

It's Not Easy Being Dead

by Dandello (AKA Librarian)

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Rating: T

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2017

Laura Kendall sat on her living room sofa, staring at the paperwork spread out over the coffee table. She hated paperwork, she always had, but it was a necessary evil given her job as plant manager of one of Wayne Industries lesser west coast facilities. But this wasn't even for work - it was for a pizza drive at the grade school where her eight-year-old daughter, Samantha, attended.

Laura ran a hand through her light brown hair. 'I need to make an appointment with Jill to take care of my roots again,' she thought. 'Maybe I'll get it cut short. Cl... Charlie likes it that way...'

The news was running on the big screen, but it was more for background noise. Then one of the talking heads mentioned a name she hadn't heard publicly in nearly nine years. She grabbed the remote and turned up the volume, unable to tear her eyes from the picture on the screen of the dour bald man in prison coveralls.

"While prison officials are refusing to speculate on the cause of death pending an autopsy, it is known that Lex Luthor was suffering a rare form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, possibly related to his long term exposure to kryptonite."

The talking head droned on about Luthor's crimes but Laura wasn't listening. She knew more than she wanted concerning Luthor's crimes. *He* was the reason she was living in Northern California instead of Metropolis or Gotham or D.C, why she was working for Wayne Industries managing a business instead of writing for the Washington Post or the Daily Planet.

"Charlie, Jay!" she yelled.

Charles Jacob Kendall's head came up as almost before his wife's yell hit his ears. Sixteen year-old Jay ran around the old car they were working on with one of the neighbors. He was running a little faster than a normal boy should be able to, but Charlie doubted Bob Standish noticed as he followed them into the house.

Laura was staring at the television screen, at the old photos of Clark Kent, Lois Lane and her son Jason White. Dead faces from ten years past. The commentator was going on about Luthor's final crime spree, the murder of Kent in the middle of the Daily Planet newsroom in front of sixty or so horrified journalists. Kent had been shot at point blank range then beaten by Luthor's thugs while Luthor gloated that he had determined that Kent was, in fact, Superman.

However, Superman's body - at least a crushed kryptonite contaminated body the

authorities identified as Superman's - was found following a rescue near Mexico City that involved a building collapse. *That* body was interred in a tomb in Metropolis's Centennial Park, over Luthor's vehement protests. He claimed the body was a hoax and if anyone had taken Superman out, it should have been him.

Lois Lane and her son died when her car exploded in the Daily Planet parking garage less than an hour after Kent's death. The photo on the screen showed a car that hadn't simply burned - it had been obliterated. The bodies had been identified by DNA, her engagement ring and her son's med-alert bracelet.

"They said Luthor was dead," Laura said. "He died in prison."

"Do you think it's finally over?" Jay asked.

Laura looked back at Charlie.

"Bruce or Bill haven't called, have they?" he asked.

She shook her head slightly, confirming his suspicions. Neither Bruce Wayne nor Bill Henderson of the Metropolis Police had called to tell them it was safe for them to relax, that the danger was past. That Luthor was no longer a threat.

Bob was frowning, watching the pictures on the screen. Charlie hadn't wanted him to come in, but there really hadn't been a good way to keep him out without making things seem even more suspicious and Bob was naturally curious. It was part of his job as a cop.

After a moment, Bob's expression cleared. "You're in a witness protection program, aren't you? Because of Luthor."

Charlie heard Laura's sharp intake of breath and tried to keep his own breathing even and normal. After ten years in hiding building a new life, he didn't want to have to start over again because a neighbor got too curious. He didn't want to do that to his family. They had a good life where they were.

"What makes you say that?" Laura asked.

"Little things," Bob said. "You guys never talk about where you lived before coming here, but you've kept up your subscription to the Daily Planet. Most people have at least a few old family photos on the walls somewhere. You know, grandparents, aunts and uncles. But you have nothing here that's more than ten years old. And when we ran the background check on Charlie when he was hired by the school district, it came back spotless. Not even a traffic ticket. Nobody's that clean without help."

To Charlie's surprise, Laura managed a chuckle. "He is. Not even a parking ticket. A real Boy Scout."

"So, who are you, really?" Bob asked. "What did you do?"

Charlie sighed. It was one of things he'd always dreaded. One of the neighbors figuring out that there were deep secrets in the Kendall household.

"You do realize that the majority of people in witness protection programs have committed no crime other than choosing their relatives badly," Charlie said after a moment. "There's a knock on the door and there are armed marshals outside telling you to leave now with just the clothes on your back because the bad guys think you would make a great hostage, or maybe they just want you dead. Not necessarily because *you* did anything, but just because."

"And somebody close to you got Luthor pissed off?"

"More or less," Charlie admitted. Misdirection wasn't actually a lie and after all this time he still wasn't a great liar, although he had improved. Necessity was a good teacher.

Bob seemed to accept his statement as an admission. "Your secret's safe with me," Bob

said after a moment.

"Bob, you can't tell your wife, or your boss or *anyone*," Charlie told him. "*You* may trust them with your life, but then they tell people *they* trust and the circle gets wider and wider and then one dark night there's an explosion that takes out half the block."

Charlie watched Bob's face go pale. "You're joking, right?" the man stammered out.

"No," Laura said. "Luthor was never known for his subtlety. He nuked Southern California, remember? And then nine years later the madman's out of prison and trying to level Metropolis. It took Superman to save the city. It nearly cost him his life. It *did* cost him his life, later."

She turned back to the screen. "Please let it be true," she whispered so low that Charlie might have missed it except for his unnaturally good hearing. "Dear God, please let it be true. Let the bastard be dead."

She shuddered and Charlie reached over to give her shoulder a gentle squeeze. The past ten years hadn't been easy for any of them, but she'd had the hardest time of it. It wasn't easy being dead.

2007

"Enjoy what's left of your life *alien*," Lex Luthor spat at the bloody beaten man on the floor of the Daily Planet newsroom. Lois Lane watched in horror as the bald madman gave his prone victim one last savage kick to the side before hurrying out of the newsroom, followed by his gang of armed thugs.

The thugs had burst from the elevators less than thirty minutes earlier and had taken the newsroom hostage at gun point. Everyone, Lois included, had assumed Luthor was there to take her hostage to force Superman's arrival. Instead, Luthor swung his head around as if looking for someone. Finally, he spotted the person he had been searching for: Clark Kent.

"There you are, Mister Kent," Luthor purred. "Or should I say, Superman?"

There were protests of disbelief around the room but Luthor's men waved their automatic weapons around threateningly. The protests died quickly.

As Lois watched, Clark seemed to shrink in on himself as if consciously trying to obscure his height. He laughed nervously. "You think I'm..." He made that silly sideways hand motion he used to denote Superman. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" Luthor asked. "I have evidence that Superman disappears into this building and not just to visit the charming Ms. Lane here. And a check of personnel records shows there's only one person working in the building who even remotely resembles that flying freak."

"Just because I may resemble..." Clark began to protest.

"Resemble?" Luthor barked. "Superman's twin brother couldn't look more like him than you do. Or should I just call you Kal-El?"

"My name is Clark Kent," Clark managed to say.

Luthor laughed. It was an ugly laugh. "Oh, I know all about you. Clark Joseph Kent, Smallville, Kansas. Only child of Jonathan and Martha Kent - adopted *foundling* child. Did you know your upstanding, salt of the earth parents were on the FBI's watch list?"

"A lot of civil rights activists were on the FBI's watch list," Clark responded.

Luthor ignored his statement. "Graduated summa cum laude from Smallville High, then disappeared off the face of the Earth until you entered the journalism program at Met U. Graduated with honors there, then managed to wrangle a job at the most prestigious newspaper on the East Coast. How did you manage that? How did 'I never lie' manage to fake a resume good enough to get hired here?"

Out of the corner of her eye Lois saw Perry begin his own protest. One of the thugs swung his gun around to point directly at the editor and he snapped his mouth shut.

"Why do you assume it's fake?" Clark asked.

It occurred to Lois that Clark was trying to keep Luthor talking, trying to buy time. But for what? For the police to arrive? They didn't even know there was a problem. One of Luthor's first acts was to cut the office phones and the computer network. For an opening to act? It was *Clark* for heaven's sake. Goofy, aw-shucks, trip over his own feet *Clark Kent*. Unless...

It was ridiculous to think that Clark was really Superman. That would mean that *Clark* was Jason's biological father. And he had lied to her every day, insinuating himself into her life while at the same time Superman distanced himself from her. Lois looked around at her coworkers and recognized her own confusion and surprise reflected in their faces.

"What do you want, Luthor?" Lois demanded.

The bald man made a show of checking his watch. "What I want is for your little bastard to arrive. Or should I say your alien love child. Or haven't you shared that little tidbit with your co-workers? That the alien freak is a dead-beat dad?"

"That's not true," Lois protested. "Richard is Jason's father!"

"Is that how you suckered the poor boob into keeping you and your brat?" Luthor demanded.

Lois didn't have a chance to answer as the elevator doors opened and her fiancé Richard White stepped out with Jason. She saw their eyes widen as they realized something was wrong but it was too late. Luthor's men were dragging them forward.

"Now the whole family's here," Luthor chortled. "Shall we see who your brat's father really is?" He took a pistol from one of his men and pointed it at Jason.

"Luthor, why are you doing this?" Clark demanded. Lois suppressed a gasp. Clark's voice was lower, firmer, stronger. He *sounded* like Superman.

"One flying freak is more than enough for this planet. Two? I don't think so. So one of you isn't leaving here alive. If you don't act, the brat dies and I guarantee I'll make sure the entire world knows you sacrificed your bastard to save your own skin," Luthor said.

Lois saw that the color had drained from Clark's face. "What sort of sick old man are you that you would use a child like that?" Clark asked.

"Haven't you figured that out?" Luthor demanded. "I'm saving the world from *you*. By the way, *my* gun is loaded with kryptonite."

Lois watched in horror as Luthor's finger tightened on the trigger. The shot echoed in the large room and she reflexively closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes she expected to see her baby dead on the floor. Instead, Clark was shielding him with his body. Blood was staining Clark's jacket.

Richard was standing there, shocked, pale, horrified. Jason was clinging to Richard's leg, tears streaming down his face.

Then Luthor's goons grabbed Clark away from Jason and Richard and began beating him. It was merciless, barbaric, but to Lois's surprise, Clark was getting his licks in as well. He managed to floor two of Luthor's goons.

Luthor was furious. Another shot rang out and this time Clark went down. The beating didn't stop. Even Luthor was getting in the act, kicking him while he was down. Lois was certain she heard bones cracking under the onslaught. And through all of it, Luthor's other goons waved their guns around. No one dared move. No one dared help injured, defenseless,

innocuous, Clark.

Then one of the goons yelled out a warning. Luthor gave Clark one last vicious kick before leaving the newsroom. "Enjoy what's left of your life *alien*."

Lois was shaking as she knelt beside the bloodied man on the floor. She couldn't even tell if he was breathing. "Clark?"

"Help's on the way," Richard said from somewhere close.

A murmur went through the newsroom. Lois looked up to see a dark haired man kneeling across from her - Bruce Wayne, the Daily Planet's publisher.

"The police were notified as soon as we lost the security system and phones," Wayne said. "Luthor won't get far." He turned his attention to the man on the floor. "Hang in there buddy."

"Luthor was going on about how Clark was really Superman," someone said. Lois thought it might be Jimmy, but she couldn't be sure. Nothing was making sense.

"He said he had kryptonite bullets," the voice went on.

Wayne nodded and tapped the earpiece Lois just now noticed he was wearing. "Code Dallas. Repeat Code Dallas," he said softly to the air.

The next few minutes were a blur. Suddenly she was surrounded by blue uniforms that pulled her away while white uniforms gently moved Clark's body onto a gurney. They cut away his jacket and shirt sleeve and began hunting for a vein for an IV. *He had to be alive if they were starting an IV, right?*

There was no sign of Superman's distinctive skin tight blue.

"Mommy?" a small voice asked and she felt Jason's warm body against her leg. She knelt down to be on eye level with him. His eyes were wide with fear, brimming with tears. She scanned the rest of his body. He was unhurt, just scared.

"It's okay, baby," Lois assured her son. "It's going to be okay..."

From behind her, Perry was shouting orders to the rest of the crew: "This is a newsroom. This is news! Gil, you and Jaime are on Luthor. Polly, you're on Kent. Why did Luthor think *he* was Superman? And where the hell *was* Superman?"

Wait... Perry doesn't believe Luthor's claims about Clark?

"Mexico City, chief," a voice called out. "An apartment building collapse... oh shit..."

The noise in the newsroom dropped to nothing and someone turned up the volume on the GNN monitor. "... have they found him?" a reporter was asking someone. In the background men were attacking a burning pile of rubble with shovels and blankets. Then a shout. The camera came closer as workers, some with bare bleeding hands, rolled away chunks of concrete to reveal a bloody, dust-gray body - but the dust didn't hide the fact that the body belonged to a dark-haired man wearing a Superman uniform. The dust also didn't hide the sickly green color of some of the chips of rubble.

"Is he..." the reporter on the screen asked. One of the rescue workers shook his head and the reporter turned back to the camera. He swallowed hard, visibly shaken. "To bring you up to date - less than an hour ago, reports came in concerning the collapse of an apartment building that was under construction on the outskirts of Mexico City. Witnesses say that Superman was on the scene digging out survivors almost before anyone realized what had happened. Then the unthinkable - while Superman was inside looking for the last unaccounted for workmen, a bomb brought down what remained of the building. As you can see, rescue workers and members of the construction team have been working feverishly to rescue the being who has rescued so many, but now..."

On the screen a man with a stethoscope shook his head solemnly. Another man draped a worn jacket over the face of the dead man.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the world," the reporter said solemnly. "It would appear that Superman is dead."

"How..." Lois managed to stammer out even though she wasn't sure what she was even trying to ask.

"Lois, how about we go home?" Richard asked, breaking into her whirling thoughts.

At first his words didn't really register, but then she shook her head. "No, I'll be okay." She wasn't sure if she was lying or not.

"Lois, at least get Jason away from here," Perry suggested gruffly. "Your sister's or even Alice." He nodded meaningfully at the police tape that now surrounded the area where Clark had been shot and beaten. Men and women wearing protective masks and nitrile gloves were taking samples of everything they could.

Lois nodded. It would be better if Jason was away from the newsroom. She grabbed her purse and keys and took Jason's hand.

"Ms. Lane, we'll need to get your statement," one of the officers said.

"I'll be back," she promised. "I just need to get my son away from here."

She started toward the glass doors to the elevators only to find that Wayne had fallen into step with her on Jason's other side.

"I'll walk you to your car," he said as he ushered her into the elevator car. "I could drive you, if you'd like."

"No, thank you," Lois said. After a few moments the elevator doors opened onto the one of the floors that connected to the parking garage. She led the way through the steel doors and then found her path blocked by the billionaire.

"Ms. Lane," he began. "Clark is a very good friend of mine, and I promised him I would do everything in my power to keep you and your son safe. So for his sake, I need you to trust me."

"Why would Clark..."

"I think we both know why," Wayne said quietly.

It was insane, utterly insane, but Lois suddenly knew that Luthor had been right. Clark Kent was Superman. She had a sudden vision of Clark in jeans and a plaid shirt, face bloodied.

"Maybe we should hire a body guard," he was saying.

"I don't want a bodyguard. I want the man I fell in love with," she heard herself say.

"I know Lois, and I wish he were here."

"He..." she began then thought better of it. *If Clark is dead it won't matter and if he isn't, we'll have time to hash this out.* "What do you want me to do?"

The news came over the limousine's radio - after the horror of Luthor's the attack in the Daily Planet newsroom, a car bomb had gone off in the adjacent parking garage.

It was just one more shock in a day filled with horrible shocks.

Before getting into Bruce Wayne's waiting limousine, the billionaire had taken her and Jason to the nearest lady's lounge and had them both change clothes from the skin out. She found she wasn't surprised that he had replacements ready, in their exact sizes. He took Jason's book bag and his med-alert bracelet as well as Lois's jewelry, including her ear studs, and her purse.

Under normal circumstances, she would have been worried about the fact he seemed so

prepared. But these weren't normal circumstances.

"Where are we going?" Lois finally asked the driver. He was elderly with a pleasant face and a British accent.

"To Wayne Manor, mum," the driver answered. "You and the lad can stay there until Mister Wayne has things arranged for you."

"You mean he doesn't have everything already figured out?" Lois asked.

The driver chuckled. "We have tried, but I'm afraid some things simply had to be improvised."

It was an hour drive from Metropolis to the Wayne estate outside Gotham City. Jason fell asleep soon after they hit the freeway, leaving Lois alone with her thoughts. *Clark was Superman*. The shy, inconsequential farm boy Perry had saddled her with so many years ago had a part-time job as a superhero. She knew she'd slept with Superman, and that Jason was, in fact, his son. She remembered having dinner in a crystal cathedral, remembered his rapt expression as she slipped out of her clothes to stand naked before him. She remembered his kisses - first shy then growing in sureness.

But how she had gotten to the crystal cathedral in the first place was a blank, as was her return to Metropolis. She did have an odd memory, or was it a dream, of firing her pistol at Clark. 'I risked my life instead of yours,' she heard herself say to him. *She fired her gun and he stayed standing*. Had she known about him then, she wondered. Had she known she was making love to Clark when they were in the crystal palace?

A news report came on and Alfred, the driver, turned up the volume. "More on the brutal attack that took place in the Daily Planet newsroom this afternoon. The victim, Clark Kent, a senior staffer for the paper, was declared dead on arrival at Metropolis General Hospital. His attackers, who witnesses claim included convicted terrorist Lex Luthor, are still at large. It is unclear whether or not the attack on Kent is related to the car bomb that claimed the lives of fellow staffer Lois Lane and her young son less than an hour later."

"A car bomb?" Lois repeated. She glanced down to make sure Jason was still asleep.

"Yes, mum," Alfred said, keeping his voice low. "Wayne Security found two of Luthor's people watching the car. Apparently, Luthor planned to grab the boy, kill you and make it look like you were both killed in the explosion. Brilliant plan if I must say so, but luckily, we got there first."

"That's why Mister Wayne..."

"If Luthor believes his plan backfired and killed you both, we have a much greater chance of keeping you two alive until we can deal with the bastard."

"And what can Bruce Wayne do to 'deal with the bastard'?" Lois asked. Everyone knew that Wayne was a womanizing, self-centered fop. His one talent appeared to be that he knew what he was and surrounded himself with brilliant administrators who actually ran his businesses for him.

"Clark is a very good friend of mine, and I promised him I would do everything in my power to keep you and your son safe," Wayne had said. Had she misjudged the billionaire playboy?

Alfred chuckled. "You might be surprised at what Mister Wayne can do, Ms. Lane."

Alfred drove the limo past the helicopter parked on the lawn, and into a garage that was larger than most suburban houses. The doors closed automatically behind the car and Alfred ushered Lois and Jason through a side door and down a passageway to the main house.

Bruce Wayne was waiting for them in the house. "Welcome to my home, Ms. Lane." He was wearing fresh clothes but there was a white bandage on his forehead. "I'll show you to your rooms," he added.

"Uh, sir?" Alfred interrupted, gesturing to his own forehead.

Wayne gave him a sheepish grin. "I was a little close when the bomb went off. But it did increase my credibility when I told the police I had seen our guests get in the car before it went up. By the way, Alfred, you need to get onto the insurance company. The blast totaled the Lamborghini, too."

"Yes, sir. They'll be thrilled to hear about that."

"I'm sure they will. Oh, how was the drive?"

"We were tailed when we left the building, but they didn't follow us onto the freeway," Alfred reported. "It seemed rather amateurish, actually. I think the first one wanted me to know they were watching."

Wayne nodded and Lois had the impression he wasn't surprised by Alfred's report. After a moment Wayne beckoned Lois and Jason to follow him to the third floor. He unlocked an oak door and ushered them through, handing Lois the key.

"The old house simply had a lot of bedrooms," Wayne said as Lois looked around the first room. It was a sitting room rather than a bedroom. "When we rebuilt it, I had them arranged into suites," Wayne continued. "Two bedrooms and a shared bath. I don't have that many visitors staying over, and the ones that do prefer their privacy. Alfred likes serving dinner at seven and he gets annoyed when people are late. Other than that, we don't stand much on formality when it's just us."

He turned to leave.

"Mister Wayne? How long will we be your guests? I mean, when can we go back home?"

He regarded her evenly. "First, I think we're beyond Ms. Lane and Mister Wayne, don't you? And as for the other part... As far as the world is concerned, you and your son are dead. Now, you can walk out the front door here and try to go back to your life in Metropolis, but if you do, no one, not Superman, not the Batman, *no one*, will be able to keep Luthor from carrying out his plans for you and your son. And I will tell you something even Clark didn't realize. In the event Luthor or someone like him does get control of Superman's son... Luthor's not the only one with kryptonite bullets."

There was a chilling finality in his expression as he closed the door, leaving her alone with her son.

What the hell do I do now?

Bruce was as charming as ever when Lois and Jason came down for dinner. It was as if the earlier threat had come from someone else wearing the billionaire's face.

Lois was told that she and Jason had the freedom of the house but it was recommended they not leave the confines of the mansion. Even though the mansion was set well away from any roads there was still the chance that someone with a high powered telescope could catch sight of them. Lois didn't bother to point out that if someone had that kind of technology, they could certainly see through the mansion's large windows. Then she realized that all the windows were silvered - no one could see inside unless the glass was backlit. She also suspected that measures had been taken to foil parabolic microphones and other similar technologies.

Bruce Wayne liked his privacy for more than she would have guessed, considering his

public persona. But it fit the Bruce Wayne she'd seen up in the suite. The one who thought the Batman was more than just an urban legend or a criminal vigilante. The one who seemed to know a lot about things a playboy wouldn't normally know.

She put on a brave smile for Jason. The day had been traumatic enough for him. There was no need for him to know about her worries.

The next morning Lois woke up half expecting to find the nightmare of the day before to have been just that - a nightmare. But it hadn't been. She was in a suite in Wayne Manor with Jason. Clark was dead and everyone thought she and Jason were too. *Richard... He must be devastated. And Lucy and Mom and Dad...*

Jason was curled up in her bed, buried under the blankets with just the top of his head showing. Lois decided to leave him be. She grabbed the baby monitor receiver from the night table and headed downstairs to find some coffee.

She found Alfred, and fresh coffee, in the kitchen. It was still early and part of her wanted to gulp down the coffee and start working on... whatever. She'd been in the middle of a story on corruption in the building inspector's office. After the devastation Luthor had caused with his 'island', some contractors were cutting corners while rushing to put up housing and offices to replace what had been lost. But the only way the contractors could get away with it was with the collusion of the city inspectors.

Someone else would be finishing her story. Someone else would be finishing *all* her stories.

"Sleep well, mum?" Alfred asked.

"Not really," Lois admitted as she sipped her coffee. "Do you have any idea how long we need to stay here?"

"With any luck we should have things squared away in a week or so," Alfred said. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"No, thank you," Lois said. A copy of the Daily Planet was folded over on the breakfast table along with several other newspapers. Bruce read the Daily Planet? Of course he did - he owned it.

She unfolded it to reveal the front page. 'Superman Murdered' the headline said. Below the headline was one of Jimmy's photos of Superman - the iconic one of him holding the Daily Planet globe on his shoulders like Atlas. Next to it was a shot of his bloodied body in the rubble as rescue workers looked on in horror. Noel's byline was on the story.

The front page of the Metro section also had a large headline and photos. 'Daily Planet Journalists Murdered.' The articles were accompanied by staff photos of her and Clark. Below them were more photos - one of the burned out Audi and another of Luthor standing over Clark's body in the newsroom. Luthor's pistol was clearly visible in his hand. How Jimmy managed to get that photo without being killed was nothing short of a miracle.

"Luthor and two of his thugs were picked up this morning," Bruce said as he walked in. He poured himself a coffee and sat down opposite Lois at the table. "He practically gave himself up. Now he's claiming that he was set up by the Planet and that Superman's death is a hoax to cover up the fact that Superman was Clark Kent."

"It hardly matters if they're both dead," Lois pointed out.

"Very true," Bruce agreed. "But what about his mother?"

"His mother?"

Bruce reached for one of the other newspapers on the breakfast table. He handed it to her. This one was from Wichita. There was an article below the fold with a small photo of

Clark and an elderly woman. The photo next to it was of a burnt out farmhouse. That headline read 'Slain Journalist's Home Destroyed, Mother Murdered - possible gangland connections.'

Lois looked over at Bruce, hardly able to breathe. *Luthor had Clark's mother murdered as well?*

Bruce seemed to read her mind. "We got her and her companion out in time," he said. "We knew something was going down. Smallville is a very small town and it was noticed when strangers showed up asking questions about Clark and his family. It became even more suspicious when the courthouse records room was broken into. Nothing was taken, but still..."

He sighed. "As I said, Smallville is a very small town and Martha had a lot of friends looking out for her."

"Where is she now?" Lois asked. "Does she know about Clark?"

"She's safe," Bruce answered. Lois noticed that he didn't answer her second question.

Any further musings were interrupted by a wail coming from the baby monitor: "Mommy!"

It took several minutes for Lois to get Jason calmed down. He had woken up in a strange bed in a strange house and had, not surprisingly, panicked.

"Where's Daddy?" he kept repeating. "Why didn't he come too?"

Lois found herself at a loss to explain to her son why Richard, the only father he had ever known, wasn't with them. But then, she wasn't completely sure of the answers herself.

"I know we can't go back to Metropolis until Luthor's been 'neutralized'," she said to Bruce, "but can we at least let Richard know we're safe?"

"Lois, we don't know who Luthor's told about Jason being... well, you know," Bruce told her. "Metropolis won't be safe for Jason any time soon."

"I wasn't meaning we should just waltz into the danger zone and say 'Hi honey, sorry to scare you like that...'" Lois said. "Just send him a note that we're okay, that we're in witness protection, and we'll try to get in touch. Is that too much to ask?"

Bruce sighed. "I'll run it past my security people, but I'm not sure they'll go for it," he said. "They say that a clean break is best."

Bruce was scarce for several days, although the gossip columns documented the parties he'd been seen at. When he finally did show up, he seemed remarkably chipper. "Luthor was arraigned today," he announced with a smile. "Multiple counts of conspiracy to commit murder, multiple counts of aggravated assault and assault with intent to kill... and those are just the beginning. The state of Kansas and the Feds haven't weighed in yet with *their* charges, yet."

"So, how soon before we can stop worrying about him?" Lois asked.

"Soon, I hope. But considering he managed to wriggle his way out to two consecutive life sentences..."

"You're not holding out much hope?"

He shook his head. "One thing, though. My security people are not completely averse to giving your fiancé a note letting him know you and Jason are safe. I can deliver it to him during the memorial for Superman this afternoon. In fact, they're not completely averse to you attending the ceremony, so long as you wear a disguise and don't approach anyone you used to know."

"I can do that," she assured him.

He raised an eyebrow at her.
"I can do that."

Bruce's helicopter deposited them at the heliport on top of the Daily Planet parking garage. From there they took a limo to Centennial Park where the service for Superman was being held. Bruce was quiet, somber even, as though he really believed this was Superman's funeral.

Two MFD ladder trucks were sitting to either side of the main road into the park. The ladders were extended, nearly touching at the top, and an American flag was suspended between them. The rest of the flags in the city were at half-staff. The governor had declared a week long state of mourning for the superhero.

Lois couldn't even begin to guess what it took for Metropolis to get Superman's body away from the Mexican government, or the other agencies that would have wanted to dissect him, to find out what made him 'super'. But then, if Clark was really Superman, the body in the casket couldn't really be Superman, could it? She resolved to ask Bruce about it once they were alone.

A dais had been set up at the west end of the park, sitting next to a small white windowless building that Lois didn't recall ever seeing before. On the far side of the white building a small orchestra had been arranged. It was currently playing Copeland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*. On the dais itself, a bier had been set up and there were a number of folding chairs at the back of the platform. A simple podium decorated only with a metal plaque depicting Superman's shield had been set up to one side of the bier.

The park was already crowded with on-lookers. Lois wondered how many of them were because Superman had touched their lives in some way. Or were they there for the spectacle? She was one of the top investigative journalists in the nation but she realized she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer to that question. She was afraid she'd be disappointed in the answer.

Bruce led the way to their reserved seats in the front row. A short distance away she spotted Perry and his wife, Richard and one of the girls from research. Richard looked like he'd been through hell. His eyes were bloodshot, nose raw. She wanted to go over to him, to comfort him, but she felt Bruce's hand on her arm. He shook his head ever so slightly.

Lois nodded. She had agreed to not contact anyone she knew. Bruce was going to hand her letter to Richard after the service. Richard looked over in her direction, but there was no sudden recognition in his face. She was just one of the crowd - Bruce Wayne's female companion of the day. At the moment she was blonde with dark sun glasses and a little black dress that cost more than the entire wardrobe she'd left behind.

The audience fell silent and Lois heard a slow rumbling rhythm. She realized after a moment that she was hearing drums. The funeral procession had entered the park. After a few moments four drummers appeared, representing the military services. Lois wondered who had arranged that. To her knowledge Superman hadn't been a favorite of the U.S. military establishment. He was a wild card and they didn't like wild cards.

The drummers were followed by two black horses in black harness pulling a cart with a simple coffin. Their hooves beat a dis-synchronous rhythm on the pavement. The coffin had a United Nations flag draped over it as a pall.

The carriage was followed by a rider-less horse, a pair of boots turned backwards in the stirrups, an honor guard with rifles, and a formation of uniformed police and fire fighters. Each

had a black band across their badge. Lois recalled reading somewhere that the bands were traditionally made from the black lining of old uniform hats. She didn't know if that was true, but it was a nice story.

The official procession was followed by a mixed group of 'civilians', people who had simply fallen in with the procession as it moved through the city to the park. People who wanted to pay their last respects, people who didn't want to let Superman go.

She saw Jimmy was taking photos, catching the arrival of the procession.

Six uniformed officers - three police and three fire, all wearing white gloves - picked up the coffin and made their way to the dais. The officers place the coffin on its bier and stood at attention as a group of clergymen and women gathered on the dais. Lois had never seen, never even imagined, a group as ecumenical as this one. Ministers, priests, rabbis, mullahs, lamas, and monks - Metropolis was well known for its racial and religious tolerance and it had myriad and diverse religious groups. And it seemed that every one of them had sent someone to invoke the deity on Superman's behalf.

After a minute or so, one of the police officers stepped over to the podium, tucking his uniform hat under his arm. He looked solemnly over the assembly. "I am Inspector William Henderson of the Metropolis Police Department. I have been asked by my fellows in uniform to say our piece since I was the one of us who had the most contact with him." He paused a moment as if deciding what to say.

"Superman first appeared in our fair city nine years ago and he proved his worth by saving lives that first day," he began. "He proved his worth every day he was here, never asking for anything in return except that we put aside our differences and care for each other.

"My first impression of him was that he was young, very young. Not much older than my own kids. My second impression was that he was far wiser than his years. He cherished life and he believed in the rule of law. He never took an oath to uphold our laws, to serve our people, but he did just that. He put his own body between gunmen and innocents. He walked into fire. He swallowed bombs. He didn't have to. He wasn't paid to. It wasn't his job. But every time he did, that meant someone lived who might not have otherwise. Every time he did, a police officer or fire fighter or a civilian was able to go home to their loved ones.

"We know he proved his worth while he was with us, because we know how much we missed him when he left to seek his home. And we know how glad we were when he returned to us.

"He once told me he didn't consider himself courageous because it was easy to stand in front of a bullet or walk into an inferno if you knew it couldn't hurt you. I asked him what it was that he *was* afraid of and his answer was 'failure'. I was able to tell him that day that was what the rest of us were afraid of too. Those of us in uniform don't consider ourselves courageous. We go out everyday and we do our jobs. Sometimes we don't get there fast enough, or we find we're not strong enough or smart enough and we fail in doing our job protecting the public. Sometimes that failure means one of us doesn't make it home. But we don't call it courage.

"He didn't consider himself courageous. But when this city, this world was threatened, he didn't flinch from the duty he'd taken on himself. He went out, knowing he might not come back, knowing the odds were against him. We were lucky that day. He lived. But heroism has a price. Those that prey on the innocent, the weak, the defenseless - they hate heroes. And because he was a hero, because he defended the weak and the innocent, because he thought the rule of law was an essential part of being civilized, he was cut down by those who abhor

everything he stood for.

"Superman did not carry a badge or a gun, nor did he carry a Halligan or wear a fire helmet, but my brothers and sisters in uniform and I, we're proud to call him one of our own. He was one of Metropolis's finest, one of her bravest and I was privileged to call him my friend. We will miss him and we all swear that his killers *will* be brought to justice."

Lois though she saw tears in the older man's eyes as he left the podium and put his hat back on. He saluted the coffin and then joined the other officers standing on the dais, guarding the coffin.

More prayers and invocations, poems and hymns. A baritone from the Metropolis Opera Company sang a familiar spiritual. Lois had heard it at other funerals but hadn't paid attention to the lyrics. The orchestra struck up the accompaniment.

*Going home, going home,
I'm a going home.
Quiet-like, some still day,
I'm just going home.*

*It's not far, just close by,
Through an open door.
Work all done, care laid by,
Going to fear no more.
Mother's there, expecting me,
Father's waiting too.
Lots of folk gathered there,
All the friends I knew.*

*Nothing's lost, all's gain,
No more fear or pain,
No more stumbling by the way,
No more longing for the day,
Going to roam no more.*

*Morning star lights the way,
Restless dreams all done.
Shadows gone, break of day,
Real life has begun.
There's no break, there's no end,
Just a living on.
Wide awake with a smile,
going on and on...*

*Going home, going home,
I'm just going home.
It's not far, just close by,
Through an open door.
I am going home.....
I'm just going home....*

*Going home, going home,
Going home, going home,
Going home....*

Lois realized she didn't even know if Clark believed in God or an afterlife. Somehow she thought he did, but it wasn't anything he had ever discussed with her, or if he had tried, she hadn't been listening. How many other things had he tried to discuss with her and she hadn't been listening?

She felt tears begin to run down her face. Bruce put his arm around her and pulled her close. "I was so mean to him," she whispered. "It was so easy to love the superhero, why was it so hard to see the man?"

"He worked very hard at being invisible," Bruce whispered back. "Maybe he worked *too* hard at it."

One of the fire-fighters took the podium.

*Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings.
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun split clouds - and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of; wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hovering there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air;
Up, up the long delirious burning blue
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark nor even eagle flew;
And while, with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high, untrampled sanctity of space
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.¹*

Lois remembered that poem from high school lit. It had been written by a young pilot and it seemed even more fitting for a man who flew without those silver wings.

Finally, a husky black man approached the podium and the microphone. "Brothers and sisters," he began. His voice was deep and musical. "We, the family of humankind, have gathered here to celebrate the life and mourn the passing of a great and kind man. We do not know his name. We knew him only as Superman.

"He was different from us, possessing powers and abilities almost beyond imagining, but he did not use those powers to set himself above us.

"No, Superman used his powers to bring comfort to those in need and hope to those mired in the depths of despair.

"And he could fly. Oh, how he could fly! He soared through our skies - some say like a great bird, but I say like an angel.

"I once saw him tear apart the walls of a burning building - rip them apart with his bare hands - and pluck a young baby from certain death, cradling that child in his mighty arms as gently and as tenderly as would that child's own mother.

"It is said that Superman had enemies. Well, there were among us men who made of him their enemy; that cannot be denied. But his real enemies were the enemies that bedevil us all:

greed... fear... hate... ignorance. He fought those enemies and inspired others to fight them as well.

"Superman came to us, a stranger from another planet. He was many things to many people. Some saw him as a champion of life, others as a protector of the oppressed, and still others as a mighty warrior in the battle for truth and justice. And, yes, he was all those things and more. But mainly, he was our friend.

"He did not care about our religious beliefs or our politics. He did not care about our nationalities or our gender or the color of our skins. He cared about people. He cared about us. We are, all of us, richer for having known him, and poorer for having lost him.

"Superman was, as I said, from another planet - and I do not know what God, if any, he worshiped. But I pray to my God to comfort and protect him, as he comforted and protected us all." ²

There were so many prayers. But none had been as personal, or as direct, as that black minister's, except perhaps Inspector Henderson's. The image of Superman as an angel was oddly comforting. He *had* flown like an angel.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
Took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.* ³

Overhead Lois heard the thrum of helicopters. She looked up to see a formation of four police helicopters approaching from the south. When they were overhead, one of the copters veered off to the west, leaving the other three aircraft in formation - the missing man.

On the dais, the uniformed men stood at attention. When the helicopters passed, Henderson and one of the other pall bearers folded up the flag. That done the pall bearers lifted the coffin and somewhere a bagpiper started a mournful rendition of *Amazing Grace*.

The pall bearers took the coffin down the side steps to the small white building. The bronze-covered door was open and a concrete vault was set in the center of the floor. The pall bearers set the coffin on a frame on top of the vault. Later, the coffin would be lowered into the vault and the top would be sealed. But now, the officers turned as one and left the

chamber, closing the door behind them.

The bagpiper finished the dirge and the honor guard fired off three volleys. A twenty-one gun salute. A bugler sounded out *Taps*. After a while the spectators began to disburse.

Bruce hurried over to Perry and Richard and handed Richard the small white envelope with her note. She watched as Richard opened the envelope and read the note: *'Richard. My son and I are okay. We hope to get in touch with you soon. LL.*

She saw Richard's head come up and he looked around the area but he still didn't recognize her. Lois fought down the urge to wave at him. This was too public a place.

Then Richard threw the note back at Bruce and walked away, the girl from research tagging behind him like a puppy. Perry and Bruce watched after him, then Perry's shoulders sagged and he shook his head. Perry and Bruce spoke for a moment and Perry nodded. Bruce headed back to Lois and she saw Perry's eyes follow the billionaire and for a moment, Perry looked straight at her and Lois was almost certain he saw through her disguise.

Then he turned away, taking his wife's arm as he followed Richard.

"It didn't look like that went over very well," Lois commented as Bruce came up to her and they started walking back to the limo.

"I was afraid he wouldn't take it well," Bruce admitted. "My sources tell me he didn't take Luthor's revelation about Jason White's parentage well either."

"I... his fiancée never told him he was her son's father," Lois said carefully. "She just gave up trying to convince him he wasn't. His name wasn't even listed on the birth certificate."

"I'm told that didn't sit very well either, when he found out," Bruce said.

"He knew," Lois protested, keeping her voice low. "That was one of their regular arguments, that she never put him down as the boy's father, that she wouldn't set a wedding date. A fiancé has no legal standing as next of kin."

"Why didn't she just go ahead and marry him?" Bruce asked.

"I don't know," Lois said. It was something she'd been thinking about even before Luthor's attack. Richard was kind, intelligent, loving - a great catch. But as much as she loved him, some part of her simply had been unable to commit to him heart and soul. Some part of her was still waiting for her knight in shining armor to come back and sweep her off her feet.

Only he came back and discovered she was engaged to another man. He was too much the gentleman to try and come between her and her betrothed.

"It was a lovely ceremony," she finally said.

"Yes, it was," Bruce agreed. "He was important to a lot of people."

"Who was..." She nodded her head in the direction of the park.

He seemed surprised then resigned at her question. He beckoned her into a coffee shop, paid for two mochas and sat down in a back booth, away from the front door. "An up and coming actor was killed in a car accident four days before Luthor shot Kent. He bore a striking resemblance to a certain mild mannered reporter working for a great metropolitan newspaper, and a certain Kryptonian refugee."

"You're sure it was an accident?" Lois asked.

Bruce nodded. "The other driver was drunk. DOA. There was no evidence either vehicle was tampered with." He chuckled but there was little humor there. "The actor had just been cast to play Superman in a movie about his return from Krypton. Superman even attended the memorial service."

Lois sipped her coffee as she contemplated how to phrase her next question. "Is my son's father all right?" she said after a long moment.

"He's alive."

"Can I see him?"

"He should be at the mansion by the time we get back," Bruce said. "But I need to warn you. He was very badly hurt."

A/N:

¹ Fl. Officer John Gillespie McGee (1922-1941)

² Reverend Leroy's eulogy comes from the novel: **The Death and Life of Superman** by Roger Stern. © 1993

³ Robert Frost, **A Road Not Taken**

"He was very badly hurt," Bruce had said about Clark. He wouldn't say any more, spending the flight back to Gotham working on his laptop with his phone in his ear.

Lois was left alone with her thoughts. *Clark was Superman. If Clark was alive, then why the charade of Superman's funeral? "He was badly hurt..."*

Maybe Superman really is dead.

Clark... God, I was awful to him. Everyone knew what a crush he had on me, how much he put up with, and how enamored I was of the bright and flashy hero. I never even saw him standing in front of me every day. It never even occurred to me what he really meant when he said 'I'm always around.'

How could I have been so blind? And Jason... Jason was drawn to him like he knew they were related. Like he knew Clark was his father.

The helicopter set down on its usual place on the lawn. Lois wiped away the tears she hadn't even realized she was shedding. She took a deep breath and hurried into the house. There were things she had to tend to before worrying about Clark.

Alfred had been under strict orders not to let Jason watch the funeral coverage on the TV so she was understandably curious as to how her five year-old and the aging British butler had gotten along while she and Bruce were in Metropolis.

She needn't have worried.

"Mommy, Mommy!" Jason yelled as soon as they were in the door. "I helped Mister Alfred make cookies and then I watched the Alvin Movie, and then a big black car came and Mister Clark was in it and I helped Mister Alfred help Mister Clark and..."

"Whoa," Lois ordered. "Clark is here?" She glanced over at Alfred who nodded.

"He arrived about an hour ago," Alfred informed them. "I put him in the suite next to yours."

Clark is here. "How is he?" Lois asked, almost afraid of the answer. 'He was badly hurt...'

"As well as can be expected, I imagine," Alfred told her. "I was just preparing something for him when you arrived." He turned to Bruce. "Doctor Klein would like to speak with you at your earliest convenience."

"I'll take care of that right now," Bruce promised and disappeared into his den.

Lois turned to Alfred. "You said you were fixing him something. How about I take it up to him?"

"You're a guest. I'm not in the habit of making guests work," he protested mildly.

"Please?" Lois asked. She wasn't sure why she felt it was important, but it was.

After a moment he relented. "Let me finish putting the tray together."

Jason pulled on his mother's skirt. "Mommy, Mister Clark started to cry when he saw me and he hugged me real tight but it didn't hurt..." Jason stopped and gave his mother a worried look. "Mommy, why did Mister Clark cry?"

"Because he was so happy to see you and that you were okay," Lois managed to say.

The tray was cheery with a bright napkin and a bud vase. The meal was chicken soup with home baked bread and Lois had a suspicion that Alfred was one of those who thought chicken soup was the equivalent of penicillin for all your ills.

Jason had wanted to come with her but she managed to dissuade him by telling she and Clark had grown-up things to discuss.

He seemed to accept her statement then quite innocently asked, "Mommy, why did the bad bald man hurt Mister Clark?"

Lois wasn't sure what to say. How was she supposed to explain what had happened in the newsroom, that Clark had stepped in front of a bullet to keep Luthor from murdering a small boy? *'One flying freak is more than enough for this planet, ' Luthor had said.*

"The bad man hurt Clark because Clark wouldn't let him hurt you," Lois finally said.

"Is that why they blew up our car?" he asked.

How did he know that? She nodded, afraid to speak for fear of asking him questions she wasn't prepared to hear the answers to.

"Is Mister Clark my daddy too?"

Lois nodded again. Jason didn't seem surprised at her admission.

"Mister Alfred said we can't go home because it isn't safe," Jason said. "Will Daddy come with us when we move to our new house?"

"I don't know, munchkin," Lois admitted, trying to keep from breaking into tears. How was she going to explain to her son that the man he'd always considered his father wasn't likely to want them back in his life.

"Oh," Jason said before he hurried off to 'help' Alfred.

She knocked on the door to the suite next to hers. There was no answer, but she hadn't really expected one. The door was unlocked and she rolled the cart in. Alfred had told her Clark was in the left-hand room. That door was half-open.

She knocked on that door, but again there was no response. She pushed the door open and peered inside. Instead of the queen-sized bed she had in her room, there was a hospital bed with several monitors on a rack beside it. The EKG was beeping along at forty beats per minute, the same as it had when he was in the hospital after the New Krypton incident.

Only that time she hadn't known who it really was laying in the hospital bed. *'Jason is your son. He needs you, and so do I, ' she had whispered to him, not knowing if he could hear her. She suspected he had, but he never confirmed it.*

"Clark?"

The gaunt, dark-haired figure on the bed turned his head to look at her. The bruises and cuts on his face from the beating were still evident. There was a noticeable lump on his jaw. A cotton robe hid any other visible injuries. His horn-rim glasses were nowhere to be seen. *'He was badly hurt...' But he should have healed up by now.*

"Lois?" His voice was weak and he sounded like he almost didn't believe his eyes.

"Alfred made a tray for you," she said. "I brought it up."

"Bruce kept telling me you were alive but I didn't believe him until I saw Jason here,"

Clark said. "I thought..."

"He got Jason and me away before Luthor could get to us," Lois explained. "You know, for a dissolute playboy, he certainly comes through in an emergency."

"Bruce is full of hidden talents," Clark told her. He seemed tired. His head fell back against the pillows.

"I hope you're hungry," Lois said, trying to sound cheery. "Alfred and Jason worked hard to put this together." She brought the cart closer and set the tray on the bed-table, moving it in front of him.

"I haven't been very hungry," Clark told her.

"Well, you have to eat otherwise you'll never get..." She stopped, suddenly aware of what she was going to say. *'... get your strength back.'* *Superman was solar powered. He didn't need food.*

"It smells great," he said, picking up the spoon awkwardly in his left hand. That was when Lois realized his robe had hidden the bandages that swathed his right arm.

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She had never been this nervous around Clark before. "Bruce said you were badly hurt. How badly?"

He paused a long moment before answering. "I don't think they've given me a full inventory of the damage, but aside from being shot twice, I had four broken ribs, both lungs punctured, a lacerated liver, bruised heart muscle, two cracked vertebra in my lower back, multiple fractures in my right arm, broken pelvis and bruised kidneys. Oh, and my jaw is pinned together in two places."

At his recitation, Lois started to feel tears coming into her eyes. "Oh Clark, I'm so sorry," she murmured. No one had even tried to help him. They had all been too afraid of Luthor and his men. "We all just stood there..."

"Luthor would have killed anyone who stepped forward to help. He wanted everyone to feel helpless. That's one of the ways he gets his kicks," Clark said. "I'm surprised he didn't finish me off right then."

"We think he wanted you alive long enough for him to grab Jason, kill Lois, and make sure you knew about it," Bruce said from the doorway. "Luckily, Luthor may be a genius, but he's still a thug. I don't think it ever occurred to him that you might have people looking out after you because they actually care about you as a person."

"Bruce, I..." Clark began.

"Don't thank me yet," Bruce warned. "Metropolis buried Superman today."

"It was a lovely ceremony," Lois added. "The city went all out."

"Is Superman really dead?" Clark asked softly.

Bruce sighed. "We're not sure. Doctor Klein thinks he's isolated the reason you're not healing at your usual speed. It looks like it wasn't just kryptonite in the bullets Luthor used. There was also a toxin, almost like a virus, keeping your Kryptonian organelles from functioning properly. So far you're holding your own against it and given time, your body may be able to overcome it. Or Klein may be able to develop a treatment. But for now you're essentially human."

"So, Luthor won after all?" Clark said. "He murdered Superman."

"We're letting him think so," Bruce said.

"But there's more, isn't there?"

"The New Troy D.A. hasn't announced it yet, but I have my own sources," Bruce said somberly. "Luthor has agreed to turn state's evidence against his accomplices and has agreed

to plead guilty to two counts of conspiracy to commit murder in trade for admission into the Witness Security program. He's also agreed to help the D.O.D. unlock the secrets of Kryptonian weapons technology."

"So he agrees to help them and he walks?" Lois asked. She couldn't help the outrage she felt growing in her. *Luthor destroyed Clark's life, her life, her son's life. He traumatized everyone close to her and now he was going to escape justice?*

"Luckily, no," Bruce told her. "He'll be spending his prison time in a high security unit. Chances are he'll be spending it in a small cell, segregated from the other prisoners. He won't be simply walking away."

"He's escaped prison more than once. It took Superman to find him last time," Clark reminded him. "And he *still* managed to wriggle himself free."

"I can't guarantee he'll stay put," Bruce admitted. "But Luthor's not the only genius on this planet. I think we'll be able to hold him."

The billionaire straightened up, nodding to the tray in front of Clark. "You'd better eat that or Alfred will be extremely put out."

Clark picked up the spoon again and stirred it around the bowl. "What happens now?"

"You need to get healed up enough to leave," Bruce said. "Then I think it depends on the two of you. Officially, Clark Kent, Lois Lane and Jason Lane are dead. So are Martha Kent and Ben Hubbard. Now, I can arrange for new identities, but do I make arrangements for you together or separately? And if it is separately, well I think you both know the drill."

Bruce nodded to both of them and closed the door.

Now what are we supposed to do?

Clark was still playing with his food instead of eating. "I'm sorry," he said finally.

"For what? For being the one to stand up to Luthor's madness?" Lois asked. "For getting shot protecting your own son?"

"For everything," he said. "For leaving six years ago, for not telling you the truth when you told me about Jason, for so many things. I never wanted to hurt you."

"I'm sure you didn't," she said. She swallowed hard. "Did I know who it was I was making love to when..."

"Yes. You knew everything."

"Then why don't I remember it?"

"You were hurting so bad when we got back to Metropolis," he said. "And I was such an idiot. I thought... I was told that it was impossible for me to invest myself in one person and not abandon my 'work.' I believed them. I probably shouldn't have, I mean doctors and police and soldiers manage to do their work and still have families. But I didn't believe I could do it and I broke your heart."

She had a sudden flash of memory, or was it a dream? *'People do this all the time. No regrets, you know? I mean I did it, didn't I? I got the man I love to love me?'*

"You didn't tell me why I don't remember it."

He gave her a guilty look. "Something I never told you, but Kryptonians are psychic a little bit, or maybe empathic is a better word for it, but they become mentally linked to their partners, enough that they feel the other person. Jor-El didn't think I could establish a link to a human but I did, with you. I tried to suppress it so you wouldn't hurt so much. Instead, it blocked your memories of our time together."

She wasn't sure if she should be furious or not. He had unilaterally made the decision to break it off - at least she was fairly certain that was the case - then robbed her of even her

memories of their time together. She knew he'd had only the best of intentions, but sometimes his high-handedness just made her furious. "Can you give me back my memories?" she asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

His head was down and he wouldn't look at her. "I don't know. I suspect the memories are there. You just can't access them the normal way. Maybe like how things learned when you're drunk may not be accessible unless you're drunk."

She sighed. "My god, how can two people be so messed up?"

"I guess we'll be telling Bruce we'll be going separately?" he said softly. She stared at him, but his head was still down, avoiding her gaze.

"Like hell we will. You are not getting off that easily. *We* have a son. He needs a father. He needs *his* father."

"What about Richard?"

"What about him?" she asked flatly.

"He's your fiancé."

"*Was* my fiancé," she corrected. "Apparently he didn't take Luthor's little bombshell about Jason's paternity very well." She chuckled drily. "Even though he was probably the only one in the newsroom who *didn't* think you were Jason's father, especially seeing as how Jason liked being around you. It was only a matter of time before he figured it out and we would have had a major blow out."

"I'm sorry."

"You're not the one who was delusional." She moved closer and sat down on the edge of the mattress. "Bruce is right. If you don't eat, Alfred is going to be annoyed."

"I'm not really all that hungry," he responded. But he grabbed the spoon again and took a taste of the soup.

Lois waited until he was nearly finished before speaking again. "Why didn't you say goodbye? When you left for Krypton, Superman didn't say goodbye."

"I was afraid you would make the connection again between Clark and Superman if we both said we were leaving. I was also afraid you'd talk me out of it."

"Damn straight," she responded.

"Goodbye Lois," Clark said. She didn't pay him much attention as she composed her next sentence. It was a great exposé on mismanagement within Metropolis's Child Protective Services. She nodded at Clark's statement then the tone of his voice struck her - he sounded sad and even a little disappointed. Clark never sounded sad. He was the newsroom's own Pollyanna. She looked up and realized he was already heading toward the doors. She ran after him, catching up with him at the elevators.

"Clark, is something wrong?"

"No, I'm just going away for a while, traveling," he said. But she sensed there was more to it.

His expression was somber.

"You're not in trouble, are you?" she asked. She couldn't imagine a reason why Clark would leave the Daily Planet. It was his dream job.

"No," he said. "I'm not in any sort of trouble. I just need to get away for a while. I'll send you some postcards."

"Then it's au revoir, not goodbye."

He smiled. "Au revoir then." The elevator doors opened and he stepped inside, giving her a little wave. "Have a good life, Lois."

The elevator doors closed and his final words hit home. 'Have a good life, Lois.'
He wasn't leaving on a short trip. He wasn't planning on coming back.

"Clark!"

"Lois?" Clark was watching her worriedly. It was odd. Without his glasses he didn't really look like the Clark who sat across from her in the newsroom, but he didn't look much like Superman either.

"You know, I was ready to chase you down and talk you out of taking off, but I couldn't find you," Lois said.

"I was gone before the elevator reached the ground floor."

"We were both such idiots," Lois said. "Right after you saved the 777, Richard asked if I had been in love with Superman. I lied to him. I don't know why I did. I knew he'd figure it out, but I lied anyway. I never stopped loving you."

"Lois, Superman is dead. I'm just plain ole Clark. And I don't know if you can..."

"If I can what? Be in love with a normal man?" she asked.

"Maybe we should hire a bodyguard," he said, blood dripping from the cut above his eye and from his nose.

"I don't want a bodyguard. I want the man I fell in love with," she replied, helping him to his feet.

"I know Lois, and I wish he were here."

"Clark, trust me on this one," she said in mock seriousness. "'Normal' is not a word I would ever use for you."

2017

They waited but there was nothing more on the news about Luthor's death. Still the phone didn't ring.

Laura wiped her hands against her jeans and took a deep breath. It was no use speculating until they had more information. They would simply have to wait for the all clear. "How about some coffee?" she offered.

Bob nodded. "Sure."

Charlie reached over and touched her shoulder again. Laura squeezed her husband's hand. *It's going to be okay. Bruce will call and it will be okay.*

"Jay," Charlie said softly. "Would you go get your sister? She's over at Kendra's."

"Sure, Dad."

Laura watched after her son. He had spent most of his life hiding who he was, *what* he was. She understood how much he wanted to shake off the bonds of secrecy, to be able to announce proudly to the world who his parents were. Instead he'd been forced to lie to his teachers, his classmates and their parents. It wasn't easy. He was, by nature, an honest person like his father and living a life of lies weighed heavy on both of them.

"Um, I won't ask what your names were," Bob said as he fixed his coffee. "But what did you do before..."

"Before our lives were ripped to shreds?" Laura asked.

Bob nodded.

"We did investigative work for Wayne Industries," Charlie said. That was their fallback explanation if either of them slipped and let out things a school teacher or a plant manager shouldn't have known. True as far as it went, but misleading in its implications - like so much of their lives.

"You must have been a pretty good team if Luthor and his bunch had you targeted," Bob

said.

"Yeah, we were," Laura admitted.

"We still are," Charlie corrected, pulling her into a hug. "Lane and Kent weren't the only people Luthor had targeted for annoying him, or having relatives who annoyed him. We survived. And we will keep surviving."

"What will you do if Luthor is really dead, if the threat really is gone?"

"I don't know," Charlie said. "It's not like we can just go back and pick up our lives where they left off."

"It would be nice to be free to visit though," Laura said. "See my sister and her kids, my mom. Christmas cards and emails are fine, but it would be nice to actually *see* them."

The phone rang and Laura ran to grab it. *Was it Bruce?*

"Yes?"

"Lo, tell Charlie we have a brush fire over on Eldorado and one-forty-seventh," a man's voice ordered. Her heart sank as she recognized the voice - Jim Wilcox, chief of fire district one, the volunteer fire department.

"He'll be right there," she promised and hung up. "You heard?" she asked her husband.

"I'm on my way," he said, grabbing his heavy canvas coat, helmet and two shovels from their hooks in the hall that connected the kitchen to the garage. "Coming, Bob?"

"I'm with you."

"Be careful," Laura ordered. Charlie just gave her a cheeky grin.

2007

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the minister said. "I present to you the newly married couple, Lois and Clark."

They were now Clark and Lois Kellerman. That's what it said on the marriage license and on their new ID and credit cards.

Perry White shook Clark's hand while Alice White gave Lois a hug. The only other witnesses were Jason, and Alfred. Bruce was busy in meetings. He was hosting a retreat for the high-level executives of Wayne Entertainment and their significant others. As editor-in-chief of the Daily Planet, Perry 'happened' to be a high-level executive.

Clark was constantly being amazed at how much trouble Bruce was going to for them. He knew he was one of the few people Bruce actually considered a friend, but this went far beyond the call of duty.

"Congratulations, son," Perry said. "I just wish this was happening under better circumstances."

"Don't we all?" Clark asked. It had been six weeks since their alleged deaths, six weeks since Luthor and his thugs beat him to within an inch of his life. It had been a hard six weeks. He wasn't used to pain or needing to eat and sleep. He was healing up nicely according to Doctor Klein, but he was chafing at how long it was taking. The physical therapy hurt like hell but Lois turned out to be his biggest cheerleader and his most stringent taskmaster.

Now she was his wife, at least in name. As for the rest, he knew she deserved better. Without his 'gifts' he was just an ordinary man and she would never settle for an ordinary man.

"How's Richard doing?" Lois asked Alice.

"He's in London right now," Perry said, "working out some problems for us over there. He's put the house up for sale. All of your stuff, and Jason's, we had put in storage. Give me a list of the things you want most and I'll make sure Mister Wayne gets them to you."

"Thanks, Perry," Lois said. "But you didn't answer my question."

Alice sighed. "He's doing as well as can be expected, I suppose. He honestly thought he was Jason's father."

"I never told him he was," Lois said. "And I did try to tell him differently."

Alice simply shrugged. Clark didn't know if she believed Lois or not. Without the ability to tune in on heart rate, he wasn't as sure as he used to be about things like that.

"Losing you and Jason like that, and then finding out you weren't dead at all but you hadn't bothered to let him know..." Alice said. "I know you never meant to hurt him, but still..."

"It really wasn't my choice," Lois said. "Mister Wayne's people were afraid Richard might be targeted too. They thought it was better if he thought we were gone. Even my parents weren't told until after Superman's funeral." Lois sighed. "They couldn't be here today because there was no good way to explain why my parents would be visiting Gotham City. There's no reason at all my father would be seen in the company of Bruce Wayne. At least you and Perry have an excuse."

"Do you know where you'll be going?" Alice asked.

"Somewhere in the Midwest, I think," Lois answered. "Mister Wayne has everything arranged."

"We leave in a few days," Clark added.

Perry gave him a searching look. "You know I don't believe a word Luthor said about you. But I also want you both to know that there'll always be a place at the Planet for you."

"We'll be back before you know it," Lois told him. Clark didn't need super hearing to know she was lying - he knew her tells too well, the over-bright smile, the little tilt of her head. He knew Perry knew them too.

It was a comfortable fiction. Everyone, except possibly Jason, knew that Lane and Kent would never be writing for the Daily Planet, or anywhere else, ever again.

Three days later, Lois, Clark, and Jason Kellerman got off a plane in Minneapolis. They took a cab to a suburban neighborhood, to a yellow tract house with a neat picket fence nearly buried in snow.

The inside of the house was filled with neatly labeled moving boxes. The furniture was simple and inexpensive. Jason ran through the house to see which room was his. Lois and Clark followed him more slowly.

Whoever Bruce had assigned to take care of them had done an excellent job. Jason's room was in the back with a single window looking out over a large fenced yard. The room was filled with Jason's toys.

Clark noted the house had a top of the line security system and he had no doubt the built-in computer network was at least as sophisticated as the security system.

Lois was putting on a brave front, but Clark knew she had to be feeling at least as overwhelmed as he was. Without super speed unpacking was going to take days and they weren't even sure what was in all the boxes. At least the beds had been made and their clothes hung up.

"Oh God," Lois murmured looking around. "This is what the rest of our lives looks like."

"It'll be okay," Clark tried to assure her. He pulled her into a hug and after a moment she relaxed against his chest. "Hey, maybe now you'll have the time to write that great American romance novel you used to talk about," he said.

"What about you? Is the next Tom Clancy hiding out in Minneapolis?"

"Could be."

She disengaged from his arms and took his hand. "The bed in our room looks like a California king."

"Yes?"

"I thought we might try it out."

His heart jumped and she seemed to sense it.

"Clark, did you think I just married you so Jason would have a father?"

"I..."

She hushed him by pulling down into a kiss.

It was just as he remembered it from so long ago. Sweet as honey. He let her tongue explore his mouth.

After a moment he pulled back. "Lois, I'm not the man you fell in love with. You know that."

She studied his eyes. Hers were hazel with specks of blue and gold. "Clark, I fell in love with a man who was intelligent, gentle, sweet, and kind. He was also the only partner Perry ever assigned to me who could actually keep up with me. The fact that he could bend steel in his bare hands was a definite plus."

"Perry didn't assign Superman to be your partner," he reminded her. "And you never paid all that much attention to the guy in the glasses and tweed suit."

"Did it ever occur to you that the reason I went on so much about Superman was that I was afraid I might fall for the guy in the glasses and tweed suit? You were always my favorite person to abuse, you know. Perry said we bickered like an old married couple."

He chuckled at that. *'Oh, I've seen how the other half lives. My sister, for instance... three kids, two cats, one mortgage... I'd go bananas after a week, ' she said. He'd just started at the paper, was just learning the ropes. She was brilliant, feisty, head-strong. He'd never met anyone like her.*

It took her nearly three years to finally connect the dots. He'd been standing, talking to Jimmy about something and he was aware that she was studying him, making connections, conclusions. She even went so far as to jump out Perry's office window to force him to act openly. Luckily, he managed to save her life without being seen or suspected, but it was a close call.

Then Perry sent them up to Niagara Falls to look into a honeymoon scam. Superman had made a rescue at the falls that afternoon and Lois was suspicious that he happened to be there. Later that evening she confronted Clark with her suspicions again.

"You are Superman. Aren't you?"

He tried to deny it. "Lois, we've been through this delusion of yours before. Don't you remember what you almost did to yourself, jumping out of a building thirty stories up? Can't you see the tragic mistake you almost made?"

She smiled thinly at his reflection in the dressing table mirror while she put on her makeup. "You're right, Clark. I did make a tragic mistake. What a fool I was..." She opened a drawer in the dressing table and pulled something out. She swiveled in her seat and he realized she had a pistol in her hand and she had it leveled at him.

"I bet my life instead of yours."

"Lois, don't be insane," he protested. "Lois, you're crazy!" He could see her finger on the trigger, the muscles contracting and he knew there was nothing he could do that wouldn't make things even worse. The gunshot echoed in the room.

He stayed standing.

"I knew it," Lois said. There was a touch to triumph in her voice, and wonder. "I guess I must really have known it for the longest time..."

"You realize, of course, if you'd been wrong," Clark allowed himself to say, dropping his voice to its more normal register and straightening to his full height. "Clark Kent would have been killed."

Lois chuckled softly. "How? With a blank?"

Clark closed his eyes in frustration. In the stress of the moment, it hadn't even occurred to him that he hadn't felt the bullet strike him.

"Gotcha," she added, a gentle smile on her face.

They went to the arctic fortress. She hadn't stayed awed for very long. They had dinner and made love. For the first time in his life he felt complete, whole. There was nothing he couldn't do with her at his side. It hadn't lasted.

"If you will not be Kal-El," the Kryptonian AI stated using the image of his long dead father. "If you will live as one of them... love their kind as one of them, then it follows that you must become... one of them."

He had walked willingly into the chamber that would make him human. Human so he could love her as a man. Human so they could make a life together.

But in that cheap hotel in Alaska, he saw the sorrow, the disappointment in her eyes while they lay in the bed together watching the news on GNN. Watching the reports of the disasters that Superman *wasn't* attending to - a killer tsunami in the Philippines, a jumbo jet that ran off the runway in Moscow and burst into flames killing all on board. That he'd taken a beating in a run down diner hadn't helped.

"Maybe we ought to hire a bodyguard from now on," Clark suggested bitterly.

"I don't want a bodyguard," Lois told him. "I want the man I fell in love with."

"I know that, Lois. And I wish he were here..."

"Clark?" Lois's question broke into his thoughts.

"I was just..."

"Clark, Superman is dead. But you're not. I didn't marry Superman. I married you."

"But he was..."

"He was bigger than life and nearly everyone loved him. But you have to let him go. *We* have to let him go."

"It's hard," he admitted. "I watch the news and..."

"I know. I know you want to help. I know you *need* to help. We just have to figure out what Clark Kellerman can do to help."

"When did you become so wise?" he asked softly. He caressed her hair, studying her face. She had aged in the past six weeks. Some of the brightness had gone out of her eyes and there was a tiredness in her posture that hadn't been there before.

She smiled and the age and tiredness seemed to disappear from her. "I'm the mom of a very special little boy and I'm finally married to his very special father."

Clark found himself smiling. She was so wonderful. He was almost afraid it was a dream - that he was going to wake up and find she was gone.

"Now," she continued. "Are we going to bed, or am I going to have to knock you down so I can have my way with you on these uncomfortable looking boxes?"

Winter turned to spring and spring into summer. Jason had settled in relatively well at school. He graduated from kindergarten with passing marks. And his performance in gym had improved. It seemed he was outgrowing his asthma and allergies.

Lois was working part time as a personal assistant to one of Wayne Tech's local managers and was nearly finished with the first draft of her novel. Clark was an assistant editor at one of the local weeklies and spent two nights a week volunteering at a local hospice.

Jason's nightmares had mostly stopped, as had Clark's although Lois still occasionally woke up to find Clark's side of the bed empty. She would find him asleep, sitting up against the headboard of Jason's bed, their son cradled in his arms.

It was a life of comfortable domesticity Lois had never imagined for herself. Their one concession to their former lives was a subscription to the Daily Planet. Lois kept an eye out for articles on Luthor but it looked like the authorities were keeping him under wraps. Even Bruce didn't know exactly where Luthor was. That worried her and she knew Clark was worried, even if he didn't say anything.

The other worry was how much Jason missed Richard. Not a week went by that Jason didn't ask why the daddy he'd known all his life hadn't come to visit him. It broke her heart every time she or Clark had to explain that Richard couldn't visit him. It was too dangerous.

Lois poured herself another cup of coffee as she contemplated the next section of her story. Clark and Jason were out for the day with Grandma and Grandpa 'Haskell' - Bruce had relocated Martha Kent and Ben Hubbard to the Minneapolis area as well. They were now Ben and Martha Haskell and they loved taking Jason fishing on weekends. And Jason loved spending time with them.

The phone rang, interrupting Lois's musings on the final denouement of her plotline. The caller ID indicated it was Bruce.

"Yes?"

"Is Clark around?" Bruce asked without preamble.

"He's out with Jason."

She heard a sigh then he went on. "Richard's creating problems. He wants to see Jason and he's been making loud noises over at the U.S. Marshall Service. He's also managed to find a judge that agrees that since he was named as Jason's father on school and hospital records that gives him some paternal rights."

Lois's knees felt wobbly and she sat down. Considering how negative Richard's reaction had been when he found out Jason's true paternity, she was surprised that he wanted to have anything to do with her or Jason now. She had expected him to wash his hands of them.

"What do you think we should do?" Lois asked.

"I can arrange with the Marshall Service for you and Jason to meet Richard in a secure location."

"What about Clark?" she asked, noting Bruce's omission.

"Richard doesn't know about Clark. He knows that Perry has kept in touch with you, but that's all. I'm not aware that he's kept in contact with your sister or parents."

Lois took a deep breath to gather her thoughts. "I know Jason wants to see him. So yeah, go ahead and make the arrangements. I'll let Clark know what's going on."

"Lois, I'm sorry about this."

"Don't be," Lois assured him. "I'm the one that insisted he know that we weren't dead. Now we have to deal with the consequences."

"I'll get everything arranged for the meeting," Bruce said and hung up.

Lois hung her head. She wasn't sure how she felt about seeing Richard after all these months. Would she have chosen Richard over Clark if he hadn't thrown the letter at Bruce, if he had walked over to her after Superman's funeral and pulled her into his arms? It was a question she had asked herself more than once. She also recognized that it was a moot point - he *had* thrown the letter away, he *hadn't* tried to make contact in the weeks immediately afterwards. And she *had* chosen Clark.

'This is such a mess,' she thought as she picked up the phone to call Clark.

The meeting with Richard was set to take place at one of Bruce Wayne's properties outside of Reno, Nevada. Lois, Clark, and Jason took a commercial flight to Reno where two U.S. Marshals met them.

It was as they were crossing the terminal to the parking garage that Lois got her first scare. A tall woman with short brown hair was staring at her - a woman she recognized from Metropolis. Police Inspector Maggie Sawyer.

"What's Maggie doing here?" Lois hissed at Clark.

Clark just shook his head as he tried to hurry her and Jason along to the car. One of the marshals strode over to Maggie and spoke quietly to her. After a moment, Maggie nodded her head, but Lois still felt her old friend's eyes on her as they left the building.

"Does this happen very often?" Clark asked. "Running into people you used to know thousands of miles away from where you expect them?"

The marshal chuckled wryly. "All the time."

Bruce's Reno house was an hour outside of town. Lois doubted the billionaire spent much time there, maybe the occasional weekend while attending meetings on the west coast. The house was a stark contrast to Wayne Manor - all glass and brushed steel nestled into a bluff like a half-buried alien craft. The view from the living room was spectacular.

Lois had just gotten Jason unpacked when one of the marshals knocked on the door. "Mister White is here."

"Daddy's here?" Jason asked, eyes glowing in excitement.

Lois nodded. "Now, remember what we talked to you about."

Jason bobbed his head. "Daddy Clark and Grandma and Grandpa are a secret."

"Yes," Lois told him. She looked up to see a sad expression on the marshal's face.

"This is the part of the job I really hate," he said quietly. "Teaching kids how to lie."

"Tell me about it," Lois said, equally quietly. "But it's better than the alternative, isn't it?"

The man nodded and led the way to the living room where Richard was waiting. Lois wasn't sure where Clark was but she knew he was close. She could feel it. She could feel his quiet strength supporting her and suddenly realized how much she had come to rely on the quiet strength that was Clark.

Richard hadn't changed much in the past six months but he did look a little tired. His face lit up as Jason launched himself at him.

"Daddy!"

Richard swung him around. "Hi, Munchkin. Let me look at you..." He set Jason on his feet. "You've grown so big..." Richard pulled him into a hug. "I've missed you so much." He looked over Jason's head at Lois. "You're looking good, Lois."

He licked his lips nervously. "How have you been?"

"We've been fine," Lois said. A flicker of pain crossed his face at her simple statement.

"Daddy, I passed gym at school!" Jason interrupted. "And I'm not 'lergic anymore and..."

he stopped suddenly. "And I have lots of new friends and I'm a first-grader now," he continued more slowly.

"That's great," Richard said, smiling. Jason continued chattering about his new friends. He took Richard's hand and led him to his room to show him the toys he'd brought with him.

Lois watched after them then headed to the kitchen for coffee.

Clark was there with one of the marshals, listening to the monitor in Jason's room. It was less obtrusive than having a marshal with them the entire time.

"There's a fresh pot of coffee," Clark said, keeping his voice low. She felt his eyes on her as she poured herself a cup, wishing it was something stronger than just coffee.

"He looks good," Clark said, coming over to her. Clark was right. Richard was looking fit and trim. His five-o'clock shadow made him look rakish, daring.

"It's so strange to see him after everything," Lois admitted. "I think he was expecting more from me. We *were* engaged, after all."

Clark didn't say anything. There really wasn't anything he could say.

She squeezed his hand to reassure him. After six months of marriage, she knew Clark still had doubts as to whether she would have chosen him had Richard not taken himself out of the equation. But she *had* chosen Clark.

In a little while Jason brought Richard down to the kitchen for a snack. Clark and the marshals made themselves scarce before they got there, leaving Lois and Jason alone with Richard.

Lois poured Richard a cup of coffee and Jason a glass of juice. Jason grabbed a handful of cookies and gave two to Richard who munched on them as he sipped his coffee. Jason had already downed his.

"Jason, why don't you take some cookies to the marshals, okay?" Lois said, handing Jason the plate. He disappeared out the door.

"These are very good," Richard said finally.

"I made the acquaintance of some good cooks," Lois said. "And they love spoiling Jason."

"He sounds like he's okay, wherever it is you're living," he said. "Jason wouldn't tell me. He never used to keep secrets from me."

You'd be surprised. Jason knew about Clark being Superman the first time they met. And he didn't tell anyone.

"We're both fine, Richard," she said aloud. She hated the note of finality she heard in her voice but there was no helping it. She didn't want to hurt him, but she didn't want to get his hopes up either. She had made her choice and it hadn't been him.

He studied her again as if deciding how to proceed.

"I'm so sorry about... I acted like a jerk. I knew you had doubts about things, like who Jason's natural father was, but I just didn't get it. And I sort of lost it when Luthor shoved it in my face. I thought you were dead, and then you're not... It took me a while to get my head around that. But I've missed you so much and I want things to go back the way they were. I just want us to be a family again."

"Luthor is still out there," she reminded him.

"He's in prison, Lois. He can't hurt you or Jason anymore," Richard said. She heard the pleading in his voice.

"We're not safe so long as he's alive," Lois said.

"And I can't keep you safe?" he asked.

"Richard, please don't do this."

"Lois, I just want us together again. I still love you."

Dear God, how did this get to be so complicated?

"We can't go back," she said. "It's too late."

"Why?"

"Because I'm married," she said. He actually paled at that, his dark beard-shadow standing out in sharp relief against his skin. "I never wanted to hurt you," she went on, "you have to believe that, but the day you threw the note back at Mister Wayne I had to make a choice."

"You were the one with him at Superman's funeral," Richard said. "You could have said something, given me a sign, anything."

"With Luthor's people watching?"

He took a deep breath. "Is he a good man, the one you chose over me?"

"Yes."

"Is he here?"

"Yes," Clark said from the door. She had known he was near and she wasn't surprised to find he'd been keeping an eye on Richard. Lois knew it wasn't out of jealousy - Clark simply wasn't made that way - but he was concerned for her safety. *She* was certain Richard wouldn't do anything but she knew that Clark wasn't so sure. Living in secrecy had made them both a little paranoid.

Richard's eyes widened at the sight of Clark filling up the doorway. Then his eyes narrowed. "I should have known. Was it all a lie?"

"Richard, you were there!" Lois was aghast at his disbelief. "Clark saved Jason's life."

"I don't know what to believe anymore," Richard protested. "First Luthor comes in and claims Clark is Superman and Jason's *his* son. Then he's declared DOA and a bomb kills you and Jason. Only none of it's true!"

"Richard," Clark said quietly.

Lois noted he was using his real voice, one Richard had never heard - not quite 'Daily Planet' Clark, but not quite Superman either. At least the glasses muted Clark's distinctive eye color otherwise Richard might connect the dots and realize that it was Superman standing there.

"I spent five days in the trauma ICU at Metropolis General Hospital under the name of Charles King," Clark continued. "Multiple gunshot wounds and other injuries I may never completely recover from. My doctor's name was Bryant. Wayne Security caught Luthor's men on security cameras planting a remote control bomb in Lois's Audi. They were intercepted and Lois and Jason were taken to safety. You would have been brought along too, if you'd been with them."

"The bomb was detonated to make Luthor think Jason and I were dead," Lois added.

"But you couldn't be bothered to let me know? You let me spend a week in hell mourning my fiancée and my son."

"Luthor was watching the building and he had spies *in* the building, maybe even in the newsroom," Clark said. "If you hadn't been grief stricken, he would have known something was up and he would have gone after us again, and he would have made sure we were dead and I really don't want to think about what he would have done with Jason."

"You make Luthor sound like he's super-human."

"The bastard murdered Superman," Lois stated.

"He claims he didn't," Richard pointed out.

"And you believe a convicted cop-killer?" Clark asked.

Richard seemed to sag into himself. He looked over at Lois who had moved to stand with Clark. "Were you ever planning on telling me that I'm no longer needed in Jason's life? That he has a daddy and it's not me?"

Lois paused as she considered her next words. She didn't want to hurt him, but he was making it hard not to. "We agreed to meet you because Jason misses you and he wanted desperately to see you. As far as he's concerned, he has two daddies."

Richard bowed his head for a long moment. When he raised it he seemed calmer. "Jason sounds happy. He really is getting better at gym?"

"His asthma isn't nearly as bad as it was and so he's able to do more," Lois said.

"And he goes fishing?"

"And hiking and camping and swimming," Clark said. "He wants to go out for junior soccer when school starts."

"What about his piano? I know he didn't want to continue after what ever it was that happened on the Vanderworth boat, but..."

"It took a little bit, but he's taking music lessons and he's doing okay," Clark said.

"Good."

There wasn't much else to be said.

Dinner was quiet, except for Jason chattering about recent movies they'd rented or gone to see. His favorite was the **Incredibles**, naturally, but **Mary Poppins** was still a close second.

Later that night Lois snuggled against her husband.

"I didn't think that seeing him would be this hard," she admitted.

"You lived with him for how long?" Clark asked.

"Since Jason was born," she said. "He bought the house for us."

"Lois, it's understandable that you still have feelings for him. Five years is a long time. A lot of marriages don't last that long. You invested a lot in your relationship with him."

"He's a good man and I never meant to hurt him, but I knew even when I accepted his ring that the fit wasn't as good for me as it was for him. I fooled myself for a long time thinking I just wasn't ready to make that final commitment. That it was 'me' and not 'us' that was the problem. That if I gave it enough time, he would be able to fill the empty space in my heart."

Clark sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I told you a long time ago you're a hard act to follow."

She felt him go still against her.

"What?" he said, his voice tight.

"Clark, I remember Niagara Falls and I remember Alaska. I remember all of it."

"How?"

"Dreams at first, then I realized I could 'feel' where you were, how you were feeling," she told him. "I thought it was my imagination."

"I knew I could feel you and Jason. I didn't lose that when..." Clark said. "But I never thought that you..."

"It didn't really come into focus until we got here," Lois said. "Until I saw Richard and I realized that I still care for him, but I don't love him that way. Maybe I never loved him that way. But I realized I could feel you giving me support. I could *feel* it."

She rolled over, propping herself on one elbow so she could look into his face. His eyes were wide with worry.

She went on. "Then it was like a curtain opening and letting the light in. I remembered

pulling the gun on you, the dinner you prepared, how you looked at me when I undressed for you that first time. I remembered the look on your face when I told you I couldn't take seeing you every day. That it was killing me," she said softly. "I remember it all."

"Lois, I..."

She put a finger to his lips. "No regrets. The man who loves me got me to love him back. And even though he's a lunkhead and sometimes I want to scream and throw things at him, he's the one I chose to marry."

"No regrets."

Richard spent most of the next day with Jason.

Lois noted that Jason seemed happy when it was time to leave for home. Richard seemed happier as well. 'Maybe now he can get on with his life,' she thought. She had never meant to hurt him.

The drive to the airport was quiet and Lois found she was looking forward to going home to her suburban tract house with Clark and Jason. She was looking forward to finishing her novel and living her life in peace.

She chuckled under her breath.

"What?" Clark asked.

"I was just thinking of what Maggie would think if she knew about everything," Lois said. "I mean, look at us. Mortgage, two cars, a kid. Who'd have seen that coming?"

"Nobody who knew us," Clark admitted.

The flight back to Minneapolis was uneventful, until they arrived at the airport and headed for the car with their luggage.

Then Lois spotted someone she recognized. "Oh, crud. That's Senator Harrington." She jerked her head to indicate a tall, pleasant looking man in an expensive suit waiting for his ride. "I investigated him a few years back. There were questions about his dealings with some dubious defense contractors. I know he was involved up to his neck, but nothing stuck."

"Maybe he won't remember you," Clark said.

"Are you kidding?" She hadn't told Richard or Perry how far she had nearly gone to get the goods on Harrington.

He shrugged. "We can hope."

It was a vain hope. Harrington was scanning his surroundings as if looking for someone. He looked right at them and his forehead creased as though trying to place them. Then his expression turned to one of astonishment. "Lois?"

Lois decided to brazen it out. "Pardon? Do I know you?"

"Lois, you don't have to play games with me," Harrington said. Lois's heart sank - so much for brazening it out. "I like your hair."

Self-consciously, Lois's hand went up to her hair. She'd had it cut short the week before as an experiment. A change of look for the summer. Clark seemed to like it, but he would never tell her otherwise, at least not directly.

"When I heard you'd been killed by a car bomb, I didn't believe it," Harrington went on. "I guess I was right not to."

Lois didn't respond to Harrington's jibe, but she glanced up at Clark when he put a protective hand on her shoulder.

"New boyfriend?" Harrington asked.

"Husband," Clark stated.

Harrington looked surprised. "You must be White, then. Tom Harrington." Harrington put out his hand to be shaken.

Clark shook the offered hand, but he didn't correct the senator's mistake. "We need to get going," Clark said firmly. Lois realized that she was grateful for his intervention - another sign of how much she'd changed. Mad Dog Lane would never have accepted Clark's help.

"Please don't tell anyone you've seen us," Clark asked as Harrington's ride drove up and stopped. It was a stretch limo.

"I won't if you won't," Harrington said as the driver came around and opened the door for him.

Lois watched the limo drive away. "What the devil did he mean by that?" Lois wondered aloud.

"If I was still an investigative reporter, I would be asking why a U.S. senator from New York was in Minneapolis, being picked up by a limo belonging to Randolph Industries, a defense contractor under investigation for questionable business practices," Clark said. "If I was still an investigative reporter..."

"I'll drop Bruce a note in the morning," Lois decided.

Things settled into relative normalcy. Summer rolled into autumn, school started, for both Jason and Clark. Clark had decided to go for a teaching certificate. During college teaching had been one of his career choices before settling on journalism as his major. On his journey to Krypton, he had wondered if he would have ended up being a teacher had Krypton not died. He certainly wasn't the scientist that Jor-El had been. Although science wasn't hard for him it didn't fascinate him as words did. He couldn't see himself as a soldier.

Clark's job was also doing well. Ad revenues were up at the paper and so were subscriptions. He'd gotten a decent raise. It wasn't anything like working for the Daily Planet, but it gave him the opportunity to make a difference in the world around him - albeit a small difference. His editorials were being noticed in the region.

It felt good to be doing some good in the world. He missed being Superman and he found early on that if he kept himself busy, it seemed to lessen the pain. There were days when he almost felt he could grab onto the powers, they were just out of his reach - Superman wasn't dead but just sleeping. Other days, it was almost like Superman had been a dream. He wasn't real and never had been.

Lois had moved to full-time at her job and was handling more and more of the day to day operations of the plant. Oddly enough, it suited her. Her skills as an investigator worked well in rooting out problems, and her skills as an interviewer worked for her in dealing with co-workers and subordinates.

Jason was making plans to see Richard over winter break. Apparently it was something they'd agreed on in Reno. Clark wasn't sure how they were going to swing it but he trusted Bruce to arrange something. The billionaire was nothing if not resourceful.

As was his habit, Clark was doing his own homework while watching GNN. 'Randolph Industries' CEO indicted...' the scrolling banner at the bottom of the screen read. Clark knew that Lois had sent a note off to Bruce months before about seeing Harrington at the Minneapolis airport. She hadn't mentioned if Bruce had sent any information back but Clark doubted he had.

Clark opened his laptop browser and went to the Daily Planet website to see if they had anything more. There was a short synopsis of the story that would be in the next edition.

Thaddeus Randolph, CEO of Randolph Industries, had been indicted on multiple counts of fraud in his sales to the Department of Defense. There was no mention of Senator Harrington - not that Clark had expected there to be.

"Did you see the news on Randolph?" Lois asked, shutting the garage door behind her and dropping the groceries on the kitchen counter. "Not that it's a surprise. The only way they could have beat us out of that last contract was by cheating," she added. 'Us, ' in this case, was Wayne Industries.

"So, do you think you'll get the contract now?"

"The bid's already been resubmitted," Lois said as Clark put away the groceries. She was grinning in the way that told him there was more.

"And?" he prompted.

"And, Wayne Industries is hosting a symposium on 'Greening the Military' right after Christmas, in Vail. I've been invited to attend. Families are invited so long as they pay their own transportation."

"I assume you've already sent the information along to Richard?" Clark asked.

He wasn't surprised when she nodded. "He has to put in for vacation time. I also went ahead and booked a round trip for you and Jason. Mine's through the company."

She studied his face for a long moment. "Are you really okay with this?"

"Richard was Jason's dad for five years," Clark said. "If it wasn't for, you know, he'd still *be* Jason's dad. What sort of person would I be if I begrudged him some time with his son?"

"You'd be human."

Clark sighed. "I miss him," he said. "Being him, I mean. I miss being able to bring you take out from Hong Kong and Shanghai and Kyoto and Paris. I miss hearing your heartbeat no matter where I am. I wanted to be able to show you so much... And then Luthor happened."

"I miss working for Perry, all the people in the news room. I even miss Lombard and his stupid lewd remarks," Lois told him. "I miss my old life. But if this is what I have to do to keep Jason safe... At least I'm not alone in this."

Clark took her hand and kissed it. "You're not alone," he murmured, wondering once again what he had done to deserve such a wonderful woman.

Thanksgiving came. Martha did most of the cooking - Lois's cooking skills had improved during their months of exile but she still wasn't ready to take on the entire feast. Dinner would be in the late afternoon - Clark and Ben had volunteered their day to serve dinner at one of the homeless shelters and had taken Jason with them.

Even without his powers, Clark still had a need to help others. And Lois knew he still missed being able to help as Superman. She could see it in his eyes every time the news showed a disaster Superman might have been able to handle when human means failed.

There were times when she woke up in the night to discover he wasn't beside her. She would find him staring out the window at the sky and she knew he was dreaming of flying. And she knew there was nothing they could do about it.

Bruce had Doctor Klein fly out a few weeks earlier. Klein had examined Clark, took blood samples and tissue samples. He hadn't been hopeful that he'd find any changes - any sign that Clark's powers would return. Klein had been right. There were no indications that Clark's condition had changed. The toxin was still in his system. He was still human and it looked like that was how he was going to stay.

Clark had taken the news stoically, but Lois knew how disappointed he had really been.

"How is Clark, really?" Martha asked, putting the stuffed turkey in the oven. "He won't tell me."

"He's 'Clark, "' Lois answered. Then she sighed. "He was hoping for better news from Doctor Klein. At least he's not getting any worse. But he misses being able to help the way he used to. And we both miss our old lives. Writing scathing editorials isn't the same thing as getting into the trenches and uncovering what the crooks are doing."

"And how are you really doing?" Martha asked.

Lois thought about the question. "This isn't the life I ever imagined I'd be living. Back before Superman returned, I was reasonably content living with Richard, raising Jason. I'd won another Pulitzer. Life was good. Then Superman came back and so did Clark and I realized exactly what had been missing from my life. I do love him. Not the flashy celebrity who was bigger than life, but the quiet, steady, *good* man that was under the costume."

"So, when do I get another grandchild?" Martha asked with a grin.

"We're working on it," Lois assured her mother-in-law.

Lois and Clark had discussed having another child. Lois had even stopped taking her contraceptives. They were both certain it was only a matter of time before they would be able to tell Jason he was getting a baby brother or sister. After all, it had taken only one night of passion for Lois to get pregnant with Jason.

"Where did you learn to do that..." she had asked after one of the most incredible kisses she had ever experienced.

"Here... just now..." he had answered. "There were so many times I wanted to tell you. Sitting next to you as Clark, smiling shyly, listening to you talk about Superman, and how much you... loved him..."

Lois chuckled. "That's all right. I suppose it is a little late in the game for me to play hard to get."

"It's all real now, Lois - I'm real - and I love you," he said. She knew he meant it. He kissed her passionately, easing her down to the floor. It was like a dream.

"Mmm. If you only knew what that felt like..." she murmured.

"The kiss?"

"Not... exactly..."

Their first love-making had been passionate, intense, almost frantic. Lois wasn't a virgin, although she could count her previous lovers on less than one hand. Clark was inexperienced but a fast learner. Their next love-making was slower, more exploratory, but no less intense. His kisses burned across her skin.

Richard's kisses had never felt like that. Clark's kisses still burned across her skin. She hoped they would never stop burning.

But she wasn't about to tell her mother-in-law that.

"Dear Lord, we thank you for this food, this company, this day and all of our days," Ben intoned over the dinner table.

"Amen."

It was picture perfect, a Norman Rockwell painting - the family gathered around the holiday feast. It would be perfect, Lois mused, if it weren't that they were all in hiding from a madman.

"Bruce called while we were heading home," Clark said as they were clearing away the dishes. Ben and Martha had settled down with Jason to watch one of the obligatory Christmas

movies.

"Harrington's under investigation for his involvement in the Randolph Industries scandal," Clark continued. "He also wanted to make sure we were keeping an eye out for strangers in the neighborhood. D.O.D. managed to get Luthor transferred into military custody. Bruce hasn't been able to find out where."

"I could ask my dad if he..."

"Lois, your father has more sense than to tip his hand that he knows we're not dead," Clark reminded her. "And if Luthor really is working for the military, he'll be classified above top secret. Nobody but his minders are going to know where he is."

"When did you get to be such a cynic?" Lois asked. It wasn't like Clark to be so negative about digging for information.

"Bruce told me a couple other things I didn't want to mention in front of Mom or Ben," Clark said softly.

"Such as?"

"Superman's tomb was opened by a people with *very* high authorizations. I gather they finally got permission from *someone* to take the body for study."

Lois's breath caught in her throat. She knew it wasn't Superman's body in the tomb. "And?"

"The coffin was empty. The authorities haven't released the information to the media but it looks like Superman's body was stolen not long after the funeral. The FBI is looking into it."

"Do you think they'll find anything?"

Clark shook his head.

"You said he mentioned a couple things," Lois reminded her husband.

Clark took a deep breath and blew it out his nose. What ever it was Bruce had told him, Lois knew it wasn't good.

"There's a rumor going around Metropolis that Lois Lane and Clark Kent aren't dead and that they're living together," Clark said, keeping his voice low.

"Who would have started it?" Lois wondered aloud. "Richard wouldn't say anything. He knows how to protect a source."

"But someone may have overheard him talking to Perry, or Lucy may have said something to her husband. Maggie Sawyer saw us in Reno and we both know what gossips most cops are. And Harrington saw us in Minneapolis. It wouldn't have taken much for him to put two and two together, especially since he's being investigated."

"So, what do we do?" Lois asked.

Clark paused and looked toward the living room where his mom, Ben, Jason were still watching the movie. "I didn't have time to ask Bruce what he thought," Clark said. "But I'm thinking, if we're outed publically, I mean a TV crew in the front yard, we may as well come clean. We'd have a chance of getting our old lives back, or at least some semblance of them."

"And if that's not how it happens?" Lois asked. "If somebody tries to grab Jason, or takes pot shots at us?"

"If it was just you and me, we could probably brazen it out anyway. Luthor was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder, not murder itself. Those convictions will still stand," Clark said. "But we have Jason to worry about. If it looks like Luthor still has the means to come after us, we should run like hell and not look back."

"Maybe it'll all blow over and we won't have to worry about it," Lois suggested hopefully.

"Do you really think we could be that lucky?" Clark asked.

"Stranger things have happened," Lois reminded him. "Look at us."

The closer to Christmas it got the more excited Jason became - he was so looking forward to seeing 'Daddy Richard' again.

Clark was feeling a little calmer. Bruce's news about the tomb had disturbed him, although he couldn't quite put a finger on why. He had known early on that the body that had been identified as Superman's had belonged to a young actor who had died in an accident. One of the new costumed meta-humans had placed the body in the collapsed building in Mexico. Clark didn't know the details, nor did he want to know. But it was nice to know that Superman's example had brought out some of the others who had abilities beyond those of 'mortal men.'

That Luthor was now in military custody also bothered him, but he had more concrete reasons for that. Luthor was dangerous. The fictional Hannibal Lecter had nothing on Luthor. Lecter never threatened to murder billions of people. Luthor had actually tried.

At least it looked as though the rumors of his and Lois's survival were dying down. General Sam Lane made a statement to the Daily Planet that his eldest daughter, Lois, and her son were dead, killed in a car bomb blast.

No one would dream of calling a three star general a liar.

Clark sat back in his chair, stretching his long arms over his head. His essay for his last class was due first thing in the morning. He was nearly finished and it would have been done sooner if one of his reporters hadn't ended up in the hospital with pneumonia earlier in the week.

Lois was due to come home shortly and Jason was playing next door. Clark put his laptop on stand-by and hurried to start dinner. He extended his hearing to make sure Jason was all right. It was odd, but right after Klein's bad news about Clark's returning powers, his hearing had kicked back in. It had been painful at first, but over the past few weeks he'd gotten better control.

He hadn't told Lois yet. He didn't want to get her hopes up.

"Lois, wake up," Clark's voice intruded into her dreams. The urgent tone made her open her eyes. It was dark in the bedroom. Pitch black.

"Wha..." she managed to mutter. A quick glance at her alarm clock confirmed that the power was out. But moving her head gave her vertigo. "Clark?"

"We have to get out of here, now!" Clark said, pulling her out of their warm bed.

That's when she heard it, the whoosh of gas igniting.

Lois never quite figured out how she and Jason got out of the house that night. All she really remembered was standing in the snow with a quilt wrapped around her and Jason, waiting for the fire engines to arrive. Their house was in the middle of the block. The houses to either side were also on fire but there was no sign that anyone else had managed to escape, but it was hard to tell with the neighbors coming out to see what was going on.

Flames licked the sky. There were explosions and the onlookers moved back.

"Are you guys okay?" a worried voice asked.

Lois looked over to see a man clad in skin-tight bright red standing next to Clark. Lois wracked her brain for a name. *Lightning? No... Flash.*

"We're okay," Clark assured the meta-human.

"Good," the Flash said. "Then let's go."

"Go where?" Lois asked. 'Run like hell and don't look back, ' echoed in her mind.

"The Bat sent me," the Flash said. It sounded like a password. "He told me you'd know what to do."

Clark seemed to have gotten whatever the message was. He hurried Lois and Jason away from the fire.

Lois turned back to the man. "Who did this?"

"Hell if I know," the Flash responded.

2017

Laura heard the distinctive whoosh of a flying meta-human coming in for a landing in the back yard. She turned off the television and headed to the kitchen to see who it was. Not many of the metas knew who the Kendalls really were and those few rarely visited openly.

Laura recognized the visitor, although they'd only met once. But then everyone knew of Diana, Princess of Themyscira also known as Wonder Woman.

"Kal-El is not here?" Diana asked.

Laura gave her a dark look. Diana knew better than to refer to Charlie by that name. As far as the world knew, Kal-El was dead. Murdered by Lex Luthor.

"I take it that 'Charles' is not home?" Diana amended.

"Brush fire," Laura said as an explanation. The other woman nodded.

"So, I guess Luthor's death hasn't been confirmed?" Laura asked.

"The autopsy is being conducted as we speak. The prison officials are quite certain that the man that died was in fact Lex Luthor and not a simulacrum," Diana stated.

"But?"

"He was a very resourceful madman," Diana said. "However, we are also very resourceful."

"Mom?" a girl's voice called. Eight-year-old Samantha Kendall came into the kitchen. Her brother Jay was right behind her. "Jay said you wanted me home," the girl said. Then she caught sight of the Amazon and her eyes opened wide.

"Wonder Woman?"

"Hello Samantha," Diana said with a smile.

2009

Charles Jacob Kendall, wife Laura Josephine, and son Charles Jacob Jr. moved into their new home in a small town in Northern California two weeks after a 'gas main explosion' took out a Minneapolis neighborhood, killing ten people. The Kendalls were warned not to contact anyone from their previous lives. Richard White was specifically mentioned by the U.S. Marshalls handing their case.

Laura was hired on as an assistant manager at one of Wayne Industries' plants while Charlie continued to work on his teaching degree. She didn't ask how his credits had been transferred. Bruce Wayne was incredibly resourceful and Laura didn't want to think about how much he had spent on safeguarding them.

Laura's gut started acting up a few days later. The symptoms were uncannily familiar to how she felt a month after Superman disappeared - breast tenderness; nausea, especially around red meat; low energy.

She stopped at CostMart on the way home and bought a pregnancy kit. She hid the kit in the bathroom. No sense getting Clark - Charlie - excited about the possibility until she knew for sure.

The test had to be done first thing in the morning. It was going to be a long night.

"Lo, are you sure you're okay?" Charlie kept asking.

"A little over tired, that's all," she kept assuring him. He nodded but his expression was still troubled when they went to bed.

"I want you to know," he said. "I love you. And even though this isn't the life either of us hoped for, whatever happens, we can get through it together."

"I love you, too," she breathed back at him, wondering what he thought they were going to need to 'get through'.

The next morning hardly came soon enough. Laura followed the directions on the package, set her little kitchen timer, and waited. A blue line meant she probably wasn't. A pink circle meant she probably was. The timer went off but she found she was afraid to look. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and steeled herself for the results.

She wasn't sure which result she wanted. They'd discussed having another baby, but that had been before someone blew up an entire neighborhood to get to them. Having a baby right now was ludicrous, insane. But she also knew Charlie would love to be there for all those things he'd missed with Jason - her pregnancy, the delivery, the baby's first word, first steps.

She opened her eyes and looked at the little stick in her hand. A dark pink circle. *Oh dear God.*

There was a knock on the door and she took a deep breath before answering. "Yes?"

"Lo, are you okay?" a worried sounding Charlie asked.

"Yes... no... I don't know," she admitted.

"Want to open the door so we can talk about it?"

After a moment she stood and unlocked the bathroom door. She dropped the tell-tale stick into her robe pocket.

The door opened and Charlie was standing there. "Want to tell me what's going on?" he asked quietly.

It was all Laura could do to keep from bursting into tears. She hated the mood swings when she was pregnant with Jason. It was humiliating to be so out of control.

"This is so messed up," she began. "We're hiding from a madman and now..."

"You're pregnant," Charlie said.

"How do you...?"

"Well, I'm not completely oblivious to your cycles, so I know you missed the last one," he said. "Plus, Klein may not have been completely on target in his assessment of my condition. I can hear the baby's heartbeat. It's kind of like a little extra flutter down here." He placed his large hand over the lower part of her belly.

"Your hearing is back?" she asked. He hadn't told her.

He nodded. "I didn't say anything because I didn't want to get your hopes up. Or mine, for that matter."

"Has anything else come back?"

"Vision comes and goes, but it's getting better," he said. "It's, maybe, fifty percent of what it used to be. Speed, strength, invulnerability, ditto. It's almost like I need to have a pressing need to access them before I can."

"Is that how we got out of the house that night?"

He nodded. "I smelled carbon monoxide and everything kicked in. At least long enough to get you and Jason out of the house."

"So the Flash didn't save us?"

Charlie shook his head. "I doubt he got there in time to even try. Otherwise he would

have been able to rescue some of the neighbors."

"How many people dead? And for what?" Laura asked. It was a rhetorical question. Charlie simply sighed. Even as Superman, he wouldn't have been able to do much to save the neighbors. The official death toll was up to eleven now. Of course, that list included Clark, Lois, and Jason Kellerman.

"So, what do we do now?" Laura asked.

"Well, I guess that third bedroom won't be an office now," Charlie said with a grin.

"And I doubt my new boss will act like Perry did when I was pregnant with Jason," Laura said. "I swear he would have chained me to my desk if he thought he could've gotten away with it. I mean, he was even worse than when Simone Fulton got pregnant. He wanted me to cover the school board and dog shows. I wasn't even allowed to cover the cat shows because cats carry something that could have hurt the baby."

"Was he really that bad?"

"Worse."

Charlie chuckled at her expression. "At least now you have an office job."

"Which I just started."

"It'll be okay," Charlie said. "I'm here and I'm not planning on leaving."

"A baby?" Jay repeated. Neither Laura nor Charlie had been certain what their son's reaction would be to their announcement. They had talked about the possibility before all hell broke loose in Minneapolis. Jay had been excited about the idea then, but so many things had happened since. The idea of another baby hadn't come up after their move. Of course, the timing was such that there was little doubt she'd gotten pregnant just before they'd been forced to run for their lives again.

Jay stared at his mother's belly and Laura wondered if he had powers coming in or he was just hoping.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" he asked.

"We don't know yet," Charlie answered.

Jay simply nodded but his expression was guarded.

"Jason, please talk to us," Laura said, crouching down to be on eye level with her son.

Jay seemed to take a moment to consider his next words. "I just wish that bald man was dead so we can go back home. It's not fair that we have to hide. We didn't do anything." His eyes were bright with tears.

"No, it isn't fair," Charlie agreed. "And maybe, someday, we won't have to hide anymore."

"It isn't fair," Jason mumbled, wiping his face with the back of his hand.

"Life isn't always fair," Laura murmured. "We just have to do the best we can."

Laura's boss, Max Skyler, took the news of Laura's pregnancy with surprising equanimity. Laura wondered exactly what Bruce had told him of her situation. Despite her husband's assurances, she didn't think she was as great at her job as everyone seemed to think. Granted, she was a reasonably good manager - the plant in Minneapolis had been a good training ground - but 'great' wasn't a word she would use to describe herself in her current position. She'd been a 'great' investigative journalist, a 'great' city beat reporter, but management hadn't been something she'd ever aspired to.

Even at the *Daily Planet*, she had been happy as a reporter and had no ambitions to rise

to management, despite Perry's occasional hints in that regard. Clark - Charlie - would have been a better choice for promotion to a senior editor position. He was even tempered and dedicated to getting the job done in the best way possible. He was likeable too, and always able to get the best out of people.

But she was the one with the management job and despite everything things seemed to be working out.

Jay had settled into his new school and Charlie was on track for his teaching degree. He was interning at the local high school this quarter.

Life was looking good.

Even the world seemed to be getting along. More meta-humans and even a few aliens had revealed themselves to the world. Superman's example both in life and in death had spurred them into working more openly.

The newest one had her photo splashed across the front page of the *Daily Planet* - Diana, Princess of Themyscira, a mysterious and long hidden island of women. They called themselves Amazons and she was their champion, sent into the 'man's world' to promote understanding and justice. She was tall and statuesque and her costume left little to the imagination - a gold bustier, blue and white briefs, and red and white boots.

She'd been dubbed 'Wonder Woman' and Laura wondered if Diana had chosen the name or it had been given to her by the media. Clark Kent would have never chosen to call himself 'Superman'. Lois Lane had chosen the name for him and it had stuck.

Luthor was in a Supermax prison. According to the report Bruce sent in a confidential company document packet, Luthor had not only failed to give his minders any usable information concerning the Kryptonian technologies he'd been boasting about, he had made more than one attempt to escape custody. The last attempt had led to the death of one of the scientists assigned to work with him.

Laura called Bruce on a secure line as soon as she read the report - one of the perks for working with a company such as Wayne Industries was that they took their own security very seriously. And Laura had Bruce Wayne's personal phone number. Even her boss didn't have that and he wasn't about to find out that she did.

"Does this mean we can go back to Metropolis?" she asked Bruce almost before he finished picking up on the other end.

"Even in a Supermax, we can't guarantee he can't send someone after you," Bruce said. "We're ninety-five percent certain he figured out where you'd been and we're pretty sure he *wasn't* involved in the incident in Minneapolis."

"How do you know that?"

"I have my sources," Bruce said. Laura could almost hear his smile. His tone became serious once again. "When the news reports came through on the explosion and they listed the dead, he went berserk. Tried to get his convictions overturned because he claimed to have proof that Lois Lane and Clark Kent weren't dead at the time of his trial."

"But, he wasn't convicted of killing them."

"Exactly. He was also furious because he figured someone had stolen his thunder. If anyone was to have killed Lane and Kent, it should have been him."

"I didn't read anything about that in the *Planet*," Laura said.

"And you won't," Bruce said.

"But if Luthor wasn't involved in the explosion, who was?"

There was a sigh. "We think it may have been someone involved with Senator Harrington

or Randolph Industries. We're still not sure if it was to keep you from testifying that you saw him where he wasn't supposed to be, because you reported the incident, or even as a warning to someone else. He was under investigation even before you spotted him."

"But you think it's still not safe."

"Not yet."

"Can we at least let Richard know we're okay? Jay misses him so much."

There was a deep sigh. "Lo, I was in White senior's office when the list of victims came out. Richard recognized the names too, and he took it hard. Quit the *Planet* and took a job overseas. Please, do him and yourself a favor and let the man get on with his life in peace. Let him bury his dead."

"But we're not," Laura reminded him.

"I'll check with Perry and see what he thinks about it," Bruce promised. "But don't get your hopes up. Oh, by the way, Lois Kellerman's breakout mystery thriller has just hit the bookstores and is getting excellent reviews."

"Pity she's not around to enjoy it," Laura said. Her first published novel and she couldn't take credit for it.

"Maybe someday. In the meantime, her in-laws are putting her earnings into a scholarship fund for victims of violent crime. Some of the money is being set aside for *your* kids."

"How did..."

Bruce laughed. "I have my ways."

"So, when do *my* in-laws get relocated?"

"They're in the process of telling their friends and neighbors they're moving to Montana for the fishing," Bruce said. "Needless to say, they won't end up there."

"Cl... Charlie's been worried about them."

"I know. Tell him I'll call him. I have some ideas I want to run past him."

"What did Bruce want to talk to you about?" Laura asked her husband after dinner. Jay was in his room, hopefully doing his homework.

Charlie frowned and Laura sensed he was debating with himself as to what to tell her.

"If it's something he doesn't want you to talk about..." she added.

The frown didn't disappear but he relaxed a little. "Some of the new 'heroes' have been talking about creating some sort of organization to help with communications and coordination of effort," Charlie said.

"And?"

"Bruce wanted to know if I was interested in getting involved."

"Superman's dead."

"With what I can do right now I qualify as a meta-human," Charlie told her. His voice was somber. "Not a very powerful one, but still..." He shrugged. "But what he's really interested in is if I can access anything from the Fortress. You know that Luthor was blowing smoke when he told the feds he had all the Kryptonian data and could translate it for them."

She nodded.

"Well, Bruce thinks there's a chance that Luthor didn't grab everything. If he's right, I may be able give this new 'Justice League' some really advanced tech to help them along."

"And if it falls into the hands of someone like Luthor?"

"That's one of the reasons Bruce isn't actually against this group. Who better to police the meta-human community than a group of meta-humans sworn to uphold the law and promote

justice? And who better to follow Superman's example?"

"Superman is dead," Laura repeated.

"Don't you think I know that?" Charlie's voice was tight. "Don't you think I wished it had gone down differently that day? That maybe if I hadn't been so sure I could handle Luthor myself, I might not have gotten shot *and* poisoned? I might not have let Superman die? Bruce warned me that Luthor had uncovered information about me. He warned me not to go it alone but I didn't listen. I mean, what could hurt Superman? Maybe I really am as dumb as Luthor said I was. I knew he had kryptonite and I still thought I could handle him."

"You did what you had to do," Laura said. "Luthor was ready to shoot Jason. At least you weren't wearing the Suit that day. You never did tell me why."

Charlie sighed. "My one concession to Bruce's warning. It was better for everyone if he murdered Clark Kent rather than Superman. And who would want to go after Clark's family? He wasn't anybody important."

"He was very important," Laura corrected. "He was Jason White's father, Lois Lane's partner and Martha Kent's son."

He studied her face for a long moment. "How did you ever get to be so wise?"

"Comes with the territory. I'm a mom."

Charlie didn't leave for the Fortress until spring break. He didn't mention anything more about the new Justice League to Laura and she didn't ask. It wasn't that he was trying to keep secrets from her - he wasn't - but falling into the old habits was so easy.

He took a commercial flight to Nome where one of the League's representatives would meet him. Then they would go together to the Fortress to see what could be salvaged.

Bruce hadn't told him which member of the League was meeting him.

"Mister Kendall?" a woman called. He looked around the concourse and spotted her. She was tall, nearly six-feet tall, with black hair pulled into a tight bun and pale skin. She was dressed in a conservative business suit and her eyes were masked by a pair of dark-framed glasses. "I'm Diana Prince. Mister Wayne sent me."

Charlie introduced himself, shaking her hand. Her grip was strong and she seemed surprised that he didn't wince. Had he been human, he was sure she would have cracked a bone. She gave him a long appraising look before she led him out of the main building and onto the tarmac where a helicopter was waiting.

"Mister Wayne apprised me of your situation," she explained as she settled into the pilot's seat. "He has high hopes for our little expedition."

"And exactly what situation did he apprise you of?" he asked. Her glasses did little to hide her identity and he was surprised no one at the airport seemed to realize who she was - Wonder Woman.

She smiled. Perfect white teeth against ruby red lips. "I read everything I could find about Kal-El of Krypton, also known as 'Superman'," she said. "I was disappointed to discover he was gone before I even arrived in the man's world."

Charlie didn't have anything to say to that. He simply watched as she guided the helicopter north.

"You are not what I expected," she said after a while. "Choosing Superman as a name seemed so..."

"Self aggrandizing? Self centered?" Charlie suggested.

"I was thinking 'presumptuous'."

"I didn't choose the name. It was given to me by the press. Lois Lane to be precise. The symbol of the House of El resembles an 'S', so it all fit together according to her. But 'Wonder Woman' seems equally presumptuous."

"It is the traditional title for my people's champion," she said. "I won the honor in a test of strength, skill, and intelligence." She sighed. "My mother was not well pleased that I took part in the contest."

A storm was looming ahead.

"That's odd," she murmured. "There was nothing in the satellite imaging this morning that would indicate a storm. And according to the information Mister Wayne gave me, Superman's Fortress should be right there."

"It is," Charlie said. "The storm is its first line of defense. We go the rest of the way on foot. Unless you want to fly in without the chopper?"

Within seconds, Diana switched into her costume and anchored the helicopter to the glacier. She waited as Charlie pulled on heavy boots and a parka. Without his powers, the outside air felt damned cold. His current level of invulnerability might keep him from getting frostbite, but he really didn't want to test the theory.

"You do not wear your uniform?" Wonder Woman asked. She sounded surprised.

"I'm not in the super hero business anymore," he explained.

She stared at him. "You abandon your mission, your principles, so easily?"

He stopped and looked back at her. He couldn't be angry at her question. He had asked it of himself many times since the shooting. But the answer always came down to one point. "I can't afford principles. I'm a parent," he quoted. He didn't expect she'd recognize the line from *The Patriot*.

Diana had nothing to say to that as she followed him through the storm toward the hidden structure. The gale-force winds tore at them for a hundred paces and died back when they reached the protection of the outer wall.

She touched one of the blue-white crystals. "It looks like ice but it's warm."

"The outer layer of crystals act as a solar collector," he explained. "They power the Fortress and maintain the defenses."

He watched as Diana looked up at the structure. The huge crystals crossed one another at mathematically perfect angles. Utterly perfect and utterly alien.

"Is this what your world looked like?"

"So I've been told. I don't actually remember it," Charlie said.

"How sad."

The inside of the structure was dark, just as it had been the last time he visited - when he discovered his sanctuary had been violated. Now he was taking the time to actually look around.

The central console was still raised and the slots for the data crystals were still empty. But there was something wrong. Even with the data crystals removed, the Fortress should still have heat and light.

Diana was walking around, peering into the various chambers. "Is this where your starship was?" she asked, indicating an area that looked more rough-hewn than the rest of the structure.

"Yes. It was a fool's errand. Luthor faked the evidence of Krypton's survival. He even faked a message saying there were survivors. And fool that I was I fell for it. Hook, line, and sinker." He peered around in the dimness. "Luthor must have disabled the internal power system. It shouldn't be this cold or dark."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure we'll find out."

It took two hours of searching, but Charlie finally located the damaged power conduit. Another hour and the interior crystals began to glow softly. It was good that at least some of his powers were back. Without extensive tools or powers the task of repairing the damage would have been impossible.

"Let there be light," he murmured. Wonder Woman gave him a curious look and he shrugged. "A little joke."

He went back to the center console. It too was now glowing softly. "Before I left, the original Father Crystal was damaged. The one Luthor stole was a 'backup'. It didn't have a record of my conversations with my father's AI. And with the power out in here, it didn't record what was happening in here while the power was off."

"But it's not here," Diana pointed out.

Charlie was staring at the console. It had been a long time since he'd read the Kryptonian script inscribed on the console. "Just because the backup's been stolen doesn't mean the original data isn't her." He touched several places on the console and the light brightened.

"Why didn't you come back and remedy the problem earlier?" Wonder Woman asked.

"When I first realized what that bastard had done... let's just say I had a lot on my mind and I wasn't thinking as well as I should have been," Charlie admitted. "Later, it didn't matter." A series of symbols appeared in the air in front of him. He scanned the information.

"Luthor tried to override the security lock on the primary data storage," he said, translating the symbols.

"And what would that do?"

"Allow him to install new security protocols to keep anyone else from accessing the information stored here." He sighed. "When that didn't work, he damaged the power conduit. I'm guessing he was trying to send a power surge through the storage matrix to erase the data."

"He had to have realized you would be able to repair the damage," Diana pointed out.

"He was counting on me not coming back," Charlie said. "And he would rather that no one have the information than risk someone else getting hold of it."

The console chimed softly. "The new crystals are finished." He looked around the chamber. With the lights on it seemed so much friendlier. "You know, this wouldn't be bad for a headquarters."

"A little out of the way," she said.

"Harder for the bad guys to find."

He waved a hand over a crystal pattern and an array of holographic images appeared - television news broadcasts from all over the planet.

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea after all," Diana admitted.

Charlie had been gone for nearly a week. It was the first time he'd been gone for more than a day at work since they'd been forced into hiding. It had been strange, not having him around. As Lois Lane she'd always been independent, self-reliant. Even when she was living with Richard she hadn't had the same connection she now had with her husband - Clark or Charlie or Kal, or whatever his name really was.

But she had missed him. Badly. She had missed his warmth in their shared bed, missed his strong arms around her when she woke from the nightmares she still had, missed his calm presence when Jay was being difficult.

"How did it go?" Laura asked.

"Good," he said. She sensed he didn't want to elaborate. She also knew he would tell her what happened, sooner or later.

She wasn't disappointed.

"I was able to repair the damage Luthor did to the Fortress," he said as he unpacked his travel case. "Everything works again. This new meta-human league will be using it as a headquarters, at least until they can build their own. There's been a suggestion of putting it on the Moon."

"Are you okay?" she asked. He'd been pensive ever since she picked him up from the airport.

"The Fortress's medical scanners and databases are better than STAR Labs," he said quietly. "But even the Fortress AI can't say when, or if, I'll ever get all my abilities back. It does confirm it's a virus-like infection."

"But, of course, there's no treatment and no cure," she completed for him.

He sighed and shook his head. "Maybe if I'd had access to the Fortress right after I was exposed, there may have been a treatment. But maybe not."

She studied him for a long moment. They'd been together long enough that she knew his moods. There was something else he wasn't saying.

After another long moment he sighed and sat down on their bed. "The League representative was Wonder Woman," he said so softly she might not have heard it if she hadn't been watching him.

"You spent a week in the Arctic with Wonder Woman?" Laura wasn't sure how upset she was supposed to be, or who exactly she was supposed to be upset *with* - Bruce for setting it up or Charlie for going along with it.

"Nothing happened," Charlie added.

"And I'm supposed to believe you?" Laura spat. "I mean, look at her. She's every guy's wet dream. Tall, gorgeous. Hell, she could poke a guy's eye out with those..."

"I'm not every guy," Charlie said gently. "And I'm not her type."

"And what type is that?" Laura asked. Now she wasn't sure how she was supposed to feel - angry at Charlie for getting into a compromising situation or relieved that Wonder Woman hadn't wanted her obviously desirable - and taken - hunk of man.

Charlie took a moment before answering. "She's a warrior, first and foremost. That's how she's been trained. She's the Themysciran version of a Top Gun. That's not a come-hither sway she's got. That's a swagger. There was only one man on the planet who might have been able to best her and that was Superman."

"And he's not around anymore."

Charlie nodded. "He also wasn't a warrior and she doesn't know what to make of someone who would walk away from his mission to protect his family. That isn't the warrior's way."

"Return with your shield or on it," Laura quoted.

"Exactly."

Laura wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe that he would honor his vows no matter what the provocation. But Diana of Themyscira was so damned gorgeous and Laura Kendall was so 'average' and now she was pregnant and moody and not at all sexy. She could understand how a man might be tempted to taste perfection.

And she knew how other women looked at Charlie. He didn't see it, but she saw the looks he got when they were out together. Even as 'plain ole Charlie Kendall' he was tall and fit and

gorgeous. What woman in her right mind *wouldn't* want to jump his bones?

"Clark?"

His eyes widened at her using that name.

"I know I don't say it very often, but I love you."

"I love you, Lois. And I swear to you, nothing happened and nothing will."

She wished she really believed it.

Spring turned into summer. Jay graduated first grade with As and Bs, even in gym. There was no longer any sign of the fragility he had when he was younger. Charlie finished his teaching degree and had interviewed with several of the nearest school districts. He was confident one of them would hire him even if it was part-time.

Martha and Ben moved into a small house a little ways out of town. Jay was spending a lot of time with them, which was good for all of them. Martha and Ben hadn't really liked Minneapolis - Martha hadn't been able to plant a garden. Now she had the space to plant a good sized garden and Jay loved to help.

Bruce arranged for secure email and phone communication so Laura could stay in touch with her parents and sister. Her mom was ecstatic over the possibility of another grandchild, even if she might never see him or her in the flesh. Laura's parents didn't know what her name was now, only that she was married and living somewhere in the U.S. Unless Richard told them, they didn't even know the man she'd married was once known as Clark Kent.

"Clark, there is no way in hell I'm sitting through Thanksgiving dinner with my father and all the other crazies in my family without backup," Lois told her partner of six months.

"But I..." Clark began to protest. Then he snapped his mouth shut and his shoulders sagged even further as if he had realized how futile his protest of other plans really was. "What time do you want me to pick you up?" he asked.

"I'll meet you there at three," she told him, handing him a Rolodex card with her sister's address on it. "And don't you dare be late."

To Lois's surprise, Clark was waiting in front of her sister's house when she drove up. Adding to her surprise was the fact that Clark was actually dressed casually. Chinos and a heavy cable knit sweater that looked like it might even have been hand knit. In his hand he had a paper sack that looked like it might hold a wine bottle.

He hurried over to her as she struggled with the large bowl of salad that was her contribution to the Thanksgiving feast. It was all anyone in the family trusted her with.

She raised one eyebrow at the sack in Clark's hand. She had told him he didn't need to bring anything.

"I didn't know what to bring," he said. "So I brought some sparkling cider. It's non-alcoholic. I hope that's okay."

She stared at him a moment. Sometimes Clark was just so strange. But then, maybe he remembered that her mother was a recovering alcoholic.

The front door opened to reveal Lois's father standing there. Samuel Lane, General, U.S. Army. Even in civilian clothes he was stiff and looked like he'd rather be in uniform. Clark introduced himself and stuck out his hand to be shaken.

The General looked him up and down and simply walked away.

"Don't mind him," Lois ordered, following her father into the house. "He hates civilians. And left wing pinko journalists are the worst of the lot."

"Is that why you..." Clark began.

Lois laughed. "No. But it's definitely one of the perks."

The rest of the family was already there. It was Lucy's house so obviously Lucy, her husband, Ron, and their three kids were there. Lois's mother, Elinor, was overseeing setting the table. Maman, Lois's grandmother, was sitting in the recliner. Lois wasn't sure if she was watching the movie with the kids or not. Over the past few months Maman's dementia had gotten worse. This was probably the last holiday she would spend with them. For now she seemed okay, but that could change at any moment when Maman forgot where she was and who the people around her were and panicked.

Lois took the salad into the kitchen. Her father followed her, glowering.

"Don't tell me. Ron's already filled you in on Clark," Lois began. Sometimes a preemptive strike was best. "You hate him without even meeting him which is typical for you. But you didn't have to be rude."

"He's a..." Sam started.

"He's a what? A nerd? A geek? He's put up with me for the past six months at work and I haven't killed him and he hasn't quit. That has to say something for him."

She concentrated on tossing the salad. Thanksgiving was supposed to be a happy family get-together.

"It's just that you can do better and you know it."

"Better than what? Lucy told me to bring somebody so I did. I'm not running off to Vegas with him," Lois told him. "And even if I did, it would be none of your business."

Lois turned her back on her father. After a moment she heard him leave. Lois sighed. She had known her father wouldn't like Clark and she had known that Ron would tell him all the newsroom gossip about the tall Midwesterner. Not that there was much to tell beyond the fact he had an obvious crush on Lois. Clark wasn't gay. And although it wasn't something she would ever say aloud, he was one of the few people capable of keeping up with her.

"I'm sorry," Clark's voice intruded into her thoughts.

"Nothing for you to be sorry about, Clark," Lois assured him. "It's my dad who's being a jerk. Ignore him. He's an equal opportunity hater." She gave a wry chuckle. "He'd hate Superman if I went out with him."

"Why? Because he's an alien?"

"Because even Superman isn't good enough for Princess Lois," Lucy said with a grin. "Don't worry about the General. He'll come around. Eventually."

Only Sam Lane never did 'come around'. He disliked everything about Clark - his quiet demeanor, the fact that he'd never joined the military, the fact that he disapproved of the U.S. government's high-handed actions overseas. For Sam it was 'My country, right or wrong'. Clark had a different view. It was something few people realized about quietly understated Clark Kent - he was a quiet, even shy, man, but there were things he believed in passionately, things he was willing to fight for. The biggest one was a person's right to live free of want and free of fear.

Laura sighed. Look at them now - Laura, Charlie, and Jay. Their lives were circumscribed by fear. Fear of a madman. Even from his prison cell, Luthor's threats laid a pall over their lives.

Laura doubted her father would understand even now. Running and hiding wasn't in his vocabulary. Of course, it hadn't been in Lois Lane's vocabulary either. But Lois Lane was dead.

The summer days grew hotter and Laura's pregnancy became more noticeable. Charlie was offered a job at the local high school. Things were looking relatively good. But things had been looking good before Christmas, too. Before they'd had to run again.

Laura's boss, Max, was entertaining a group of visiting VIP's from the East Coast, including Bruce Wayne. Of course Laura Kendall didn't know Bruce Wayne.

She was working paperwork when her office door opened. "Can I help you?" she asked without looking up.

"Hello, Princess."

Startled, she looked up to see a uniformed man standing in the doorway - General Lane, her father. Laura's mind spun for a moment then she said, "General Lane, is there something I can help you with?"

He chuckled drily as he shut the door behind him. "Mister Wayne wanted to warn you. I But I... I wanted to surprise you."

"You surprised me."

He seemed disconcerted at her reaction. He studied her a long moment and she could see his eyes linger over her belly.

"Your mother told me you were expecting another child," he said after another long moment. "I wasn't sure I believed her."

"Believe her," Laura said. "The baby's due the first week of September." She studied him a long moment. He was thinner and much grayer than she remembered. Even his skin looked a little gray.

"What are you doing here? How did you find me?" she asked.

"A man in my position... I called in a few markers, found out who arranged for your disappearance."

"And who else knows?"

He shook his head. "I've been working with classified and highly sensitive material most of my career, Princess."

"You didn't answer my question."

He smiled. "That's my Princess. Always wanting answers."

"Okay, here's a question you should be able to answer. Why are you here?"

He actually managed to look worried. "I... This isn't the place to discuss that. In a few minutes you'll get a call from your supervisor that you and your family are being invited to have dinner with Mister Wayne and me to discuss some minor details in some military hardware WayneTech is designing for us. At some point before or during dinner, Mister Wayne will beg off. Then we can talk."

There was something in his voice that worried her. "Dad, what's wrong?"

"What makes you think there's something wrong?" he asked, opening the door to leave.

A sudden thought. "Did your sources tell you who I'm married to?"

Lane chuckled. "You're married to your son's father. I guess late is better than never. I've already been warned to keep an open mind about him."

"By whom?"

Another chuckle. "Let's just say that you and he have friends in some places I certainly never expected."

As General Lane had predicted, Bruce Wayne invited the Kendalls to join him and General Lane at dinner at Angelino's. Also as predicted, Bruce's cell phone rang as they were placing their dinner orders. He apologized, arranged to take care of the dinner check, and hurried off.

To General Lane's credit, he did a credible job of not recognizing Jay and Charlie when he spotted them coming into the restaurant.

They chatted for a few minutes after Bruce's departure - Jay's school, Charlie's new job. It was Charlie who finally asked the question. "Why are you here?"

"I'm not allowed to come visit my daughter and her family?"

"You know what I mean," Charlie said. "Your eldest daughter is listed as dead. We're supposed to limit our contacts with the past."

Lane sighed. "I know the drill. But I knew there was something 'off' with that car bombing." He looked at Laura. "You're too smart to get caught like that."

"Nobody's that smart," Laura said. "We got lucky."

Lane nodded. "Like you got lucky when the people who owned Harrington decided you were dangerous?"

"Maybe," she said.

"You have powerful people looking out for you," Lane said.

Laura didn't comment but she was curious as to where her father was leading. Charlie looked worried and Jay was concentrating on his meal.

"You have no idea what I went through to get permission to come out here," Lane continued. "Even your mother doesn't know exactly why I decided to take up Wayne's invitation to look over his factory here. I don't normally do the glad handing thing."

"So why did you?" Laura asked. "You know I've been in contact with Mom and Luce through email and phone calls."

"This isn't something I wanted to say over the phone or in a letter," he said. His expression grew sad and distant.

Laura felt alarm bells going off in her head. It was like when she used to do interviews and the interviewee started waffling on her. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Lane sighed heavily. "Isn't it enough that I wanted to see my daughter and her family?" He turned to Charlie. "When White came back from that trip to Reno he told me Lois was married. I had a hard time believing him. Then he told me who it was and everything clicked together. You knew what that madman had planned but you put yourself in a front of a bullet that you knew could kill you. Everything fit, including why..." His voice trailed off as though he was afraid to vocalize the next part.

"Why what?" Charlie prompted.

"Why so many people have put so much into watching your back," Lane said. "I seriously doubt they would have put as much effort into keeping just Lois safe."

"You might be surprised," Charlie said quietly.

"Maybe," Lane said. "But I doubt it."

"You didn't go to all this trouble to let me know you know I'm married to my son's father," Laura pointed out.

Her father managed to look guilty. "The worst day of my life was when I thought we'd lost you. I always thought tomorrow would be there. And suddenly it wasn't and I'd left so many things unsaid. You'd think a man in my profession would know better but we all think we're immortal until it hits us between the eyes that nothing is immortal."

"Dad, what's wrong?" Laura insisted.

Lane shook his head. "Maybe I just wanted to see for myself that you were okay. Maybe I just want to spend some time with my daughter and her family before they disappear again."

"And what makes you think we're going to disappear again?" Charlie asked.

"That madman still has a contract out on Lois Lane, Clark Kent, and Superman. Even in a SuperMax prison he's dangerous. And somebody might just mistake you for them."

"We're being careful," Laura assured him.

"Good. Now let's forget all this bad stuff for a while," Lane said. "Jay, your grandma tells me you play soccer."

Jay nodded. "And Dad's the coach."

"Really? Grandma didn't mention that..."

"Do you believe anything he said?" Laura asked her husband after they were home and Jay was put to bed. It had been a long day for all of them and Jay had actually fallen asleep in the car after they'd dropped Grandpa Lane at the airport.

"Oh, I believe everything he said," Charlie replied. "But I also know he didn't tell us everything."

"Oh?"

Charlie paused, debating how much to tell her. She knew his powers were back for the most part, albeit at a fraction of what they had been, so she had to suspect he had checked her father over surreptitiously. "He's right about Luthor having a contract out on Lane and Kent, but he didn't mention the fact that the Feds know it and are taking extreme measures to make sure he isn't sending or receiving messages from the outside. Luckily, one of the failures of a mind like Luthor's is that they can't grasp the idea that there are others out there with equally high IQs and even though they might be fooled once by someone like him, they won't be fooled twice."

Charlie sighed. "I'd feel sorry for him if he wasn't such a monster. His mail is censored. He isn't even allowed magazine subscriptions. If he wants something like that, they send someone out to a randomly chosen newsstand to pick it up for him. Same for books. He's not allowed a computer but he is given a legal pad and a pencil. Those are removed everyday. The papers are scanned and destroyed. They might have some value someday, who knows? But they don't want to run the risk of anyone making use of anything Luthor comes up with."

"You haven't told me what you know about my dad," she pointed out. He smiled inwardly. Despite everything, she hadn't lost her reporter's instincts or how to stay on task.

"I scanned him as best I could," Charlie admitted. "I'm not a doctor, but it looks like he has cancer and it's metastasized."

"No..." she murmured.

"I'm sorry."

"Why didn't he say anything?"

"Maybe it was like he said. He wanted to make sure you were okay, that you were as happy as you could be under the circumstances. I also think he didn't want us to make a fuss. It would have raised suspicions."

"How long before..."

"A few months, maybe. I'm not a doctor. I could be wrong." But he knew he wasn't wrong. Sam Lane had wanted to come and say goodbye to his daughter and grandson.

General Sam Lane's funeral was one month later in Washington D.C. The various

obituaries extolled a life of outstanding military service, mentioning his relationship to slain journalist Lois Lane only in passing if at all. They said he died after a 'short' undisclosed illness.

Laura, Charlie and Jay flew to D.C. for the funeral over the objections of both Bruce Wayne and the U.S. Marshalls handing their case.

"The Kendalls have no reason to go to General Lane's funeral," Bruce argued over the phone when Laura told him of her plans.

"Maybe Charlie served under him or something," Laura suggested.

"Charlie was never in the military and you know it."

"Then *you* find us a reason to be there," Laura challenged. "Because I'm going whether you like it or not."

Bruce finally conceded that it was possible that Charles and Laura Kendall had known General Lane sometime in the past. When and where was nebulous.

The funeral was at Arlington. The day was hot and muggy and Laura remembered why she hated the area around Washington D.C. She hated the sweltering summer heat. Being pregnant didn't help at all. At least there were trees lining the road. They afforded at least a little shade for the people waiting for the procession to go by.

The band came first, followed by a platoon of marching soldiers and a color guard. Then came the chaplain, the caisson, and the riderless horse. The mourners were led by the family - his wife and surviving daughter and son-in-law and their children. There were a surprising number of mourners. Laura thought she even saw the vice-president in the group.

Laura didn't dare approach her mother or sister. Approaching Lucy's husband, Ron, was completely out of the question. And to add more issues, Wonder Woman was there, walking beside Elinor Lane.

Charlie took Laura's hand and led her and Jay to join the solemn group behind the caisson.

The interment ceremony was simple and conducted with a military precision Sam Lane would have appreciated. There was both a cannon salute and a rifle salute. The flag was folded and passed through several hands before being presented to Mrs. Lane. Finally, following a long standing tradition, one of the Arlington Ladies escorted by a tall young soldier presented a card of condolence.

"Was this what Superman's funeral was like?" Jay asked quietly.

"A little," Laura answered. "Only there were more people to say goodbye and instead of soldiers there were police and fire fighters."

"Was that because more people liked Superman?"

Charlie answered, "I think it was more that more people knew about Superman than knew about General Lane. But that doesn't mean the general was less important, or his job was less needed."

"Well spoken," Wonder Woman said.

She was as tall as Laura had imagined, as tall as Charlie in her heeled boots. Tall and beautiful and utterly, inhumanly, perfect.

"You are Laura," Wonder Woman said, taking Laura's hand in both of her own. "I grieve with you. He was a fine warrior. A fine man. You must be very proud."

"Yes, of course," Laura said. Maybe she *was* proud of her father but it wasn't anything she'd ever thought much about. The hurts of her childhood went too deep.

Wonder Woman was watching Laura carefully, weighing her next words. "I had the

privilege of working with the General since my arrival in your country," the tall woman continued. "He often spoke of his daughters. How proud he was of them, especially his eldest. She was a warrior for Truth."

Charlie spoke for Laura. "It's a pity he never once told *her* that."

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Laura thought her daughter's eyes couldn't get any larger. Samantha adored Wonder Woman. She had the action figures, the sheets, even the pajamas. Samantha Kendall might not be Wonder Woman's biggest fan, but she was close. Very close.

Jay nodded politely to the superhero. "It's a pleasure to meet you, your highness," he said formally. He turned to his mother. "I'll go see how Dad's doing." With that he disappeared - not quite literally but close enough. Laura was going to have to talk to him about that.

Diana was watching Jay.

"Fine looking boy. I see he takes after his father more each day," Diana said. "You must be proud."

"Of course. I'm proud of both my children," Laura said pointedly. "But that's not why you're here."

Diana sighed. "Very true. I was sent to ask Charles what his plans were, assuming Luthor is no longer a threat to you and the children."

"Don't you mean what *our* plans were?" Laura asked. "It's not just his decision."

"My apologies," Diana said. "What are *your* plans?"

It was Laura's turn to sigh. "I don't know yet. We've waited so long for this, but we never really thought it would happen. We both thought Luthor would hang on forever just to spite us."

"But if he is gone?" Diana insisted. "I can understand why Charles has refused to allow Jay to reveal himself openly..."

"Mom? Why don't Dad and Jay want to admit they're meta-humans, like Flash and Atom?" Samantha interrupted.

Samantha may have only been eight, but she was smart and observant. Of course, that was to be expected. Samantha was the daughter of two of the, formerly, top investigative journalists in the country. Laura had no doubt Samantha would grow up to be anything she wanted - maybe even an investigative journalist. She certainly had the curiosity for it.

"I know they both do some when they don't think anybody's watching," the girl added.

"You noticed that?" Laura asked, not sure if she should be alarmed or not. *Definitely an investigator of some sort.*

Samantha nodded.

"You remember Dad and me talking about a crazy man named Luthor?" Laura asked.

"Yeah. He's the guy who tried to kill you and Jay and Dad. That's why we can't go visit Aunt Lucy or Grandma Elinor in Metropolis."

"Luthor poisoned your dad so he couldn't do special stuff," Laura explained. "It took a long time for him to recover. And we didn't want Luthor to know."

"Oh," Samantha said. Her forehead creased in thought. "Will I be able to do meta stuff like Dad and Jay?"

"Most likely," Diana said.

"Sweet," the girl said with a grin. She grabbed some cookies from the cookie jar and stuffed one into her mouth. It seemed Samantha was always hungry these days. Jay had gone through a similar phase at the same age.

"Mom, who did Dad used to be before Luthor hurt him?" she asked around a mouthful of crumbs.

"Superman," Charlie said from the doorway. He smelled of smoke.

Samantha gave him a wondering look. "And who are you now?"

"Your father," he said, ruffling her dark hair. "And it's not polite to talk with your mouth full."

2008

"You are so *dead*," Laura screamed at her husband. "Aaugh!" Another contraction rolled over her.

"Remember your breathing, Lo," Charlie reminded her as the obstetrician checked her progress. "Pant... pant..."

"Just a couple more pushes," the doctor told them. "The baby's crowning. You're almost there."

"Push, Lo. Push," Charlie urged. Sweat rolled off her face. He took a cloth and wiped her forehead. She gritted her teeth and grabbed his hand harder.

"We're almost there," the doctor assured them. "Just a little more."

Laura laid back to rest for a moment until the next contraction hit. She'd climbed mountains, fought thugs, went through Special Forces training as a teenager but nothing had prepared her for the level of work she was doing now. Even giving birth to Jason had been easier. Of course she'd been eight years younger then. She steeled herself for the next bout.

"Push, you can do it!" Charlie urged her. Then there was a new sound in the room, a wail of outrage from between her legs. The doctor held up a wriggling, bloody, slimy body with four flailing limbs and placed it on Lois's belly.

"Congratulations. You have a daughter," the doctor said.

Laura propped herself up on her elbows, ignoring the pain from the I.V., and looked down at the cause of all her recent pain and sweat. She counted the fingers and toes - everything was in its proper place.

"Would you like to cut the cord?" the doctor asked Charlie, handing him a pair of surgical scissors. Charlie snipped the purple-red cord at the point the doctor indicated.

One of the assistants bundled the baby into the towel and whisked her over to a nearby table to be checked out and cleaned up. "Weight seven pounds, ten ounces, Apgar score 9," the assistant announced. "She's a strong little girl. What's her name?"

"Samantha... Samantha Johanna Kendall," Laura told her. "After her grandfathers."

Laura watched Charlie looking down in awe at the newborn in the nurse's arms. He fairly glowed with pride and joy as he took the baby from the nurse and brought her back to his wife. This is what he had missed the first time - the joy and terror of being there when a new life came into the world. A new life he was responsible for.

Charlie's eyes were bright as he looked at them. Samantha had latched onto a nipple and even though Laura's milk wouldn't come in for a bit, she seemed to be happy suckling. Laura grabbed Charlie with her free arm and pulled him into a hug.

"She's beautiful," Charlie murmured, kissing her hair and caressing the dark fuzzy down on their daughter's head.

Unlike Jason before her, baby Samantha was an 'easy' child. She slept through the night at an early age, and even though she was precocious in walking and talking, she didn't seem to get into quite as much trouble as Jason did when he was a toddler. Of course, a good deal of

the relative ease was having an extra set of hands around. Jay was an attentive and helpful big brother. It was also helpful that a small town was far less stressful than the newsroom of a great metropolitan newspaper. And a father with even a few 'super' powers was good to have around when dealing with a toddler with a gift for trouble.

Laura's work hours were regular and so were Charlie's for the most part. Charlie's classes were popular with the students and he was hired on full time as soon as there was an opening.

He was there for Samantha's first steps and her first words were, predictably, 'dada'.

Laura's second mystery-thriller, the first as L.J. Kendall, was published when Samantha was three. Like her first novel, this one was well received by critics and readers. Laura became a minor celebrity around town. The extra money didn't hurt either.

That was also the year Charlie's mom died.

"She never really recovered from losing the farm like that and being forced to move away from Smallville," Ben said later, after the funeral.

"I'm sorry," Charlie said.

"Don't be. It wasn't your doing and she got to know her grandkids. Until you came back and found out about Jay, she never thought she'd see grandkids," Ben said. "She was really proud of you, you know, and not just because of... you know."

"I know."

Ben looked down at the brass urn that contained his wife's ashes. "She wanted to be buried next to Jonathan."

"That won't be a problem," Charlie assured him.

That night Laura awoke to find the space next to her empty. Charlie was standing at the window in the darkness, looking out at the sky.

"Charlie? Is something wrong?"

"Bruce called. Another family was found dead. This one was in Florida. He said the physical resemblance to us was remarkable."

"So, is Luthor pulling the strings, or is someone murdering our look-alikes to try to pick up the contract?" Laura asked.

Charlie shook his head. "Bruce is fairly certain Luthor doesn't have access to the outside. So that only leaves people trying to pick up a couple million for a triple homicide. That's assuming Luthor was in a position to pay."

"There's something else, isn't there?"

He didn't speak for a long moment. "I was having a dream about flying like the old days. When I woke up, I was floating."

Laura hunted in the dark for her robe at the foot of the bed. She moved to stand beside him, leaning against him for comfort - his or her own she wasn't quite sure.

Early in their ordeal she had prayed for the return of his unique abilities. She'd seen how hurt and helpless he felt when watching the TV coverage of disasters he might have been able to prevent if Superman was still around. She had many of the same feelings when watching the news or reading newspapers - even her beloved *Daily Planet*. So many obvious leads that hadn't been followed, so much corruption that hadn't been exposed to the light of day. So many things she could have done...

"I never took her flying," Charlie murmured. "My own mother and I never took her flying. There was never time, and then... I miss her so much. Does it ever stop hurting?"

Laura sighed. It hadn't been so bad for her when her father died. She and the General hadn't been all that close over the years - but his death still hurt. There had been so many

things left unsaid between them. Laura doubted there had been much left unsaid between Charlie and his mom.

"I know it sounds like mindless platitudes," Laura said softly, "but there will always be an empty space in your heart that's exactly her size and shape. But after a while the sharp edges will soften and you'll be able to remember all the good things without it hurting so badly. And I know you have a lot of good memories of her and your dad. Just hold on to them."

He put his arm around her and leaned his cheek on the top of her head. "Have I told you recently how much I love you?"

"Not in the last couple minutes."

"I would have let you go with Richard, you know," he said after another long silence. "If Luthor hadn't forced the issue I would have stood by and watched you marry him."

"I was engaged to him for five years," she reminded him. "The betting pool over in Sports wasn't on when I'd marry him but when he'd realize it was never going to happen. I think Polly won that one. She figured that I'd be dead before he figured it out. Mel over in Business would have won the other pool. He had down 'car bomb' as the cause of Lois Lane's death."

"What do you think they're betting on now?"

"Who knows? Maybe when Luthor kicks off?"

"Once the League finds out about... they're going to be pushing for me to be more involved with them," Charlie said. "I'm not sure that's wise. But I can't just stand by and do nothing if I have the ability to do something."

"Superman's dead."

"I know. And he's going to stay dead."

"You could run for city council."

That brought a chuckle. "I want solve problems, not become one."

Doctor Klein's tests confirmed that Charlie's body had finally fought through most of the effects of Luthor's poison. His power levels were only a fraction of his previous abilities - he wasn't nearly as fast as the Flash and Wonder Woman could probably beat him in a fair fight but he was still unnaturally strong. He could fly, he could see through things and he was nearly invulnerable. With time there was a chance he would regain his former power levels.

Superman had bared his face to the world. He wore bright colors so he could be seen and recognized as someone who had nothing to hide. Few had realized it at the time that it was his human alter ego that wore the mask.

Pax wore dark gray and his hands and upper face were covered, even his eyes. Unlike most of the other costumed heroes he wore a cape. He refused to speak to the media, reserving his rare utterances for the emergency workers on the scene.

His first appearance was at a wild fire that was threatening a Los Angeles suburb. Fire crews had been working on that section of the fire for at least a day and had thought it was under control until the wind whipped up and the fire jumped the freeway. It was *Pax* who determined the fire had been arson to cover up a murder. In a moment of cosmic justice, it appeared that the arsonist had died as well, caught in the fire when it ran out of control.

The press had a field day. Speculation ran rampant about the new superhero. The most popular theories were that *Pax* was either a clone of Superman or Superman's son - the one Luthor had raved about in the *Daily Planet* newsroom before he murdered Clark Kent. Neither *Pax* nor the League confirmed anything.

One thing the press didn't seem to notice was that *Pax* rarely appeared in the daytime in

the U.S. Nor did he stay at disasters for days on end the way Superman had occasionally done. Pax flew in, took care of the job, and disappeared.

Being a school teacher didn't afford Charlie Kendall the same freedom to disappear as Clark Kent had as a reporter. And being a parent meant he refused to be on call the way many of the League members seemed to be.

Lex Luthor was furious when he found out about Pax.

"They actually had to sedate him," Bruce told Laura with a chuckle when he called her at her office. "He was ranting about Pax really being Superman in disguise."

"No one believes him, do they?" Laura asked.

"I'm told the *Inquisitor* thinks it's a possibility. After all, Superman's tomb is empty. They've put out a reward for a recording of Pax's voice so it can be compared to Superman's."

"What happens if they succeed?"

"I trust that Pax is more careful than that," Bruce said.

After a while the press furor died down. Superheroes were becoming old hat.

When Samantha was five more of Jay's powers began to manifest. Charlie was out of town at a seminar on teaching the Talented and Gifted - appropriate considering both Jay and Samantha tested out as gifted - when the first incident occurred.

"Mom!" Jay yelled from his bedroom that morning. Laura ran in to find Jay sitting on his bed in his pajamas, his eyes screwed shut.

"What's wrong?" she demanded. "Open your eyes so I can see what's wrong."

"No!" Jay wailed. "My eyes started burning and..." He pointed to the wall by the door. Laura turned to see scorch marks. Jay's favorite Superman poster was blackened.

Heat vision?

"My eyes are still burning," Jay said in a whisper.

"Stay right here and I'll be right back for you," Laura ordered. She ran into the bathroom Jay shared with Samantha and pulled out as much of the flammables as she could, dumping them on the floor of the hallway. Then she started running cold water into the bathtub. She breathed a silent prayer of thanks that when they remodeled the bathroom two years before they left the old cast iron tub in place. Cast iron burned a lot less easily than acrylic.

Laura grabbed all the ice cube trays from the freezer and dumped the ice into the tub before bringing Jay into the bathroom.

"My eyes are still burning," he complained.

"I want you to look into the tub and open your eyes," Laura ordered. She wished Charlie was home. It was unlikely Jay would be able to hurt *him*.

"But I might hurt you!" Jay protested.

"I'll be standing behind you," Laura assured him. "Just look into the tub."

Suddenly the tub erupted with steam. The ice water was boiling. After a few moments the heat seemed to turn down although steam was still rising from the water.

"Feeling better?" Laura asked, waving steam away from her face.

"I... um... I don't know what happened," Jay said.

"I suspect your powers are coming in," Laura said. She expected him to be surprised by her statement.

"You think so?" he asked instead. He sounded pleased.

Laura scowled at her son. "You don't sound surprised that you might be developing super powers."

"Mom, I've known about Dad and Superman since I was five," Jay said. "In fact, I figured

it out the first day I met him back in Metropolis. What I couldn't figure out was why nobody else had figured it out."

"Preconception and misdirection," Laura said. "Nobody was looking to see Superman in a suit and tie working in an office because Superman never indicated he did anything other than fly around rescuing people."

"Nobody except Luthor was looking, you mean," Jay reminded her.

"Nobody except Luthor," Laura agreed. "I don't think anyone figured out how he figured it out. Maybe he had a way of tracking Superman. If he did he hasn't let anyone else know about it."

"Do you think I'll end up with all of Dad's abilities?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think Dad's happy being Pax?"

"How do you..." Laura almost sputtered. She and Charlie had tried to keep Jay and Samantha from knowing about Charlie's other job. Both adults knew that secrets were a hard thing for children to understand or keep.

Jay grinned at her. "Mom, I'm Superman's son, remember? I promise I won't tell Sam about Dad being Pax. I mean, she's just a little kid."

2017

Charlie gave Wonder Woman a hard look. "I thought the League agreed to be more circumspect than this."

Diana shrugged, an elegant move that made Laura glower. Charlie pulled his wife close to his side and placed a protective arm around her shoulders.

"The dead man's DNA is being checked as we speak," Diana said, indicating a tiny ear bud that Laura hadn't noticed before.

"The initial analysis confirms it is Luthor's genetic material, but the Batman and the Martian Manhunter have further tests to rule out clones or simulacrum," Diana continued.

"And if it turns out to be a clone or simulacrum?" Laura asked.

"Then nothing will have changed," Diana said.

Charlie shook his head. "It will mean that Luthor escaped and is no doubt currently planning something heinous."

"We would see signs of that," the Amazon pointed out.

"You missed the signs when Luthor was planning to level the East Coast," Laura said.

"There was no League then, and the signs *were* there. It was simply that there was no one in a position to recognize them at the time, not even Superman," Diana explained softly. "Now we know what to look for and we have the means to look."

Charlie seemed to accept that.

Diana's expression became distracted and she held up on finger as she listened to distant voices. Charlie's expression was thoughtful and Laura knew he was listening in.

"It's confirmed," Diana announced. "It was Luthor. The preliminary autopsy report indicates he died of advanced lymphoma, most likely due to long term kryptonite exposure. It appears that he ingested it at some point and the mineral lodged in his bones, including his skull. There were also signs of cerebral atrophy similar to Alzheimer's disease."

"You mean the brain of the greatest criminal mind on Earth was turning to mush?" Laura asked. It was too much to believe. Luthor was not only dead, but he had been suffering from dementia.

"So it would seem," Diana said. "It will, of course, take several days, possibly weeks, for

the various pathology studies to be done. And there will be those who will not believe it and may still try to claim the price he put on the heads of Lane and Kent and their son."

"Do you think we can get an expert to testify that this cerebral atrophy was making Luthor delusional as long ago as when he shot Kent?" Charlie asked.

Diana smiled. "I'm sure we can."

The rest of the day was a daze. Bruce finally called to confirm what Diana had already told them - Luthor really was dead and the authorities in Metropolis were taking extraordinary measures to make sure the body wasn't stolen before it was cremated.

"So, what are we going to do?" Laura asked her husband as they were getting ready for bed. She still didn't quite believe it had finally happened.

"We don't have to do anything really," Charlie said thoughtfully. "We don't have to watch ourselves quite as closely. We can print and hang some older family pictures, admit we lived in Metropolis when Superman was there. Some people may have some issues with the fact that we had deep secrets, but with any luck that'll blow over quickly."

"Diana wanted to know what our plans were," she told him.

"The League wants Superman to come back," he said.

"Is Superman ready to come back?"

He shook his head. "Superman is dead. Granted, it's not easy being dead, but I think that it's better this way. Pax isn't Superman, but he does his part."

She smiled. "Then Superman can stay dead. But we can visit Metropolis, can't we?"

"I'll make the arrangements in the morning. How does spring break sound?"

Metropolis, the Big Apricot, City of Tomorrow.

They'd been gone for ten long years. Laura didn't remember the city being so crowded, so busy, so smelly. She was sure it hadn't changed that much - Metropolis had earned its name - but she'd been hoping she hadn't changed that much.

Although the city boasted of many new buildings, the Daily Planet Building hadn't changed. The great globe still rotated on the roof and the lobby still displayed framed copies of famous frontpages - the sinking of the Titanic, the destruction of the Hindenberg, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Apollo landing, Kennedy's assassination, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Superman's first appearance, Superman saving the city and world, Superman's death.

Near the elevators was a newer display, a polished black slab with *Our Honored Dead* inscribed across the top. Below the inscription were listed the names, dates of birth, hiring date, date of death, and journalistic awards of those who died in the line of duty while working for the *Daily Planet*. There were also inscribed photos of most of listed dead.

Laura was surprised to see how many names there were. Lois Lane and Clark Kent were listed near the bottom of the second column. It was eerie seeing their faces among the dead.

"Is there something I can help you with?" a man asked. Laura turned to see a blue uniformed security guard standing there, a concerned look on his face.

"No," Laura answered too quickly.

"The display just kind of..." Charlie began.

The guard nodded. "It gets to a lot of people. You wouldn't think that being a writer could be so dangerous." He frowned at Laura as though trying to place her face.

"We were working here at the time Luthor killed Mister Kent and Ms. Lane," Charlie said.

The guard's expression cleared. Mystery solved. "Welcome back," he said.

Charlie shook his head. "We're just visiting."

The elevator was nearly empty as it traveled to the thirtieth floor. But Laura found herself feeling positively dowdy in her conservative business suit and low pumps - at least as compared to the two expensively dressed women in the elevator with them. Lois Lane had worn Prada and Jimmy Cho. Laura Kendall wore Footprints and Dansko. Now even the thought of forcing her feet into high-fashion torture devices gave Laura foot cramps.

Laura caught Samantha studying the two women. "Mom, did you dress like that when you worked here?"

Charlie answered for her. "Yup. Your mom was one hot babe. Very high maintenance."

"And Dad wore three piece suits," Jay added. "Every day."

Samantha's eyes widened at that. Laura smiled. Samantha had never seen her father dressed more formally than chinos and a sports jacket. High school teachers didn't usually need three piece suits.

"You worked here?" one of the women asked.

"It was a long time ago," Laura said as the elevator doors opened onto the hallway on the thirtieth floor. She didn't look back as she strode across the marble to the glass doors to the newsroom, her husband and children trailing behind her.

"Was I that bad?" Laura asked Charlie, her hand on the door handle.

"If you were, I didn't notice," Charlie said with a smile.

"The tall one was checking you out, Dad," Jay said.

"Really? I didn't notice that either," Charlie said with a chuckle as he followed his family into the newsroom.

"Just remember you're mine, Farm boy," Laura called back. She started toward Perry White's office. Like the city, the newsroom was familiar yet strange. The smells were the same - stale coffee, ozone, sweat and perfume. This place had been her home for nearly sixteen years. At the time she couldn't imagine anything different. But there were so many new faces and only a few old. Lois Lane's brother-in-law, Ron Troupe, had moved to NewsTime several years before. Polly and Gil were still there, but Ralph was gone.

"Whoa, be careful with that..." a familiar voice said. She looked back to see Charlie handing someone a sophisticated digital camera. Then she recognized the sandy haired man as his eyes widened at the sight of her and Charlie.

"Mister..." Jimmy Olsen began.

"Kendall," Charlie said. "Charlie Kendall. And Laura, Jay, and Samantha."

Jimmy was practically babbling. "You're alive! I mean, you're here! Ohmygod. Chief! Look who's here!"

"Hello, Chief," Charlie called out.

Perry glowered in their direction, then his expression cleared and Laura knew he was fighting down a smile. It would never do to be seen smiling in the newsroom over anything other than a great story. It might damage his crusty reputation. And Perry did so value that.

They followed his gestured instructions and went to wait in his office.

"It's so weird being back here," Jay commented, looking back at the newsroom.

Laura gave a sad chuckle. "I was a little older than Samantha the first time I walked into the newsroom. It was some sort of field trip, but I remember promising myself it wouldn't be the last time I'd walk through those doors." She smiled at the long ago memory. "Perry was an investigative reporter and he was having it out with his editor over something or other."

"Sounds familiar," Charlie said. "The first day I met you, you were arguing with Perry over something or other."

"And the first time I actually met her, she tried to convince me she was nearly twenty, instead of nearly sixteen," Perry said, walking into his office. He stopped and studied them. "Jason? I can't believe how much you've grown. You're nearly as tall as your dad here. I hear you're a soccer player *and* you're a musician."

"And a straight A student," Laura added proudly. "He'll be taking community college classes next year."

"Mom..." Jay protested. Laura ruffled his hair.

"And this young lady must be Samantha," Perry said.

Samantha nodded, for once speechless.

"She looks like you," Perry said, leaning against his desk.

"She takes after her mom in more ways than one," Charlie said with a grin.

"I can imagine," Perry said.

Laura studied the older man for a long moment. He hadn't been a young man when their lives were torn apart and the ensuing years hadn't been easy for him either. She knew from Bruce that Perry had 'respectfully' declined to retire, even though he was several years past eligibility. He'd had a bout of lung cancer and had, so far, beaten the disease. But Perry White had never been one to take it easy. Most likely he would die in this office.

"You're lookin' good, Perry," Laura said aloud.

"I look like a worn out old man," Perry corrected her. "I've missed you. Both of you. And my offer still stands. There's still a place for you here if you want it."

"We don't have exactly *Daily Planet* grade resumes any more," Charlie said.

"On the contrary, I've read your recent work. You're a pretty regular contributor to the education journals," Perry said to Charlie then turned to Laura, "and Alice has every one of Laura Kendall's thrillers and I'm surprised some business rag hasn't approached you to come on board."

"I've had offers," Laura admitted. "But none of them are the *Daily Planet*."

"You'll consider coming back?"

Charlie responded. "We came to visit to see if it made any sense to come back."

"And?" Perry prompted.

Laura looked over at Charlie. They had discussed several possibilities concerning coming back to Metropolis. Where they were was a good place to raise kids, but Metropolis was where the *Daily Planet* was.

"With today's communications, we don't have to live in Metropolis to write columns, do we?" she asked.

"No, I don't expect you do," Perry agreed with a chuckle. "Who should I tell personnel I'm sending down?"

"The Kendalls," Charlie said. "Lane and Kent are dead."

"And Superman?" Perry asked.

If Charlie was surprised by the question, he didn't show it. Perry White hadn't gotten to be editor in chief of one of the world's top newspapers by being unobservant.

"Superman was a name, a title, given to Kal-El of Krypton by Lois Lane," Charlie said. "Kal-El will never wear that uniform again."

"But?" Perry prompted.

"But," Charlie went on, "it's just possible he wasn't alone on Earth. It's just possible

someone will take up his mantle, eventually."

"Chances are I won't be around to see it," Perry said.

Laura opened her mouth to protest but Perry put his hand up. "I'm not getting any younger, Lois. I know what shape I'm in. I can guess what shape I'll be in, in ten years time."

"Nonsense," Laura protested. Yes, he was heavier than she remembered, heavier and more care-worn, but she couldn't imagine a time when he wouldn't be manning the helm of the *Daily Planet*. She couldn't imagine him gone.

He smiled uncharacteristically and shook his head. "Get down to personnel and get your paperwork filled out so I can pay you. I figure twelve column inches from each of you for Sunday's edition?"

Charlie reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a mini-card. He handed it to Perry. "Our columns for this Sunday."

"You were planning this, weren't you?"

"Just following your motto, be prepared," Charlie told him with a grin.

"Welcome back," Perry said, shaking Charlie's hand.

Charlie began to usher Jay and Samantha out of the office.

"Have you heard from Richard at all?" Laura asked Perry.

Perry shook his head. "He walked out right after we heard about that explosion in Minneapolis. That was, what, nine years ago? The last I heard, he got married while he was in Tokyo and he had a little boy. I guess the kid would be about five now."

"I'm glad he found somebody," Laura said. "I never meant to hurt him, you know."

"I know that, Lois," Perry said. "But I'm not sure he ever figured that out."

"I can't believe how generous the pay package is," Laura commented as they headed for Centennial Park and Superman's memorial. It hadn't taken very long to fill out the necessary paperwork for Charles and Laura Kendall to become employees of the *Daily Planet*. "We could almost live on it."

"Are you thinking we should move back?" Charlie asked.

"I don't know. It's certainly tempting," Laura admitted. The strangeness was wearing off and the familiarity of the city was seeping in. It felt 'right'.

Samantha had run ahead to the playground adjacent to the memorial and was playing on the swings. Jay was keeping a watchful eye on her. Samantha's powers weren't showing any signs of coming in yet, but Jay's strength had manifested for the first time when he was only five.

Laura and Charlie stopped in front of the tomb - a small white building with Superman's symbol inscribed on the brass doors. In front of the doors an eternal flame burned. A brass plaque gave his name as Kal-El of Krypton and listed the date of his arrival in Metropolis and the date of his death. Beneath the dates was the simple inscription 'He was our friend.'

"That's a good epitaph for anyone," Charlie said quietly.

A low wrought iron fence surrounded the building and there were roses around the sides of the building. Bouquets were placed against the fence. After all this time, people were still placing placards and flowers at Superman's tomb.

"It was a beautiful funeral," Laura said. "He saved so many people. He was loved by so many."

"And all it took was one mad man to bring him down," Charlie said.

"That's all it ever takes."

Charlie put his arms around her from behind, resting his chin on the top of her head. "I don't regret having to lose him," he said softly. "I don't regret it because it meant that I could be a father to Jason and a husband to you without you having to share with the world, at least for a little while."

He pulled away and she knew he had heard something outside of her range of hearing.

"What is it?"

"A ship in trouble," he said.

"Go," she ordered.

He took off at a lope then disappeared around the back of the building.

'Do I want to come back to this?' Laura wondered as she sat on the bench and watched Samantha testing the playground equipment. It was hard enough raising two kids in a small town where everyone knew them, especially kids with 'special' skills and abilities. She knew it would be even harder in the city where so many people were looking for the fast buck. She also knew that Charlie was happy where they were but he would pack up and move the family across the country if she asked.

But that was something she had promised herself they wouldn't do to Jay and Samantha. She wouldn't uproot them the way her own father and mother had done to her and her sister.

"I thought I'd find you here," Jimmy said from somewhere behind her. She looked up to find him standing beside her. "I used to spend a lot of time here by the tomb. Still do, I guess."

"It's been a long time," Laura said, patting the seat beside her. Jimmy sat down.

"Sorry if I embarrassed you back there," Jimmy said. "I mean, you guys were literally the last people on Earth I expected to see in the newsroom." He looked over at Jay and Samantha. "I can't believe it's been so long. Jason..."

"Jay," Laura corrected softly.

"... Jay's in high school. I remember when he played robot monster with a trash can over his head. Cl... Charlie thought he might be a little 'off', you know."

Laura chuckled as she remembered Jay's games in the newsroom. One of his favorites was robot monster. Clark hadn't been the only one to wonder about Jason White's overactive imagination.

Over on the playground, Samantha was urging Jay to push her harder and higher.

"I missed you guys so much," Jimmy continued. "I used to pray that I'd wake up and find it was all just a horrible nightmare and you two would be at your desks when I came in and it was all okay."

"I'm sorry."

Jimmy shook his head. "Don't be. Perry told me what was going on after he came back from that conference in Gotham. I think we were both hoping it would all blow over and in a couple months, a couple years at the outside, you'd be back."

"Instead, eight people died in one horrible night because somebody decided Lane and Kent were too dangerous to live. Another five families are dead because of idiots who wanted to claim Luthor's bounty," Laura said, keeping her voice low. "Eighteen more people, half of them little kids, dead because of Luthor's insanity. If it had just been me, I would have said to hell with it and stayed. But it wasn't just me."

"I understand," Jimmy said. "I really do." He pulled out his wallet and opened it to show her a photo of a blonde woman with a young child. "My wife Patricia and our little girl, Joanna. She's three."

"Congratulations," Laura said. "She looks like a nice person."

"She is," he said. "We'll be married five years next May."

It was strangely humbling to realize the kid she'd taken under her wing so many years ago was not only married but had a child of his own. Metropolis had moved on without her. It had moved on without Lane or Kent or Superman. James Olsen was an award winning photojournalist. Lois Lane and Clark Kent were just memories.

"Will you be moving back to Metropolis?" Jimmy asked.

"Eventually," Laura replied. She smiled at him, knowing she had made the right decision for her and her family. "Eventually."

2027

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Charles Kendall asked his wife as they stopped in front of the doors of the historic Daily Planet Building.

Laura Kendall nodded. "I know it won't be the same without Perry, but I think it's time we finally came in out of the cold. Besides, we do have a Superman exclusive."

Charlie chuckled. "And don't forget Supergirl."

Today had been the debut of the JLA's two newest members - Ler-El, son of the original Superman who had chosen to take up both the uniform and working name of his father, and Lara Kal-El, Superman's daughter.

The media, in fact the whole world, was agog with the news, and it was only a matter of time before face recognition protocols put the pieces together and revealed the new heroes' civilian names. But Laura and Charlie had the first exclusive interviews with the two newcomers. The world didn't need to know it had been over breakfast in their new Metropolis apartment.

The elevator doors opened on the floor that used to house the newsroom. Now it held the editorial and sales offices but no reporters. With all the advances in communications, nearly everyone else worked from home offices or wherever they were. Even the daily staff assignment meeting was held in cyberspace. But the Daily Planet was still considered the best of the best.

Bruce Wayne was waiting for them, all dapper in his tailored suit and custom tie. The years had been kind to him. He was nearly sixty but looked years younger, but then so did Laura and Charlie. There was something to be said for good genes and extra-terrestrial medicine.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Bruce called out. People started to come out behind cubicles to join Bruce, among them the Planet's E-in-C, James B. Olsen. He was ginning at them. He'd come a long way from that shy kid Lois Lane had befriended so long ago.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Olsen said loudly. "I want everyone to meet our new City Editor and our new International Editor - Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Welcome back to the land of the living."

"It's good to be back," Clark told everyone. "It's not easy being dead, you know."