell them that I need a copy of the report, you hear me?"

Wayne replied, "Right, Sheriff."

Rachel turned to one of her deputies and said, "Hank, take those prisoners in and lock them up. Coop, you stay here with me. I'll need to go over to the Irig place and you'll be in charge here. Later, I'll give Mr. Olsen here a ride back to town. He left his car there."

Seeing that Clark had recovered consciousness, she moved over next to him and asked, "How are you Clark? You don't look the best. It looks like you need to go to the hospital too."

Weakly, Clark replied, "No, I don't think so, Rachel."

Martha spoke up, "I think one bullet just creased his arm, the other passed clear through his shoulder. It was bleeding a lot, but it has slowed down, thanks to some first aid. It was the pain that knocked him out. It was a near thing, but I think he'll be okay. I don't think there's anything they can do in the hospital that a little TLC can't do." Martha looked significantly at Lois as she finished.

Rachel moved over and stood above Trask. She said, "Don't touch anything." She raised her voice slightly as she said, "Mr. Olsen, before you go, I have one more job for you." Then she addressed her deputy, "Coop, call for an ambulance, please."

Jonathan spoke up, "When I went into the house for the first aid kit, I tried the phone. The line's dead."

Nodding, Deputy Cooper moved over to his car and got on the radio. When he finished he reported, "An ambulance is on the way Sheriff. I put in a call to the phone company too. They're sending out a line truck."

"Thanks, Coop. Stand by till they clean up."

"Will do, Sheriff."

Even though he was awake, Lois continued to hold Clark, cradling his upper body in her arms and rocking back and forth. Unashamedly, Lois showered him with kisses, tears of joy and relief that he would recover streaming down her cheeks while everyone else looked on.

Jimmy moved over and started taking more pictures. He made sure to catch pictures of the derringer as well as Trask. Jimmy was really earning his crime photographer stripes on this trip.

As soon as Jimmy finished up, Cooper went into his trunk and brought out an evidence kit. He donned a pair of rubber gloves and pulled out a plastic bag. He picked up the derringer and placed it in the bag. He sealed it and wrote the details on the

outside. He did the same with the gun that Trask had dropped and the ammunition. The bags all went into the kit and back into the trunk.

Rachel, seeing Lois and Clark together and after Lois' declaration of their wedded state turned away in disappointment. It just wasn't meant to be.

Rachel turned to Lois and said, "Lois, it sure looks like you have more influence over Clark than I ever did. You take care of him now, ya' hear?"

Lois looked at Clark, smiled at Rachel and said, "I'll take care of him, Sheriff."

Coming out of her morbid mood somewhat, Rachel chuckled and said, "Lois, why don't you just call me Rachel. After all," Rachel nodded in Clark's direction as she continued. "We have something in common."

Lois looked again at Clark and pulled him to herself as she said, "Yeah, Rachel, I guess we do."

Rachel said, "I guess I'll see y'all later. I need to go check on the rest of my deputies and make sure we got the entire bunch," as she turned and headed for her car she said, "Mr. Olsen, could I trouble you for another task? I might need more pictures."

Jimmy smiled and said, "I'm all yours, Sheriff."

Rachel said, "Hop in and we'll go. When we're done, I'll take you to your car so that you can get to wherever it is you need to go."

"Thanks, Sheriff." Jimmy could see promotion to staff photographer in his near future.

After a while the ambulance arrived. The EMTs looked at Clark's wounds. Seeing that the bleeding had stopped they applied some antibiotic ointment and redressed the wounds. Using a body bag, after removing the implement of death, they hauled away Trask's body by placing it on a long board and transferring it to a stretcher in the back. Wayne rode with the EMT in the back as they transported him to the ER to take care of his hand.

Deputy Cooper followed the ambulance when it left.

As soon as the ambulance and the patrol car had turned onto the road, the dapper little man returned, so that only left, Jonathan, Martha, Clark, Lois and the dapper little man.

The little man said, "I suggest that we bring out some lawn furniture and sit in the sun so that Mr. Kent can heal."

Lois addressed him, "How do you know so much about us?"

"That, my dear Miss Lane is, as they say, 'a long story'. I suggest that we all get comfortable."

Chapter 9

When they pulled out the furniture, Lois made sure that her chair was right next to Clark's, literally within touching distance, and she did that frequently, almost as if to constantly reassure herself of his continued presence. Lois had never been a touchy-feely person, but over the last couple of days, that had changed. She loved it when Martha gave her a hug; it was so loving, warm and comforting. So far she hadn't been on the receiving end of a hug from Clark's father, but she could imagine how it would feel. She pictured him as a large version of Clarkie Bear and just knew that his hugs would be soft and cuddly.

Once they were seated, Lois turned to the dapper little man and asked, "Just who are you and how do you know so much about us?"

After a brief hesitation, in his British English accent, he replied, "My name is Wells," he hesitated for a second and then continued, "Herbert ... George ... Wells."

Lois repeated, "Herbert George Wells," she did something of a double take, shaking her head as if to clear it of cobwebs and then said, "Wait a minute. H. G. Wells? No, you can't be. You have to be another H. G. Wells, *the* H. G. Wells is *dead*!"

Snickering, Wells said, "To quote a gentleman I met on one

of my trips to the United States in the late 1800's, actually another writer by the name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, you probably know him better by his pen name, Mark Twain, 'The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.' Yes, I am in very fact, as you put it, *the* H. G. Wells. And, yes, actually, I am dead, but not yet. It is somewhat confusing. Traveling through time can be *very* confusing at times. Oh, I say, 'at times', how droll. Well, anyway, you see, after I wrote my story about time travel, I actually built a machine ... and ... well, here I am. In other words, my death is still in the future, my *personal* future, but it is in *your* past." Noting the confused expressions on their faces, he said, "You see just how confusing time travel can be."

They spent the afternoon in the sun while H. G. Wells explained how he and the organization he had founded, TTEMPO, went about making sure that events in the histories of the universes worked out properly and just why things had occurred as they had.

Later in the day, thanks to the time spent in the sunlight, Clark's wounds were visibly better. The groove that one slug had dug in his deltoid had closed and the hole in his shoulder was in the process of closing. They kept dressings in place covering the wounds, both of which were bloodstained, to reinforce the fact that he had been injured, but otherwise Clark was shirtless so that he could soak up the sunlight. Another benefit of his shirtless status was that it gave Lois a chance to ogle his bare chest which she did unashamedly.

After a rather short time, Jimmy drove up. Seeing Jimmy arrive, Herb was worried and about to exit when Lois said, "Don't worry about Jimmy. We can handle him."

Jonathan got up and pulled another chair off the porch.

Jimmy was literally beside himself. He had been taking pictures for the Sheriff and learning about crime scene photography which had different requirements than regular newspaper photography and he knew that he was the better photographer for it. When he pulled up he almost bounced out of his car. He practically ran over to where everyone was sitting and dropped into the chair that Jonathan had placed there for him. As it turned out, Herb didn't need to fear any unusual questions. As far as Jimmy knew he was a friend of the family and besides, Jimmy was more concerned with his friends than any visitors.

Looking over at Clark, noting the blood-stained bandages, Jimmy came crashing down from his high and got a concerned look on his face, "How are you doing, CK? The Sheriff had me so busy I really didn't have much time to breathe, let alone see how you were. And Lois, did I hear you say something about a husband?"

Before either spoke, Lois reached over and took Clark's hand in hers. Clark said, "It wasn't really a serious wound. I'll recover."

Lois spoke up, "Yeah, Jimmy, you heard right. Clark and I were secretly married."

"Wow, guys, that's great! How'd it happen?"

Clark spoke up, "Oh, I don't know, the usual way, she fell for my irresistible charm and devastating good looks."

Jimmy was laughing as he went on.

"I just swept her off her feet at the Corn Festival. Actually, I don't know if it was me she fell in love with first, my folks or Smallville in general. There is this ambiance ..."

Lois chimed in, switching her attention from Jimmy to Clark's parents and then Clark, "I have to admit, I like Smallville and I love your parents, but I think I fell in love with you first. All of those late night stakeouts, eating cold takeout and drinking even colder coffee. No, I guess it was the movie marathons over at your place that did it."

"You guys are too much," Jimmy said, still laughing. I didn't know that stakeouts were so romantic!"

Lois gave Clark's hand a squeeze, laughed and said, "I guess

it all depends on who you are on the stakeout with. With the right person, any activity can be romantic." She pulled his hand up and kissed the back of it, "Right, Clark?"

Clark smiled and replied, "Who am I to contradict my partner?"

"CK, really, now, how badly were you hurt? When I was taking the pictures, I was concerned about the amount of blood I saw."

Martha spoke up, "Clark won't tell the straight story, too macho. One of the bullets gave him a flesh wound. It scored a track across his upper arm. The other passed through the fleshy part of his shoulder just below the collarbone. He's lucky it didn't nick the aorta or his lung. It was a close one."

Jimmy was worried now and it came out in his voice, "You are going to be okay, aren't you?"

Clark said, "Yeah, Jimmy, I'm gonna be just fine. It'll take some time, but no lasting harm."

Martha asked, "Who would like some iced tea?"

Jimmy answered, "I'd love some, but I don't have much time. I have to get to the airport."

After receiving affirmative replies from the rest she went into the house and brought out tea and glasses on a tray.

Over the tea they discussed the story. As soon as he finished his tea, Jimmy left because he had a red-eye flight out of Wichita to catch.

Once Jimmy had departed, Herb returned and he finished filling them in making sure that he didn't give them any specifics as to how it was done. Once that was finished, Herb announced that he was going to depart, but before he could Clark stopped him. "The other night, Lois was talking in her sleep and said something about a baby."

As soon as he heard this question, Herb realized that a mistake had been made and that he would have to give them some details of the procedure that he had glossed over. "Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear. It would appear as though my calculations were off, slightly." At their questioning looks he decided that more detail rather than less was needed. "In order for Lois to have the motivation needed for her to rescue you, I have been using a device we call a Soul Tracker. It is capable of following the soul essence through time. Using it I was able to infuse memories of her future life into Lois' subconscious mind to influence her actions. It is possible that in her sleep the subconscious memories came to the fore in the form of a dream. Rest assured that those are her actual memories. If she was talking about a baby that means that I used a set of memories from the wrong year. The memories were supposed to be from before any children were born."

Lois marveled and with a happy smile asked, "Then we will have a baby? You know, I never wanted children, until now. Now that Clark and I are together I know what our family will be like," she looked around significantly at Jonathan, Martha and Clark, "and I want that family."

Jonathan and Martha looked at each other and smiled as the same thought hit both of them at once — grandchildren.

Herb smiled as he replied, "My Dear, you are destined to have a large family. In very fact, your family, you, Clark and your offspring will be instrumental in bringing about the existence of Utopia in this universe."

Clark smiled, "How large?"

"I'm sorry, that would be too much information, too soon. Perhaps I shouldn't have told you as much as I have as it is. Well, I really must depart. I may drop in on you in the future, just to check in and see how things are progressing." Herb stood and pulled a device from his pocket. He punched some buttons and suddenly a doorway appeared in the air in front of him. He turned and said, "Ciao," stepped through and was gone.

After he left, Lois pulled out her cell phone and called the

Planet. When the phone was answered, the familiar southern drawl that was always a comfort to her ears, except when he was telling her that an assignment was too dangerous, came through the speaker, “Daily Planet, Perry White.”

“Perry? Lois.”

“Lois, Darlin’, I’m glad to hear from you. What’s goin’ on out there? Did you find that farmer?”

Lois showed just how much she had changed when she said in a heated tone, “That farmer’s name is Wayne Irig and he’s a friend of Clark’s father.” Realizing that she was blowing off too much steam she calmed somewhat as she continued, “Yes, we found Wayne. He’s in the hospital.”

“Does that mean that you’re finished?”

“Almost. Perry, are you ready to hear who was behind this? On second thought, maybe you should sit down. . . . Are you sitting?”

Giving in, Perry actually sat down behind his desk. “Yes, I’m sitting down. Who was it?”

“Okay, it was Trask.”

Perry jumped up from his chair and shouted, “What?!?!?!? Trask!!!! What was he doing there?”

“Perry, sit down again. Remember your blood pressure.” Lois couldn’t see him, but she could hear the grunt and the squeak of his chair as he sat. “Same as last time. He was out to kill Superman.”

Perry was on his feet again, “But, why Smallville?”

“Wayne found something that Trask thought he could use to kill Superman.” Lois felt that she needed to divert the conversation so she changed the subject, “Hey, listen, Jimmy just left. He’s on his way back to Metropolis. He said he was catching the red-eye.”

“How’d the kid do? Did he get some good shots?”

Just then a telephone line truck rolled up. Lois said, “He did good. Look, Perry, I’ve got to go. The telephone company is here to repair the line. I’ll call you later.”

Perry was sinking back into his chair as he said, “Telephone truck?”

“Yeah, Trask had the phone lines to the house cut when he captured and tried to kill Clark’s parents.”

Jumping out of his chair again, Perry shouted, “What??? Tried to kill Clark’s parents?”

“Yeah, he did that while I was tied up over at the Irig farm. He had Clark tied up in that back of the van. He threatened to kill the Kents to force Clark to reveal who Superman is.”

As he settled back into his chair, Perry asked, “Why would he think that Clark knows who Superman is?”

“Who knows, the man was obviously insane.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, he’s dead. I killed him.”

Perry jumped up again, “*What*??? You *killed* him?”

“Yeah, it was self-defense, but it was an accident. We’ll tell you all about it when we get back.”

Settling into his chair once again, Perry said, “Okay, Darlin’. I guess I’ll talk to ya later. Oh, before you go, how long will you guys be there? Will there be follow-up?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Perry. It will depend on how well Clark heals.”

Perry jumped up again and shouted, “*Heals*????”

Matter-of-factly Lois said, “Yeah, he was shot.”

Perry shouted, “*Shot*?!?!?!?!?”

“Gotta go, Perry. I’ll call later.”

In Metropolis, Perry heard the line go dead, dropped limply back into his chair and hung up the phone, but he was very agitated. He sat there for several seconds simply staring at the device and then reaching up he placed a couple of fingers on his neck, feeling for a pulse. When he found it, it was racing. <That girl’s gonna be the death of me yet.> Clark had been shot! Lois

had killed Trask! <I hope Jimmy can explain when he gets back.>

Later that evening, Lois prepared and sent a fax to Perry letting him know that she and Clark were taking some sick time and would be staying in Smallville with Clark’s parents while he recovered.

The next day they had a call from Rachel, “Lois, this here Ms. Sherman is demanding to see you. You feel like comin’ in?”

“Sure Rachel, we’ll be there in an hour or so.”

“I appreciate it. She is refusin’ to talk to anyone else. I guess I’ll see you when you get here.”

After hanging up the phone, Lois and Clark moved to the porch swing. It had quickly become one of Lois’ favorite spots. Once Clark was seated, Lois slid onto his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck and said, “I think we need to go see the magistrate in town.”

“Why, Lois?”

“I feel like a law breaker. I need to get it off my conscience.”

“But, Rachel said that you acted in self-defense. She’s not planning on pressing charges.”

Lois smiled and said, “That’s not it. We have some papers to sign.”

Finally picking up on where she was going with this, Clark nodded and said, “I know Judge Jefferson. I interviewed him a few times while I worked for the Smallville Press. I think he would be more than willing to help us out, as long as that will ease your conscience.”

“Yes, I think that would go a long way toward easing my conscience. Let’s go make it official.” She leaned in and gave him a kiss, one that held a world of promise of things to come.

Taking her hand, Clark headed for the car.

When they got into town, the first stop they made was to Judge Jefferson’s office. When Clark explained the purpose of their visit he was very pleased to help them out. He performed the civil ceremony and when they left his office they had two pieces of paper and Lois had added the wedding band to her ring.

The next stop was the jail. Ms. Sherman was being held there as a material witness on Lois’ recommendation. Once Lois and Clark were back in the cells with her she looked at Clark. She hung her head at the sight of his arm in a sling. She said, “I can’t tell you how sorry I am that it got that far. I just . . . I just couldn’t . . .” Her voice broke off at this point.

Lois said, “We understand. You were worried about your own life and that of your daughter. We aren’t blaming you about anything. You wanted to speak with us?”

“Yeah, there was something I thought you ought to know. You need to let Superman know that among the things that the police impounded from the Irig place was a small spacecraft. On the nose was Superman’s sigil, you know, the one he wears on his chest.”

Lois gasped and asked, “Are you sure?”

“Sure, I’m sure. I recognized it right off. Trask said it was found in Smallville in 1966. Superman should know about it. If it’s his property, maybe he could claim it.”

“Thanks, Sherman. We’ll pass the word on to Superman and . . . we’ll put in an extra good word for you with the sheriff. You know, you aren’t so bad after all. Take care.”

A week later Lois and Clark returned to Metropolis. The first thing they did was move Lois from her apartment to what was formerly Clark’s, but was now her apartment. It was smaller, but it felt more like home to Lois than her sterile two-bedroom. The next day they went in to the Daily Planet.

A little later, the entire newsroom staff was gathered around Lois’ desk and Perry was reading the proof copy of the article, “And, in the end, Jason Trask’s obsession caused him to search for a mystical rock he alone imbued with destructive powers, and to confuse one reporter with the target of his fixation, Superman.

He came to see this strange visitor from another planet where he was not, and to see enemies where there were none. It was an obsession that for Jason Trask would prove fatal.” He put the paper down and continued, “I been in the newspaper business thirty-five years, and this is the damndest story I ever read.”

Lois and Clark had worked a long time on that story. It was an excellent example of their joint efforts. It had the hard hitting facts about Trask and what he had done, and the softer, introspective touches that were typical of Clark. They needed to reveal only so much. There was a lot that needed to be kept secret, but because of the notoriety received from the local Smallville Press, they couldn’t squash it completely. Lois said, “You should have been there. Here’s a man so far around the bend that he started beating on Clark to get at Superman. He was hoping that Superman would come to the rescue and he could try to kill him with this rock. Everyone knows that they’re friends, but come on; Superman can’t be everywhere at once and how was he to know we were in danger. It isn’t like we can call him on his cell phone or pager or something. Let’s be real here.”

Perry turned to Clark who was standing next to Lois and asked, “Now, Kent, I usually tell my reporters to stay out of their stories, don’t get involved. But as long as you had to fight a nutcase like Trask, well ... I’m just glad you came out on top. Are you healing from your wounds?”

Clark had his left arm in a sling and would be keeping it in one for a week or more. It wouldn’t do for him to heal too quickly. He hedged, “Oh, I’m healing about as well as can be expected, Chief.”

Cat drifted over, pinned Lois with a look and said, “That’s not the biggest story! How about these two keeping their marriage a secret? Come on fess up, how long have you been married?”

Lois smiled coyly and answered, “Well, really, it just happened. It wasn’t like we planned it or anything. Really, it’s thanks to the laws of the state of Kansas. We have to thank the original settlers.” She brought her ring up and admired it once more.

Cat said, “Come on, Lois. Let’s see the hardware.”

Lois obligingly held out her left hand for Cat’s perusal. Cat said, “Looks like an antique.”

Proudly, Lois replied, “It is. This belonged to Clark’s grandmother. Someday, maybe my grandson will give it to his fiancée.”

Cat snickered and said, “Lois Lane with children? Aren’t you counting your chickens before they’re hatched? How do you know you’ll even have children?”

With an enigmatic smile, Lois replied, “I have it on good authority that we will.”

“What did you do, visit a fortune teller?”

“Not ... exactly.”

Perry turned to Jimmy and said, “Jimmy, those pictures you turned in were first rate. I’m adding you to the rolls as a staff photographer.”

As Jimmy started to move in his direction, Perry held up his hands and said, “Don’t you dare hug me again.”

Jimmy stopped and smiled. He held up the signal watch and said, “Too bad this didn’t work.”

Lois had been told by Clark that hearing that signal watch was the first indication that his powers had returned so rather than discourage Jimmy, she said, “Don’t give up on it. Superman was probably in Metropolis. You were in Smallville.”

Jimmy smiled and replied, “Hey, that’s right. STAR Labs doesn’t know what the effective range is. Maybe I was too far away.”

Perry, was almost hesitant as he said, “Well, then, kids, I just got one note for you. This rock that Trask convinced himself was gonna hurt Superman. What’s it called?”

Lois looked at him with a question in her eyes as she said, “Called? You want a name? Nobody can even find it. Even the sample Wayne sent to the lab in Wichita disappeared. I’m not sure it existed anywhere, but in Trask’s mind.”

Even as she was saying this she was traveling back in time a few days in her memory.

Flashback

A few days after the visit to the jail to see Sherman, Clark had recovered, his wounds had healed completely and his powers had returned.

Lois and Jonathan had gone to the field behind the shed. Jonathan had taken a shovel and Lois had pointed out where she had buried the rock. Jonathan dug it up and they placed it in the lead tool box, making sure the lid was securely locked. Then for good measure, partly out of fear and partly out of anger at what that rock could do to Clark, Lois had used almost a whole roll of duct tape on it. By the time she was finished it looked like a square mummy wrapped in strips of shiny gray cloth.

Once this task had been completed and with it safely wrapped up they had taken it to Clark. He had made a small net of steel cables, much like an old fashioned sling and he put it in.

While they all stood back he twirled it around and around, building up speed and finally released it. When he did, it was moving faster than ten miles a second and it only required a seven mile per second velocity to leave Earth’s gravity and travel into space.

As she watched the object disappear into the sky, Lois released a sigh and said, “Good riddance.”

End flashback

Perry, continued, enthusiastically, “Even so, this copy’d sing a lot sweeter if you gave it a name.”

Lois thought for a few seconds, and then said, “Trask thought it was from the planet Krypton... I don’t know ... it was supposed to be radioactive like uranium ...” She tried the first thing that came to mind, “Kryptonium?”

Perry smiled and said, “Okay by me.”

Clark said, “Wait a minute. It’s supposed to be a meteorite, right? What about ... Kryptonite?”

Perry handed the copy back to Lois and started to his office. Back over his shoulder he said, “You two fight it out.”

Lois playfully slugged him on the shoulder and he yelled, “Ouch!”

In an undertone she said, “You and I both know that didn’t hurt.”

He brought his lips near her ear and said, “You and I know it, but I’m not supposed to be healed yet.”

Playing the part, Lois put on a sorrowful look and said, “Oh, I’m sorry! Want me to kiss it and make it better?”

He smiled and said, “I think my lips hurt.”

She smiled and complied by giving him a kiss. After a few seconds, she said, “Now, about that name. You’re always editing my copy!”

He replied, “That’s only because we’re partners.”

Lois relented, “Okay, have it your way ... Kryptonite it shall be.” Before she continued she looked around, making sure no one would overhear, “I’m still worried. Wayne said he sent some off to the lab in Wichita and that sample has disappeared. That means that there’s still something out there that can harm you.”

“We’ll just have to be careful.”

Chapter 10 — Epilogue

%%%

Universal Locator Designation

Alpha 023 x Gamma 004 x Tau -120

Distant future — TTEMPO Headquarters

%%%

When Herb triggered the device in his hand it created a portal

to a future time and another universe. When he stepped through that portal he was instantly transferred to that time and location. When he looked down he saw that, as expected, he had stepped onto a metal plate.

Herb stepped down off of the transfer plate in the clean room euphemistically called Reception. He smiled as he saw the motto, in gold, over the doorway — ‘Only Time Will Tell’ and thought about just how true that statement was. He was glad that he had chosen that as the motto for TTEMPO, the Time Travel Enforcement and Multiverse Protection Organization.

He moved out of Reception and as he did he was greeted by several TTEMPO agents in various costumes as they were heading out on missions, some of them in pairs. No one appeared to be in a hurry which was a good sign. They were apparently going out on simple survey missions. If there had been any urgency it would have indicated that there was a problem with the time stream in one of the universes, perhaps even a problem created by Tempus or one of his doppelgangers.

Along with dealing with problems such as those created by Tempus, the charter of TTEMPO included historical research. There were many time periods where they lacked information and others which could be used as living laboratories to study people and their reactions to varied situations. Most of the time, it was important for the TTEMPO agents to interact with the subjects they were studying as little as possible and still complete their mission.

Herb shuddered slightly when he saw Andrus, but was somewhat comforted when he saw what he was wearing. TTEMPO agents, when going on survey missions had started dressing in period costume so as not to give away their presence so easily. In more technologically advanced ages they could get away with their normal clothing, but in more antiquated cultures they would stick out like the proverbial sore thumb.

When he spotted his personal problem child, Andrus, it appeared as though he was going into the medieval period. He was in the costume of a Roman Catholic Priest, or friar, presumably to check on Lady Loiset and The Fox. Herb was relieved that there would be little chance of Andrus messing up the timeline as long as the timeline wasn’t one in which Tempus took part. Then another thought came to him, what if Baron Tempos was there and Andrus interacted with him? That could be a disaster in the making. He made a mental note to check the time records for discontinuities before anything became irreparable.

Shaking his head Herb took the translift to his floor and moved down the corridor to his office. The door, with its usual reliability, opened as he approached. He stepped in and said, “Lights on.”

Once the lights were on, Herb shrugged out of his coat and, removing his derby, hung both on the coat rack just inside the door. He moved to his desk. As he was crossing the floor to his desk he removed his tie, opened his collar by removing the collar-button and heaved a relieved sigh, thinking, <I really ought to update my wardrobe. These hard starched collars can be very irritating. Oh, well, I guess it’s all in what you are used to.> For the most part his office had been decorated in modern furniture and equipment, but it was made in such a way as to resemble what he was used to back in the early twentieth century. The first thing he did was go to the sideboard and prepare a cup of tea and then carried it over to his desk. He set the teacup on the corner of his desk and then smiled as he heard that familiar squeak as he sat in his chair and then simply sat there in thought for a time with his fingers steeped. He was planning his report on this incident.

Finally, once he had organized his thoughts he reached over, pushed a button and started speaking into the air in his British English accent, “Computer, dictation.”

A human sounding voice, apparently emanating from the very

air around him, replied “Working. Will this be a letter, or a journal entry?”

“This will be a journal entry. Addenda to report on incident in Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225, an alternate universe related in many ways to Prime.”

“Working, file accessed.”

Herb commenced, “Regarding the incident in Smallville with Trask. It had been determined that in this Alt universe intervention would be required. The freight train would delay the arrival of the Sheriff and would prevent her from intervening and preventing Trask from killing Clark while he was vulnerable.”

“I decided to take this universe on as one of my special projects; therefore the monitoring of this particular universe has fallen under my direct purview. In order to preserve the life of Clark Kent, it was necessary to provide an alternate person to prevent Trask from killing him.”

“Pause recording.”

“Paused.”

Herb was lost in thought for a time before he continued. The next parts were going to be very important to have recorded and he wanted to make sure he had everything correct. He pulled out a chart of figures that he could refer to in order to have everything correct. Once he had the chart in hand he said, “Resume.”

“Recording.”

“The idea for this entire exercise was a direct result of having sent the Clark Kent now of two universes, his own native universe, Alpha 023 x Gamma 025 x Tau 036, Alt 1, and the native universe of his Lois, Alpha -120 x Gamma 255 x Tau -190, Alt 2, on his earlier rescue missions.”

“In preparing for this mission, I had to travel back in time in the subject universe and ascertain if Tempus had been there in any incarnation. Fortunately, he is not in all universes and that was the case here, thus there was no fear of the curse such as that which we had to deal with in Prime.”

“I decided that Lois would be the best candidate to save Clark. She was already on scene and had been working with Clark for some time. In order to ensure that she would act in Clark’s behalf, I decided to give her some extra motivation. I began laying the groundwork as they were leaving on the assignment.”

“After ascertaining the absence of Tempus in their past, by using the Soul Tracker I traveled to their future and recorded some of her memories and after returning to the time of this incident, I was able to add those to her current memories on a subconscious level. I used the memories of the time after she and her Clark were together. The overlay of these memories lowered her barriers and moved the personal relationship ahead, you might say, rather precipitously. I began the memory overlay when I was in the elevator with them at the Daily Planet as they were leaving on this assignment. The time in the elevator was insufficient so I arranged for the train to break down keeping them at the rail road crossing for an extended period. I was at that time able to add more memories of her future. I finished the overlay while they were at the Corn Festival. The only time they were aware of my presence was in the initial phase, in the elevator which required closer contact to link to her mind. After that I could work from greater distance. I did continue to monitor them throughout. Pause recording.”

“Paused.”

Herb picked up his tea cup and took a tentative sip. The tea had grown cold and frowning, he set the cup back down.

“Resume.”

“Recording.”

“As I said, I continued to monitor their progress. As it turns out it is well that I did. Unknown to me or Lois and Clark, Trask had sent a couple of his men after Lois and Clark. I still do not

know if they had been dispatched to simply follow them or if they had orders to kidnap them. However, I did take steps to prevent them from following Lois and Clark by disabling their vehicle. Pause.”

“Paused.”

Herb could no longer suppress his mirth. He chuckled aloud. Standing up he moved to the sideboard and prepared another cup of tea. By the time he had the tea prepared and had returned to his desk he was back in control.

“Resume.”

“Recording.”

“I had not anticipated just how successful the memory overlay would actually be. Lois began to see Clark as a romantic partner almost immediately. I had not been aware that in this universe the state of Kansas had that law on their books.

Apparently the memory overlay was even more effective than anticipated because as soon as Lois found out that by the laws of Kansas they were married by simply spending the night together she wanted to make it permanent. Even Clark was surprised by her immediate acceptance of the situation. That does make some measure of sense as the memories used were those of their married life.”

“I hadn’t realized, until Clark mentioned it, that I had inadvertently included a memory of the birth of their first child. I was glad that I had checked out their history previously because she couldn’t wait to consummate the wedding and they almost caught me observing. If Tempus had been a problem in that universe, I would have been required to choose another protector for Clark. The other possibility I had considered had been Pete Ross.”

“Note: If activities of this nature are called for in the future I need to exercise more caution. When I moved forward in time to record Lois’ memories, I inadvertently collected memories from a later period, when they had a child. Still, I can’t quibble with the results of this exercise.”

“Pause recording.”

Herb thought for a few minutes, considering how to proceed. Finally he said, “Resume.”

“Recording.”

“When they were captured by Trask I had to wait for an opportunity to free Lois so that she could go to Clark’s aid. That was yet another difference between this universe and Prime. This Carol Sherman did not help free Lois. It was up to me to perform that task. Up to that point I had been able to operate in the background. Once I released her I had to depend on her personal motivation and her martial arts skills to protect her ‘husband’ and she performed admirably. A mama bear defending her cubs could not have done better.”

“At the appropriate time, Lois came out of hiding and unknown to both Trask and Clark, removed the Kryptonite which enabled Clark to begin to recover after only a brief exposure to the Kryptonite.”

“Her warning to Clark, coupled with the distraction provided by her breaking cover and advancing on Trask, just as he was firing the derringer, was what actually saved Clark’s life. A derringer is an inaccurate weapon at best, but even the most inaccurate weapon at a range of about ten feet is liable to hit the target. Trask was aiming for the center of Clark’s back and if Clark had not ducked when he did he would have suffered a mortal wound.”

“It was unfortunate that, though it was an accident, Lois was required to take Trask’s life; however, if she had not he would have presented a continuing problem. At the very least he would have revealed Clark’s secret and at worst, if he had convinced the powers that be that Clark was actually a threat, he could have been instrumental in his death or exile.”

“Pause.”

“Paused.”

Herb got up and moved to a sideboard again. He dumped the tea which had gone cold through neglect and prepared another fresh cup, promising himself to actually drink this one. Picking up the cup he held it under a faucet which dispensed near boiling water. Thankful for the advancements in society which made things so much easier, he pulled out a tea bag, rather than a container of loose leaves, and he prepared a cup of Earl Grey tea which he carried back to his desk before he continued. Once he was again seated and after first taking a sip of his tea he said, “Resume.”

“Recording.”

“After the Sheriff and her deputies left, I was able to sit down with Lois and the Kents to explain what had happened and why. Lois was somewhat irritated with me for overlaying her future memories. I explained that I had not had any choice in that she was the best candidate to rescue Clark from Trask. She started weeping when the thought of CJ crossed her mind. When I explained that that child was actually going to be her first born she brightened up and her mood became a happy one. They asked how many children they would have and naturally, I declined to give them that information. When she asked how long she would have to wait to have a child. I told her that unfortunately that would be too much information too soon and that she should simply be patient and let things happen in the proper time.”

“Lois admitted that she had always feared having children because of her family background, however, the memory overlay had removed those fears and she was now eagerly anticipating that event. I did not at this time reveal to her that her physiology would have to be changed by exposure to Clark’s aura to make their biologies compatible before the blessed event. I also did not tell her that another result of that physiological change would be that her lifespan would be extended. I will schedule a trip back to them at a period after the birth so that I can give her a gift. Pause recording.”

“Paused.”

Herb pulled open a drawer in his desk and pulled out a box. In the box was a pendant on a necklace. A pendant with very special properties. A pendant holding two different forms of Kryptonite within its silver matrix. On the outside of the box he wrote, “Lois Lane, Ultra Woman, Alpha -34 x Gamma 255 x Tau -225. Lois’ birthday, September 23, 2000.”

Remembering that he had simply paused the recording, Herb said, “End recording. Do not finalize and allow for future additions and edits. Format it as a document and send a copy of the file to my hand held for review.”

“Recording stopped. Formatting. Sending.”

Herb’s hand held beeped and a small light started to flash indicating the file had been received. He nodded his approval and stood up from his chair. He would review the file and make his edits after taking a brief nap. He moved to his sleeping alcove and after kicking off his shoes and placing his glasses on a side table, he lay down on a trundle bed.

He spoke to the computer again, “Lights off.”

In response to his command the lights were extinguished.

After a few seconds he said, “Computer.”

“Working. Letter or journal entry?”

“Tickle file.”

“Recording. Entry?”

“Check on Andrus mission to Medieval Period.”

“Time on reminder?”

“As soon as I wake from my nap.”

“Recorded.”

Before drifting off to sleep, Herb lay there thinking for some time, “I need to send Andrus on a mission where he will not be interacting with Lois or Clark. We need more information on the Korean War. Perhaps what I can do is send him on a research

mission. He certainly shouldn't be on the front lines. He could go in a non-combatant role, perhaps as a Chaplain, a Priest. He seems comfortable in that role. He could research personal interactions in stressful situations such as in a hospital dealing with war casualties. I'll have to give that some more thought.">

THE END