

# All I Have To Give

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Rating: T

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## Clark

### Now:

Clark Kent looked at his reflection. At the dark haired man in the mirror wearing the glasses and tuxedo. He was still having a hard time believing it. He was getting married today.

"Nervous?" Bruce Wayne, his best man, asked with a grin.

"Terrified," Clark admitted. "I still can't believe this."

"Neither can I," Bruce admitted. "But, she's just what the doctor ordered after what..."

"You promised not to mention *her* today."

"I just saw *her* and her husband being seated," Bruce explained. "I didn't know you'd invited them. A little masochistic on your part, isn't it?"

"The invitation was for Perry White, actually," Clark said. "I suspect Esther said it was okay for him to bring a few guests, or maybe Cat did. I know the Whites are in town for that 'Redefining Journalism' conference."

"Well, the usher put them on the groom's side of the cathedral."

"Well, they can't say they know the bride, and Lois certainly wouldn't admit she's crashing my wedding. I'm still amazed at all the fuss over a simple wedding."

"Simple?" Bruce laughed. "Clark, you're the top foreign affairs writer in the freaking country and you're getting married to the daughter of the head of EPRAD. This is the social event of the season. Too bad it's in Chicago otherwise the President would be here himself."

"I didn't vote for him," Clark said.

"Who did?"

Outside the two men could hear the beginning strains of the Wedding March.

"Time to get you hitched, boy scout," Bruce said with a grin, leading Clark out into the cathedral.

### Then:

*Lois was married. To Richard.*

Clark sat through the ceremony, trying to keep at least a non-frown on his face. He knew he'd been gone for six years and she had moved on, but it still hurt to watch her walk down the aisle on the arm of another man, knowing that man was not the father of her child. Knowing that the real father would do anything for her, including watch her marry another. He knew she knew all this, and he knew she didn't care.

"You forfeited your right to my son when you walked away from us," she told Superman. "I've agreed to marry Richard. We've set the date. He's a good man. He's been here for Jason and me. He'll be here. You won't."

She ignored the pain she had to have seen in his eyes. "I don't need you in my life. Jason doesn't need you."

"And when his powers come in?"

"I'll worry about that when it happens. Just leave us alone."

\* \* \*

His life went from bad to worse. Not only had she told Superman to get out of her life, she was actively driving Clark away. She didn't want him near Jason, or her. Clark didn't know if she remembered who Superman really was or if she was reacting to the continued sly comments from people in the newsroom who saw how much Jason resembled him and not her husband.

Clark had only been back at the Planet for three months when he tendered his resignation once again. "I can't work here with her hating me, Perry. I don't know what I did to deserve it,

but as much as I love it here, I can't stay. Not under these conditions."

Perry didn't look surprised, watching him from beneath grizzled eyebrows. "I understand, son. And I won't make you work out your two weeks if you don't want to."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that."

Perry looked around his desktop for a moment, finding and picking up a business card. He handed it to Clark. "I had a hunch it was going to come to this, so I took the liberty of contacting my counterpart over at the Chicago Star. You can start there Monday, if you want it. After all, they are our sister paper, which makes it a transfer. You keep your seniority."

"Three months?" Clark chuckled.

"You won't be starting over again, and O'Hanlon's a good man. You'll like him."

"I don't know how to thank you." Clark meant it. He hadn't expected such generosity from Perry, given that Lois was married to his nephew.

"You can thank me by doing the best job you know how," Perry said gruffly. "You're a good reporter. You have the potential of being a great one. Prove me right. And while you're at it, get yourself a life. Find a woman who isn't in lust with a fantasy, and be happy."

"Thank you, Perry," Clark said earnestly. "I'll do my best."

"I know you will. You deserve it."

Clark walked out of Perry's office, through the newsroom, back to his cubicle. He picked up the one personal item he had on his desk -- a framed photo of his parents and himself -- and put it in his briefcase. No one noticed, except for Perry, watching from his office and Cat Grant. Cat walked up to him as he started toward the elevator lobby.

"I was wondering how long it was going to take for you to finally give up," she said. "Where are you going?"

"Chicago," he said. "Perry offered me a transfer to the Star. I'm going to take it."

"Take care, farm boy," Cat said, then grabbed his face, giving him a kiss full on the mouth. "That bitch doesn't know what she's thrown away." Cat said as she pulled away. "Remember to write."

"I'm a writer, that's what I do," Clark laughed.

"Try to be happy, Clark," Cat said softly. She walked away as the elevator doors opened and he stepped inside.

## **Esther**

### **Now:**

Esther Krystin Straker Kimborough adjusted the lace veil that covered her hair and cascaded down her back.

"You look like a fairy princess," her mother, Elizabeth Kathryn Straker, told her, adjusting the tiara under the veil.

"I'm too tall to be a fairy princess," Esther reminded her mother.

"An Elven princess, then?" Edward Straker, USAF Major General Retired, joked. "You're missing the pointed ears, though."

"Very funny, Daddy," Esther complained. She inspected her reflection critically. "Am I doing the right thing, marrying Clark?"

"It's a little late to worry about that now," her father observed. "Do you love him?"

"Yes," she said. "He's my best friend. He was there when I needed someone. And I think he needs me just as much as I need him. You've never seen his eyes when he comes in after dealing with some tragedy, reporting on it. It breaks my heart, sometimes. He's such a good man. But sometimes, it's like I'm holding a great bird with a mending wing. I don't know how long it will be before he flies off, and if he does, if he'll be back."

In the mirror, she caught the reflection of her parents looking at one another with knowing expressions.

"That is one of the problems when a mortal gets involved with an angel," Elizabeth said with a smile. "Their priorities aren't always the same as everyone else's. And they do have wings, even if you can't always see them."

"I don't want to be the one to clip them," Esther said.

"Honey, he's just as afraid of clipping your wings," her father assured her, adjusting his uniform tie.

### **Then:**

They met following an incident at the Chicago air show where the air force was showing off its newest stealth fighter.

Major Esther Straker was putting the plane through its paces over Lake Michigan when the engines flamed out and refused to re-ignite. Without power, the angular machine was as aerodynamic as a rock, and started falling out of the sky like one.

She pulled the ejection seat controls. The canopy blew off, but the seat stayed in place. *This can't happen. These are supposed to be foolproof.*

She knew she was dead. She would be joining her beloved husband Steven soon. She hoped it wouldn't hurt too much. Then the plane stopped falling, silently coming to Earth on the edge of the airstrip she'd taken off from. She didn't dare protest, didn't dare cry in disappointment.

Superman helped her out of the crippled plane. "Are you all right? Major Straker?"

"I'm fine, thank you," Esther said, pulling off her flight helmet. If Superman was surprised to see he had rescued a female pilot, he hid it well. She tried to put a neutral expression on her face. *Why had he saved her?*

He smiled his famous smile and said: "I won't tell you that flying is still the safest way to travel. You will, of course, look into why a billion dollar aircraft decided to become a rock?" He flew off without waiting for her reply.

The reporters showed up within minutes, all asking about Superman, all except one. He stood toward the back, watching, listening. Tall, with over-long dark hair, over-size glasses and

the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. He seemed oddly familiar. He asked about the plane, the mechanics of the failure. He didn't ask about Superman.

She cut the impromptu press conference short, allowing the security guards to shoo the reporters away from her, all but the tall man in back. She walked up to him, held out her hand to be shaken. His hand was warm and dry, handshake firm. He didn't seem surprised at her boldness.

"I'm Esther Straker-Kimborough." She struggled to keep disappointment out of her voice at her rescue. She wasn't suicidal. *She wasn't.*

"Clark Kent, Chicago Star," he introduced himself. His voice was quiet, a little tentative. *He's shy.*

"Why didn't you ask about Superman?"

"Why, when everyone else was doing such a good job?" he asked. "Besides, I just moved here from Metropolis. Superman's old news there. Why a billion dollar aircraft fell out of the sky, and why the ejection seat mechanism failed are much more interesting, even if the final inquiry results are going to be classified." He peered at the name stenciled on her flight suit. "Your uniform says 'Straker'."

*Smart, too. He sees things other people miss.* "I kept my maiden name for professional reasons."

She saw a flicker of disappointment cross his face.

"My husband died last year."

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

The disappointment was still there, hidden under the polite response.

"How about a cup of coffee, Mister Kent?" she said. The disappointment disappeared.

*Does he know how transparent he is?*

She changed out of her flight suit and found he was still waiting for her outside the locker room. He followed her to the airstrip coffee shop, seemingly content to allow her to take the lead, although he did open the coffee shop door for her. *A gentleman in the Twenty-First Century.*

They talked, or rather she talked. He had a gift for listening, for getting other people to open up to him. Afterwards, she realized she had given him her life history, except for one minor detail. About himself he'd said almost nothing, except that he worked for the Daily Planet before transferring to the Star a month before. She suspected a woman was involved. *More the fool her, letting this one go.*

## **Lois**

### **Now:**

Lois Lane-White couldn't remember why she and Richard decided to accompany Perry to the cathedral this afternoon. Yes, she knew Perry had kept in touch with Clark. She knew that Perry still blamed her, at least a little, for driving Clark into moving to Chicago, losing him one of the best reporters he'd had on staff at the time. She didn't really care about that.

She decided that curiosity was the most likely reason. Clark Kent was getting married. Lois was curious as to what sort of woman Clark would ask to marry him. More than likely, *she* was the one who did the asking.

Lois was surprised to find the ushers were in Air Force mess dress, complete with sabers. Oh, yes, the bride's father was an air force general and the bride was a serving officer.

"Are you friends of the bride or the groom?" the usher asked.

"The groom," Perry answered for them. "Perry White, Metropolis."

"Perry!" a woman's voice called out. Lois looked over to see Cat Grant hurrying over to them. The woman was wearing a stylish formal pale blue satin dress. She gave Perry a peck on the cheek. "I'm so glad you could make it. Mike's seated over here." She gestured to one of the pews toward the front of the sanctuary, hooked her arm though Perry's and lead him away. The usher held out his right arm to Lois as they followed Cat and Perry to the pew.

"Where's the munchkin?" Cat asked, looking back at Lois.

"At home with my parents," Lois said. "I didn't want him to miss any school."

"You're kidding, right?" Cat looked astonished.

Lois caught the warning look Perry gave Cat.

"I've got to get back to my post," Cat said, patting Perry on the arm. "I'll see you at the reception, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Perry promised. He slid into the pew next to Mike O'Hanlon and his wife, Caitlyn.

"Glad you could make it," O'Hanlon said, shaking Perry's hand. "I know Clark was really pleased when you called and said you'd be flying in in time to make the wedding."

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," Perry told his old friend. "I'm glad he finally found somebody. So, how's Cat working out for you?"

O'Hanlon laughed. "Metropolis's loss is Chicago's gain. Took her a whole month to get up to speed and she hasn't looked back since."

### **Then:**

It was a miserable Monday morning. Richard had taken the car to work, leaving her to take a cab. She was down to her last pair of nylons, she had a blister from her new pumps and Jason had a cold. And she was mad at Clark. For his dorkiness, timidity, brilliance, naïveté, boy scout outlook. Friday, he had scooped her again, on a simple church financial corruption scandal. Perry had assigned it to her, but she hadn't had time to work on it. Clark took it and ran with it, *again*.

She was still trying to figure out what had happened between Cat and Clark the previous Friday when Clark left work for the weekend. Lois had happened to look over to the elevator lobby in time to see Cat giving Clark a kiss on the mouth. It didn't look like a 'friend' sort of kiss, not that Cat would even know how to do that. Clark didn't even seem surprised.

Lois knew Cat was attracted to anything male, warm, and human. There were times she wasn't even sure if human was a requirement.

Lois was late getting to her desk, slipping in quietly, hoping Perry wouldn't notice. He

looked out of his office at her, but he didn't seem to notice her tardiness. She looked over to Clark's desk, intending to ask him about Cat and what she saw. He wasn't there.

She worked on her newest article for a while, made a few phone calls, worked on another piece for the Sunday edition. She went to lunch with Richard and came back. Clark still hadn't come in.

She walked into Perry's office. "Perry, do you know where Clark is?"

Perry checked the clock on his desk. "Oh, about now he's probably having lunch with Mike O'Hanlon in Chicago."

"What's he working on in Chicago?" she demanded.

"I'll know that when I see it come over the news service," Perry told her. "Now, don't you have a deadline?"

Miffed at Perry's obvious lack of concern about what Clark was up to, she stalked over to Clark's desk. That was when she realized the one piece of personal property Clark kept at his desk, a family picture in a simple silver frame, was gone. Clark was gone, again. *Without saying goodbye, again.*

Cat Grant came over to her. "He's gone, Lois. And nobody noticed."

"You noticed. Everybody noticed you noticing," Lois spat out.

"I noticed," Cat admitted. "Because, no matter what you think of me, Clark is my friend, and I care what happens to him. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a column to write."

\* \* \*

It took a month for Metropolis to realize Superman was no longer responding to traffic accidents and muggings. By President's Day, it became apparent he'd stopped responding to anything but large-scale natural disasters, plane and train incidents. Superman was no longer making Metropolis his home and Lois knew she was to blame.

She tried to contact him, flying out to disaster sites where he'd been seen, been interviewed, but to no avail. If he knew she was trying to reach him, he didn't show it. He didn't contact her.

After a while, Perry forced her to give up. "Lois, Superman belongs to the world. And as much as I'd like to keep the Planet's relationship with him as close as it was, obviously he's got other ideas about what he wants to do with his time. I can't afford you flying around the country trying to talk to him and coming back with nothing."

That was when the dreams started. The dreams about Superman and about Clark Kent. About a crystal cathedral set in the snow. About a lover whose face she couldn't quite place.

## **Perry**

### **Now:**

Perry White sat in the pew next to Mike O'Hanlon, chatting with his counterpart, waiting for Lois to settle down. He realized it was a mistake to have invited Lois and Richard to this, at least without insisting Jason come along with them. Lois's statement to Cat about not wanting Jason to miss school was a lie and he knew it. Jason had been suspended for fighting, again. Only this time, he'd broken the other boy's jaw.

Perry couldn't help but wonder what sort of stresses the boy was going through that would prompt him to attack a classmate. Did Jason even know that his natural father was getting married today? Somehow Perry doubted it. Perry doubted Lois had told Jason that Clark was his biological father. The editor knew that Lois hadn't forgiven Clark for leaving, the first time for six years, and then two years ago, when he moved to Chicago to get away from *her*.

He pulled out the wedding invitation again, wishing Alice could have been there with him.

*Major General and Mrs. Johann Edward Straker*

*Request the honor of your presence*

*At the Nuptial Mass uniting their daughter*

*Lieutenant Colonel Esther Krystin Straker*

*United States Air Force*

*and*

*Clark Joseph Kent*

*Son of Mrs. Martha Clark Kent and the late Mr. Jonathan Joseph Kent*

*In the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony*

*Saturday, the eighteenth of April*

*at one o'clock*

*Cathedral of the Holy Name,*

*And afterward at the reception*

Alice would have loved all the pomp of a cathedral wedding, even if it was in Chicago. Alice had liked Clark, a lot.

### **Then:**

Perry sat a long time beside her hospice bed. Alice looked so peaceful, laying there. Death had smoothed out the creases that pain had made in her face. Cancer, breast cancer. They'd thought she'd beaten it. She'd been cancer-free for nearly eight years, but when it came back, it came back with a vengeance, invading her liver and bones. His wife of forty years, mother of his two sons, was dead.

Richard and Lois made the phone calls to the funeral home, to friends who would want to know. One call Perry made himself. He knew there was a seven hour time difference between Metropolis and Berlin, and it was one in the morning there, but he placed the call anyway.

"Clark Kent," the voice on the other end said after only about three rings.

"Clark, it's Perry. I wanted you to know that Alice is gone."

"Oh, Perry, I'm so sorry," Clark said. He sounded sincere.

"It was the cancer, it came back." It felt right to let him know there was nothing that could have been done.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"I'd appreciate it if you could make it to the funeral," Perry told him. There was a long silence on the other end and for a moment Perry thought he'd lost the connection.

Finally: "Perry, I'm sorry, but I'm stuck at this conference for at least the next week, and



I'm covering the peace negotiations Superman's mediating. I wish I could, but I don't see how I can break away."

"I know, Clark," Perry assured him. "I know you'd be here if you could."

"Thanks, Perry," Clark said. "Look, I'll probably be in Metropolis later this month. I'll stop by and we can have lunch."

"Sounds good, Clark," Perry said. Of course, Clark would be in Metropolis later in the month. He'd been elected as a Pulitzer finalist for his in depth coverage of the war Superman was working on ending.

The following Monday was Alice White's funeral. The weather was clear and a little cool. Perry's sons, Jerry and Perry Jr. managed to break away from their respective jobs and responsibilities to attend the service and stand with him at the gravesite.

Perry took a moment to look around at the group of friends and family who had come out to the cemetery to pay their last respects. He spotted a tall, dark haired man standing in the back. Perry looked away and when he looked back, the man was gone.

As he headed for Richard's car, Perry spotted the man again, this time standing over the still open grave. The man dropped a single rose onto the coffin and walked away towards a copse of trees.

\* \* \*

"I am sorry I couldn't make it to Alice's funeral," Clark said as he and Perry sat down to lunch at Domani's, one of the finer restaurants in Metropolis overlooking the West River. "There was no way I could break away and take a plane here and back, not from Berlin. Plus the peace negotiations were at a critical stage."

"I also know how much you hate airplanes," Perry said. "Plus potentially saving thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of lives certainly takes precedence over one funeral. I hear they're looking to nominate Superman for the Nobel Peace Prize. But your background pieces on the history and players had to have helped."

Clark held his coffee cup in both hands as if warming himself, a pensive look on his face. "I was afraid Mike was going to have kittens when he found out how much time I'd put into research on something he figured he couldn't publish. I'm glad he changed his mind."

"So's he," Perry chuckled. "I'd warned him you had a habit of chasing wild hares, but you'd never failed to bring me a good story, even if it did take a little patience on my part."

"A *little* patience?"

"Well, let's just say between you and Lois, I've had a lot of practice being patient," Perry said with a grin. He saw the sadness come into Clark's eyes. "She does miss you, you know."

"Not enough to return my calls, or answer my emails, even when they're about business," Clark told him. "The last time I tried her cell phone was about three months ago. I knew she was working an angle on Intergang and I had some background for her. Richard picked up and accused me of harassing her. He tried to get Mike to fire me."

"Mike called me as soon as it happened," Perry told him. He didn't mention how furious he'd been at his nephew for stepping out of bounds that way. "I gave Richard a warning never to try anything like that again. Lois didn't know anything about it." He paused, gauging Clark's reaction. "Mike tells me you've got yourself a girl friend."

Clark laughed. "Yeah, surprised everybody, especially me. She was hoping to come to the ceremony, but her unit got deployed last week. She's in charge of the air patrols over the Tazarastan border. At least the ceasefire's holding and with any luck, she'll be home in six months." There was a long pause. "How's Jason doing?" he asked finally.

"This past year's been hard on him, first that whole nightmare with Luthor, then Superman leaving Metropolis," Perry explained. "He's been having problems in school, fighting, things like that. Lois and Richard are having a hard time handling him, but please don't tell them I said anything. They're trying to keep it quiet."

"I can hardly tell them anything if they're not speaking to me," Clark reminded him with a sad smile.

## Cat

### Now:

Catherine Juliana Grant, society editor for the Chicago Star, checked her makeup one last time. Then she checked on her five year-old son, Adam, finger combing his strawberry blond hair back in place. He looked so grown-up in his miniature tuxedo, holding on to the pillow with the two wedding bands tied to it.

She clucked at the bride's maids, checking the last minute details, the bouquets, the flowers in the hair, the dresses. As matron of honor, she felt it was her duty to make the whole affair run as smoothly as possible.

Cat knew Penny from Metropolis. The younger woman worked in IT at the Planet. Lana Lang Ross was an old school chum of Clark's and married to the junior senator from Kansas. The other two young women were Esther's school friends and daughters of two General Straker's long-time comrades in arms. She was dressed in pale blue satin; they were in darker shades of blue.

Matron of Honor, she thought to herself. *It's been a long journey in two and a half years.* Two and a half years ago, Superman returned to action on Earth after an absence of more than five years. Cat was divorced from Adam's father, had moved to Metropolis from Gotham City to start a new life away from the abusive druggie she'd spent four years of her life being terrified of.

### Then:

"And who are you, handsome?" Cat purred at the new boy in the bullpen, a tall, dark-haired man with oversize glasses and the brightest blue eyes she'd ever seen. He had a rather boyish face, and despite the layering of his clothes, she could tell he was well-built. There were muscles hiding under that three-piece suit.

"Clark Kent, um...?" He started to hold out a hand to be shaken, then realized that was the hand he had his briefcase in. He switched the briefcase to his left, and looked confused a moment before offering his right hand again.

She took his hand between both of hers. "Cat Grant," she said, emphasizing the T's in her name. His hand was warm and dry, handshake a little tentative, almost as if he were afraid of hurting someone. "And where did you fly in from?"

"Fly? I don't much like planes," he said, eyes wide in bewilderment. He gulped in nervousness as he tried to get past her, to his desk in the newsroom. She moved to stay in front of him, showing just enough cleavage to ensure the interest of any healthy heterosexual male.

"Cat, go sharpen your claws on somebody else," Lois Lane warned from across the room.

Cat raised one perfectly groomed eyebrow in Lois's direction. "Looks like she's staked her claim on you *and* Richard," she said conversationally to Clark.

"What?" He gave her a blank look, but the expression on his face when he looked over at Lois was anything but blank. *Uh, oh, this boy's got it bad for the bitch queen, and that ain't good.*

"Never mind, Clarkie boy," Cat said with a grin. "See ya' around."

"Um, nice to meet you, Ms. Grant," Clark managed to stammer out as he finally made it to his desk.

Over the next week, Cat pestered Jimmy Olsen and other 'old timers' about Clark Kent. About the shy man and brilliant writer from Smallville who was assigned to shadow Mad Dog Lane to learn the big city. The man who became the only partner who stayed Lane's partner for more than a month. The man who, after going undercover with her on a story at Niagara

Falls, then another one in Alaska, filed the stories then vanished off the face of the Earth without a word for over five years. The man who was, without any doubt, the real father of Lois Lane's son.

*Does Richard know?*

Over the following few weeks, Cat watched as Lois's patronizing attitude toward Clark became disdain, then thinly veiled animosity. She watched as Clark became more withdrawn, even quieter than when she'd first met him. There were times Cat would have sworn she saw tears brightening his eyes after some uncalled for cutting remark from Lois.

It was after another such incident that Cat decided that something needed to be done.

"Clarkie, what are you doing for lunch?" she asked, leaning over him as he sat at his desk.

"Um, I don't know," Clark replied, more than a little confused.

She knew he usually ate his lunch at his desk, assuming he was in the building, which wasn't all that often. For her it would be breakfast as she'd just come into the office after an all night party celebrating the anniversary of one of the most exclusive clubs in the city. She'd filed her story from home at four in the morning and was just checking in with her editor and contacts.

"What am I doing for lunch?" he asked.

"How about the Ace O' Clubs?" she asked. "My treat."

"Okay," he said, although he still sounded dubious. He grabbed his coat from its hook and followed her out of the newsroom. But Cat noticed his glance in Lois's direction, and the dark look the other woman gave them both.

\* \* \*

"So, what's this about, Cat?" Clark asked. The waiter had brought them coffee and taken their lunch order.

"What's wrong with me taking a co-worker to lunch so I can get to know him better?" Cat asked brightly.

"You have a reputation," he pointed out with a crooked smile.

"Which I work hard to maintain," she replied. "But I promise to keep my hands to myself, not that anybody's going to believe that." She grinned at him. "So, tell me all about yourself."

"Not much to tell," he said. "Raised on a farm in Kansas, did okay in school. Got my degree at Met U., did some traveling, some writing, got a job at the Planet. Left for a while to do some more traveling came back. Like I said, not much to tell."

He was one of those tough ones to interview. He was an award winning investigative reporter, one of the best in the business according to the old-timers, but he gave little away of himself.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Like you, not much to tell," she said. "Raised in Gotham City, did okay in school, got my degree at Gotham State, worked for the Gotham Herald for a while, got married, had a kid, got divorced, moved to Metropolis, got a job at the Planet."

"You have a kid?" Clark asked. He sounded only a little surprised. He was the first person at the Planet she'd told this secret to. *Cat Grant was a mommy.*

She nodded. "Name's Adam, he's two and half. He lives with my mother-in-law up in Gotham. It's complicated. And please don't tell anyone at the office."

He smiled. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Now, for the real reason I called together this meeting," Cat said with a laugh. Somehow, she knew Clark would never betray her. "As you know, I do a lot of work after dark."

He nodded, waiting for her to go on.

"I'm looking for somebody who can go with me to some of these functions, the symphony, the show openings. And I'm getting tired of going with the guys who think they can grab some just because I have a 'reputation'. And that includes most of the guys in the office."

"And I'm safe?"

"Clark, if I didn't know you had the hots for Lois, I'd say you were gay," she said laughing. "But you don't do that scene either."

"What about my reputation?" Clark asked. There was a touch of amusement in his eyes. He had beautiful clear blue eyes and she wondered why he didn't go with contacts.

"I won't tell if you won't," she chuckled. "Are you game?"

He considered her offer for a long moment then grinned. "I'm game. Besides, I really do like the opera and I've heard good things about the new art director. This year's season is looking really promising."

"First things first," she said, handing him a business card. "He's one of the best tailors in the city. Get yourself kitted out for eveningwear and charge it to the company. Tell him you're my escort and he'll have you looking like James Bond."

## **Jimmy**

### **Now:**

James Bartholomew Olsen heaved a sigh of relief as he pinned the white rosebud and lavender boutonniere to his tuxedo. He had honestly never expected to be part of this wedding -- correction not this wedding in particular, but Clark Kent's wedding period. The reporter from Smallville had surprised everyone. He'd walked away from his dream job at the Daily Planet to take a position in Chicago. He'd finally walked, rather ran, away from Lois Lane and her machinations. Got himself a life and a girl. The farm boy had come up in the world. And no one deserved it more.

Jimmy smiled to himself, looking over at the other three groomsmen. He'd worked with Tom Andrews at the Planet, before the reporter moved to Chicago to be with family some eight years before. Pete Ross was a well-known figure in Washington D.C. Who'd've known he'd gone to school with Clark, that they'd been best of friends all through high school? The political pundits were predicting a long and illustrious career for the Kansan. There was even talk of a White House bid in a few years.

The last man, the bride's brother, was someone Jimmy had first met at the rehearsal, although a quick check on the Internet had shown Paul Straker to be a well respected aeronautical engineer at the age of twenty-five.

He brushed some lint off his jacket, contemplating his own upcoming nuptials. It wouldn't be nearly as grand as this. Penny's parents weren't rich or well-connected. He hoped Clark and Esther would be able make it.

### **Then:**

"Olsen," Perry White said conversationally. He'd called Jimmy in to discuss his latest photos, none of which was good enough to print. Another couple weeks of this and Jimmy knew he'd be out of a job. A photographer who couldn't shoot decent photos wasn't much use to the paper.

"I just got a call from Clark Kent. Seems he's back from wherever he went and wants his job back."

"So, when does he start?" Jimmy asked. He tried to keep a grin off his face. It wouldn't do to let his boss know how much he'd missed the gangly reporter.

"Considering how he left, give me three reasons I should give him a job?" Perry demanded.

"Um, he's one of the best writers you know," Jimmy said, ticking the items off his fingers. "He's the only one, besides Mister Richard, who can put up with Miss Lane for more than ten minutes. Norm Parker up and died, so there's an open desk." Jimmy shrugged. "It was his time."

"Kent starts back Wednesday," Perry told him. "You might want to warn Lois."

\* \* \*

Jimmy baked a cake to welcome Clark back to the Planet. He'd expected the reporter to show up first thing in the morning, but when the Clark didn't show, Ralph and Phil had started on the cake.

Disappointed that Clark's first day back was already marred with his lateness. Jimmy buried himself in his work, choosing which of the photographs turned in by others would illustrate the front page of tomorrow's edition of the Daily Planet. None of his photos had made the grade again.

He felt his desk shake as though kicked and looked over to see his precious camera tip off

the edge of the desk, into the large hand of the man standing beside his desk. "Careful," he warned, then looked up as the man straightened, handing him the camera.

"Sorry, Jimmy," the man said, an apologetic smile on his face.

"Mister Clark," Jimmy sputtered, recognizing the man. Then, realizing what he'd said, "I mean Kent, Mister Kent. You're here! You made it, wow! Oh my God, welcome back!"

Jimmy stopped a moment, looking around, thinking. "Hey, come with me! No wait, don't move," Jimmy decided, heading away to get the cake, at least what was left of it. "Stay here!"

Clark watched after him, eyes wide in confusion. He was still standing there, quietly towering over the short walls of the cubicle, when Jimmy came back with the cake. He peeled back the tattered aluminum foil to reveal a cake with nearly a quarter of it gone.

"I guess the other guys got hungry," Jimmy murmured in apology.

Clark just smiled, took a dollop of frosting and popped it in his mouth. "Delicious."

That was Clark, always the shy but friendly smile, the slightly stooped shoulders as though embarrassed by his height, the gawky ganglyness as though he couldn't quite figure out what he was supposed to do with his body.

Jimmy got Clark settled into Norm's desk, made sure Perry knew he'd arrived.

Lunchtime rolled around and Jimmy invited Clark to join him at the Ace O' Clubs. He tried to get Clark to talk about his travels, about the cards, about the llama rodeo he'd written about. Jimmy kept all the cards Clark had sent Lois, even though he was sure Lois hadn't bothered to read them.

Clark's abrupt departure had hurt her more than Lois had cared to admit to anyone. She refused to talk about her former partner, even though it was obvious to anyone with half a brain that her son was Clark's not Richard's. The timing was too convenient.

Superman returned to the world the same day Clark came back to the Daily Planet. Lois got the exclusive once again. Then Luthor struck, creating his crystal island that threatened to destroy the rest of the world. Superman saved the day, but ended up injured, comatose in the hospital. It was Lois and her son who visited him, got the next exclusive when he recovered.

Jimmy had felt sorry for both Richard and Clark. They were both losing the woman they loved to the Man of Steel. Then, something happened.

Jimmy was never quite sure what it was that happened, but Superman stopped giving exclusive interviews to Lois Lane. Clark managed to get a few, but Lois seemed to take his success as a personal affront, making cutting comments about his abilities, his 'lack of growth' while he'd been gone.

Richard and Lois got married in a small ceremony. Jimmy was the photographer. Clark was present for the wedding, sitting in the back of the chapel by himself, a solemnly sad expression on his face. Jimmy didn't see Clark at the reception and doubted Lois even noticed the tall man's absence.

In the newsroom things went from bad to worse as more of Clark's stories made the first page and even Perry's threats hadn't been able to keep Lois's disdain for Clark from becoming grist for the gossip mill.

Jimmy watched as Cat Grant took things into her own hands. It wasn't exactly a secret that the society writer had taken a liking to the tall city beat reporter and had taken him under her wing and probably into her bed as well.

"CK, nice tux!" Jimmy said with a grin the first time he saw Clark in the formal wear he knew Cat had arranged for him. Clark was meeting Cat at the office before heading off to the season opening of **La Gioconda**. Clark ducked his head, blushing at the complement.

"Clarkie," Cat called, coming into the newsroom after him. "Didn't I tell you?" she laughed. "James Bond's got nothin' on you." She fussed a moment with his tie, making him stand up straighter before handing him the black cashmere overcoat he'd tossed on his chair.

Jimmy picked up his camera and got a shot of them before they realized he was still there. Cat was dressed in a green strapless sheath that set off her reddish hair and green eyes. She stood still as Clark draped a black cape over her shoulders. Another good photo. A pleased smile hovered about Clark's lips while Cat was laughing at something he'd said.

They made a good looking couple. And despite Cat's reputation, Jimmy was glad she'd taken on the task of bringing Clark out of his shell. The man deserved so much more than he'd been getting from life.

Jimmy turned to put away his camera and spotted Perry standing in the open door of his office, watching, hiding an almost paternal smile as the he observed the couple heading for the elevators.

Two months later, Clark was gone again.

"I didn't want to leave this time without saying goodbye," Clark told Jimmy over coffee. Clark had found Jimmy hiding from Perry in the downstairs coffee shop. After a good two months of Superman photos on the front page of the Planet, he'd hit another dry spell. Superman hadn't been showing his face recently in the city and the holiday season hadn't presented many dramatic photo-ops.

"Goodbye?" Jimmy asked. "Where are you going?"

"Chicago," Clark said. "Perry's arranged a transfer for me. It's not working for me here, not any more."

Jimmy just stared at the tall, dark haired man. "Will you be back?"

Clark shook his head as he unfolded himself from the small table. "Take care of yourself, Jimmy."



## Martha

### Now:

Martha Clark Kent patted her companion's hand as they waited for the processional music to begin so they could be seated. Ben Hubbard gave her a tentative smile. They were both a little overwhelmed by all the fuss of such a grand wedding, much less that Martha's little boy was getting married in a cathedral in Chicago to an air force officer.

It was something Martha Kent hadn't been sure she would ever see: her son, a refugee from a dead planet, getting married, having a chance at a normal, human life. This despite the fact that he wasn't human at all, really. He was Kryptonian, he was Superman.

She smoothed her skirt with an arthritic hand. She fancied herself a simple woman, a farmer's widow. She didn't have much use for fancy dress, but she had to admit the light blue suit was very nice.

*My baby's getting married.*

His bride was a good woman, of that she was sure. She was from a good family who had accepted Clark with open arms, welcoming him into their midst apparently without reservation.

From her place in the side hall, Martha could look out into the nave. She saw a well dressed, dark haired woman take the arm of one of the uniformed ushers who led her and the two men with her to the pew just behind where she knew she and Ben would be seated. Martha recognized the woman: Lois Lane. She'd met the woman and her son once, during the vigil outside of Metropolis General Hospital, after Superman fell to earth.

Martha assumed the older man with her was Perry White, Clark's former editor. The younger man had to be Lois's husband, Richard White, the senior White's nephew. Lois Lane, the woman who broke her son's heart, tossing it aside like rubbish. Martha took a deep breath to calm herself. It wouldn't do to get angry at the woman who hurt her son.

*My baby's getting married.*

### Then:

"Mom, she's beautiful," her son said, standing in her kitchen, drying the supper dishes. "She's brilliant, and she's...well, she's... complicated. Domineering, uncompromising, pig-headed..."

Martha smiled at his enthusiasm. After four years of working his way around the world, then college, Clark had landed his dream job as a reporter at the Daily Planet. That he thought he'd found the girl of his dreams was frosting on the cake.

Martha just hoped this Lois Lane would appreciate what a rare prize her son really was.

\* \* \*

"Mom, the ship is finished. I'm leaving tomorrow," he said solemnly. Again, they were in her kitchen, this time seated at the kitchen table, savoring coffee and homemade muffins.

"Don't you want to call your friends?" Martha asked. Clark had left the Daily Planet nine months before so he could build, grow, create the starship he would use to return to Krypton to find his roots. Martha didn't quite believe the reports that Krypton had been found by astronomers, that the planet might not be dead. But she didn't share her misgivings with her son. He was so hopeful to find his place in the universe. A place he hadn't really found on Earth.

He shook his head. "A clean break works best, don't you think? And I've done that already. Besides, if they wanted to find me, they would have called you."

"That boy, Jimmy, did call," she said. "I told him I'd try to get in touch with you."

He shrugged. "Jimmy's a good guy. Please remember to send those postcards, okay?"

Martha nodded, eyes filling with tears. Her son was leaving, not just leaving home, but leaving the planet. She was filled with the fear that she would never see her beloved son again; never see his warm blue eyes, his easy smile. She feared he would die in the cold depths of space, that she would never know his fate. That he would die alone.

She hugged him, feeling him withdraw into himself, distancing himself from her.

Then he was gone.

\* \* \*

She felt the crystal starship's return before she saw it. The farmhouse shook, the very air vibrating from its passage. The sonic boom was followed by an ear shattering explosion.

The cornfield was on fire as she drove her ancient truck across the field. Got out on shaky legs to see the still glowing crystalline construct that was so alien yet so familiar. Her heart nearly stopped when a hand touched her shoulder.

"No, don't. It's too hot," a deep, impossibly familiar, voice stated.

She turned to see her son, face gray with fatigue and pain, fall to the ground, unconscious.

*My baby's come home.*

\* \* \*

"The world can always use more good reporters," she told him when he tried to convince her to let him stay at the farm, even for a little while. She was ready to move on with her life, already made plans to sell the farm.

"You're dating?" he'd asked in confused disbelief when she left to play bingo with Ben Hubbard. Martha sent Ben out to start his truck. She turned back to her son. "I'm selling the farm, Clark. We're moving to Montana."

Clark called Perry White the next day and was back in Metropolis the next week. Superman reappeared in Metropolis. And when Superman fell from the sky, Martha and Ben flew to Metropolis. She didn't tell Ben exactly why she had to be there, only that she needed to find Clark. They didn't find him, naturally. She couldn't tell Ben why, after all her demands; she wasn't overly concerned about not finding her son. She couldn't tell him she knew where Clark was. He was in a hospital room, unconscious, under the name of Superman.

She and Ben ended up outside the hospital, part of the spontaneous vigil that had formed to wait for news of their hero's condition. She watched Lois Lane and her son come out of the hospital, accompanied by a police officer. She managed to get close enough to talk to the woman. "He'll be okay," she assured the young woman. "He's a strong boy."

Lois gave her a confused look, not understanding.

\* \* \*

"She hates me, and I don't know what I did," Clark said. This time the kitchen was in a lake cabin in Montana. Ben had gone into town, so she and Clark were alone. She knew he would leave before Ben got back.

"Is it Clark, or Superman she hates?" Martha asked softly. She'd seen him upset before. Despite an easy-going nature, his childhood hadn't always been easy, always hiding his extraordinary abilities, fearing to get close to people.

"Both," he answered. "I told you she told me that Jason was my son, Superman's son."

She nodded, remembering.

"Right after she and Richard set the date for their wedding, she told Superman he was no longer welcome to see Jason, that since he'd left her, he had no rights, no obligation to him."

Martha stared at him, dumbfounded. He didn't seem to notice.

"It's gotten worse at work. I've been escorting one of the society writers to the theater about once a week. There's nothing romantic. I'm not half-bad looking and she knows I'm too much a gentleman to try anything but it keeps other guys away. Lois... I don't know... She hates me and everyone in the office knows it. I don't know which is worse, the people who think I did something to deserve it, or the people who are sorry for me, that Mad Dog Lane has finally lost it." He finally looked over at her, eyes dark with pain.

"You know the worse part of it is, though? I think I still love her." He looked like his heart was breaking. "I gave Perry my notice yesterday. He arranged for me to transfer to the Chicago Star instead. I start there Monday."

"Honey, what about...?"

"Superman?" He laughed, but there was no humor there. "Metropolis will figure it out eventually. Metropolis moved on. Now it's time for Superman to."

"Do you really think she wants you out of her life completely?" Martha asked softly.

"That's what she said. I have no reason to doubt her." He stood to go. "I'll call you Monday with my new cell number." He kissed her cheek and disappeared.

## **Richard**

### **Now:**

Richard White followed his wife and uncle down the aisle to their seats. He didn't want to be there, didn't want to attend this wedding. He didn't want to even be in Chicago. More specifically, he didn't want to see Clark Kent.

He didn't want to be the one to explain that Lois had fooled both of them. That Jason's biological father was, in fact, Superman. He didn't want to have to apologize for being a fool, for seeing the other reporter as a threat. For trying to defend his wife from something that wasn't real, had probably never been real.

Richard was surprised to see Cat Grant coming down the aisle to greet them. She had left the Planet nearly two years ago allegedly under a cloud. The rumor mill claimed she was an alcoholic or a druggie. The rumormongers that claimed drugs were involved had also claimed that was the real reason Kent had left so abruptly.

Richard hadn't believed a word of it, but he knew Lois had grabbed onto the story like a lifeline. She had used it to justify why Kent left for the second time without a word to her. Not that she would have listened even if he had said goodbye.

Cat looked good in her satin dress. Chicago agreed with her and he was glad for her.

"Where's the munchkin?" Cat asked.

"At home with my parents," Lois said, her tone cool. "I didn't want him to miss any school." Lois was lying. Jason wasn't going to miss school -- he'd been suspended again for fighting and right now, Lois's dad was one of the few people able to handle him.

"You're kidding, right?" Cat looked astonished. Richard shook his head, warning her off. He knew a hand-written note in Perry's invitation had specifically asked that Jason come to see the ceremony. After two plus years, Jason still spoke fondly of 'Uncle Clark', wondered why the man never wrote or called him. How do you explain to a child that one of his favorite people had been ordered out of his life for something he hadn't done?

"I've got to get back to my post," Cat said with a smile. "I'll see you at the reception, right?"

"Yeah, Cat," Richard said. "We'll see you later."

He slid into the pew next to his wife. Perry was deep in conversation with Mike O'Hanlon, his counterpart at the Star. Richard found himself studying Lois, watching her watch everyone else. Once again he wondered what he'd been thinking when he thought he could steal her away from Jason's real father. Once again he wondered at what role he'd played in driving Superman away from Metropolis, the city that loved him best?

### **Then:**

"I'm not doing another 'in depth' Superman story," Lois was telling Perry for the umpteenth time. "Let Polly or Mags do it. For that matter let Clark do it."

Richard smiled at the sudden look of astonished horror that crossed Clark's face at the suggestion. Richard was standing by the door to the conference room, watching the daily assignment meeting, where each of the senior reporters received their marching orders and told Perry what progress they were making on their various investigations. Superman was always the first topic of discussion.

The superhero had been back in Metropolis for two weeks now. The city was picking itself up from the earthquake Lex Luthor had created using stolen Kryptonian technology. The crime rate in Metropolis, indeed the entire eastern seaboard, was dropping. All was right with the world, mostly.

Perry dismissed the meeting with a stabbing finger at Lois: "Get me Superman!"

Outside, Richard pulled the star reporter to him and gave her a gentle kiss. He loved her for her strength, her brilliance, her obstinacy. "Maybe you and one of the others can work on it together so you don't have to be alone with him," he suggested.

"And you suggest, Clark?" she said with a grimace.

Richard shrugged. "Someone, anyone." He paused. "You know, we still need to talk."

"Yeah," she agreed.

"How about lunch?"

\* \* \*

"I asked you when he first came back if you still loved him," Richard reminded her over lunch. They had gone to the deli just down the street from the Daily Planet. It was early and the restaurant was still quiet.

"And I told you 'no'," she told him. "I may not have been quite truthful. I was in love with him, and I thought he was in love with me. Then he left without a word and I found I was pregnant."

"Everybody thinks Jason is Clark's son," Richard said.

"Richard, I don't remember having sex with either of them."

Richard flinched inwardly at her choice of words. Not 'making love,' but 'having sex.' 'Having sex' was what one did after a drunken party, when all you wanted was release and the partner didn't matter and you just hoped you wouldn't catch something if your partner forgot the condoms. Lois caught a baby.

"You said 'was' in love with him."

"How can you really be in love with a god? I care about him, but I'm not 'in love' with him. He wasn't there when Jason was born, you were. He belongs to the world and the world loves him, the world needs him. I don't. I thought I did, but I was wrong."

"And what about Clark?" Richard spotted the other man walking into the deli, speaking to the order taker. Clark saw the couple in the back booth and nodded politely.

"What about him?"

"Look, we both know Jason looks just like him and we both know you were pregnant when we met. I just want to know how you plan to handle this."

"You are Jason's father," she said firmly. "It says so on his birth certificate, and I say so. Case closed."

Behind her, at the counter, Richard saw Clark flinch, as though he'd heard the coldness in Lois's tone while talking about him. After a moment, Clark's take-out order was handed to him and he left, shoulders slumped even more than usual. *Was it possible Lois's voice had carried?*

"In that case, why don't you want to set a date?"

In answer, Lois pulled out her Day-timer and opened it to October. "It only takes a couple days to get a license. Pick a date."

He looked over her calendar. "Don't you want to have time to plan?"

"What's to plan? I'll get Lucy to be my maid-of-honor. You figure out who you want to be best man. It'll be family and a few people from work, a couple friends. My mom will love handling the reception. I know she always wanted me to have a big wedding, but I'm sure Lucy will oblige," she said.

Richard pointed to the last Saturday of the month. "It gives us a couple weeks to get ready."

Lois wrote it in on her calendar.

\* \* \*

It was a small ceremony in the side chapel of the church just down the street from their house. Jason gave the bride away and Perry was best man. As predicted, Lois's mother complained about there not being enough time to prepare properly. But the wedding cake was ready, as was the caterer.

The reception was in the church basement.

Richard was surprised to see that Lois had invited Clark to the ceremony. He wasn't surprised that the other man didn't come to the reception, although he had left a wedding present -- a set of *Messermeister* kitchen knives. Richard wondered if Lois knew or cared how much her colleague had spent on her, them.

\* \* \*

Richard had hoped that making things official would help. He was wrong. Clark managed several Superman exclusives, which Perry automatically put on the front page above the fold. Lois's stories on corruption at FEMA, the hunt for Lex Luthor, went below the fold or somewhere inside. It was a turn of events that made Lois almost impossible to live with. Clark had always been a good writer. He was becoming a great one. The bite that Perry had always thought was missing was now showing itself.

It was driving Lois crazy.

Then, Clark started going out with Cat Grant. Richard knew what the rumor mill said, had a pretty good idea what was really going on. Privately, he was glad that someone had noticed the reporter's lack of a life and decided to do something about it, even if it was a society columnist with the reputation of being a man-eater.

Richard also knew Jason thought the world of Clark. He was one of the few grownups in the newsroom who would actually stop and talk to the boy. Clark always had a kind word for him, never gave the impression that Jason was anything other than welcome. But when Clark's photo showed up on the society page of the rival Metropolis Star with Cat Grant, Lois forbade Jason's visits to Clark's desk.

It was only a matter of time and Richard wasn't surprised when Perry told him that Clark had transferred to Chicago. Richard barely noticed that Superman had stopped patrolling Metropolis.

He was surprised when Clark started emailing Lois with the subject line 'we need to talk.' Lois ignored them at first, refusing to read them. She complained to Perry, who apparently did nothing. When Richard complained to Perry, he was told it was business and Lois needed to answer her mail.

It was when the phone calls started at work and then on her cell phone that Richard lost it. Looking back, he realized what a fool he'd been, calling Mike O'Hanlon to complain about Clark harassing Lois. He realized it when the Planet picked up Clark Kent's exposé on Morgan Edge and Intergang over Lois's series of articles on the same subject.

Then Jason started doing impossible things and Richard realized what a fool he'd really been, he and Clark both.

## Clark

### Now:

Clark glanced out at the guests crowding the cathedral. General Straker's position as a former member of the joint chiefs and current head of EPRAD guaranteed this was going to be a big wedding. Generals, politicians, business people. But the groom's side of the church was nearly as full. Members of the Star staff, city functionaries, members of the press from around the world, the ambassador of Tazarastan and members of her staff, a few well placed business people.

Lois and Richard were seated with Perry and Mike. He didn't see Jason, but that didn't surprise him. He hadn't really expected that Lois would allow his son to come to the wedding.

He was a little surprised to see other people he recognized from Metropolis -- Bill Henderson and his wife, Mark Wollstone, the Metropolis District Attorney, Maggie Sawyer and Lupe Teresa Leocadio-Escudero, Metropolis Police, people from Star Labs Metropolis.

In Metropolis, Clark had never really made friends. He had acquaintances, and most people liked him, but in Metropolis, Clark Kent was the invisible man, a chameleon. It was something that had served him well as a reporter when he started at the Daily Planet. But when he came back from Krypton, he discovered he couldn't be as invisible as he had been before. He'd forgotten how.

Moving to Chicago, as painful as that move had been, had been a blessing in disguise. Superman didn't frequent Chicago, and Clark Kent discovered he didn't need to be invisible, merely low key. His position covering foreign affairs was sufficient excuse for him to be away from his desk on a moment's notice, so that was no longer a problem, plus the Star didn't have a special relationship with Superman, and neither knew or cared if Clark Kent did. It was hard for him to not help as much as he could as Superman, but scaling back his time in the 'suit' had given him a life.

The wedding procession assembled itself. The trumpet player for *Trumpet Voluntary* was in position in the organ loft, next to the organist. The processional tune began and the wedding party started down the center aisle. They were preceded by the six officers who would present the saber arch at the end.

A thurible wafting incense into the air was carried by an altar person who seemed nervous at the possibility of setting the cathedral on fire. The cross followed then two candles in tall holders. Father Leone from Metropolis carried the lectionary. Leone was a long time friend of Clark's and was still Superman's spiritual advisor. Following them, looking lost in his own church, was Archbishop John Blackwood Ryan, coadjutor archbishop of Chicago.

The four groomsmen and bridesmaids stepped into the center aisle. The bridesmaids were dressed in pale blue satin with white and lavender flower garlands. Jimmy Olsen of the Planet was with his fiancée Penny, Tom Andrews, a fellow reporter at the Star was paired with Jenna Bradley from EPRAD. Pete Ross, junior senator from Kansas and a friend of Clark's from high school was paired with his wife Lana, and Esther's brother Paul walked with Mercedes Freeman, also of EPRAD.

Cat Grant was resplendent in her gown as matron of honor, carrying herself as sedately as if it were her own wedding, titian hair pulled into a French braid. Bruce Wayne made a fitting partner for her.

Lana's daughter Rebecca was the flower girl spreading white rose petals in the aisle. Cat's son Adam was ring bearer, grimly solemn as he walked up the aisle.

Clark took his mother's arm as they made their way toward the altar. He knew she didn't

hold with 'papist frippery and nonsense' as she termed it. But once she realized it was Esther's and his wish, she kept her peace. It was one more thing that kept Clark Kent separate from Superman. Superman was not associated with any religious faith, not even a Kryptonian one.

Following up the rear was the bride, Esther Krystin Straker, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF. A vision in white satin, veil pulled away from her face, cascading down her back. As a widow she walked alone, face uncovered, her own woman giving herself in marriage. Her bouquet was a cascade of white roses and lavender.

*I can't believe this is really happening*, Clark kept repeating to himself. *I can't believe this gorgeous creature is marrying me*. He had always fancied the dark haired girls in school. Lois was dark haired with hazel eyes. Esther, on the other hand, was pale blonde with eyes the color of deep water, changing hue with her mood. A princess of the water and air.

**Then:**

"Clarkie!" Cat yelled across the newsroom of the Chicago Star. Clark looked up to see a familiar face weaving her way through the desks toward him.

"Cat? What are you doing here?"

"Checking up on my favorite escort," Cat said with a grin. "Actually, I'm in town on business and I wanted to take you to lunch."

Clark found himself grinning, ignoring the stares and grins of his colleagues. Cat was a good looking woman. "I would love to have lunch with you."

It was a bright April day, a blustery wind coming off the lake. "You didn't come to Chicago just to have lunch with me," Clark said a few minutes later as they walked to a deli he knew a few blocks away from the Star building.

"You're right, I didn't," Cat admitted. "Clark, I'm here because I trust you. I have good reason to believe Morgan Edge is involved in Intergang."

"Morgan Edge as in Galaxy Broadcasting System, that Morgan Edge?" Clark asked. Cat nodded.

"I've been offered a job with GBS, working directly with him," she explained.

"And?" Clark prompted.

"And, if I go ahead, assuming I'm right and can prove it, I'm going to need help on the outside."

"Wow," Clark muttered. "If you're right, and you get found out... It could be dangerous."

"Would that stop you?" she asked.

"No," he admitted, although he couldn't tell her exactly why it wouldn't stop him. Being invulnerable had its advantages. "But you're not an investigative journalist. And you've never had any interest in this sort of thing before. So I have to wonder why you want to do this? Why not let Lois or somebody else at the Planet tackle it?"

"Clark, you know my ex-husband got custody of my son?"

Clark nodded. He knew it was a sore point with her, that Joe Morgan had used Cat's alcoholism against her to take her son away. The court hadn't bothered to look into Joe's criminal background, or his addictions. It was money that spoke loudest and Cat hadn't had any.

"I found out that his lawyer was paid for by Edge and I think he's been working for Intergang in Gotham City."

"And if you can prove a link between Edge and Intergang, you might have enough ammunition to get Adam away from Joe," Clark completed for himself.

Cat nodded. "Will you help me?"



Clark took a deep breath, blowing it out his nose. "Make sure Perry knows what you're thinking about. Maybe he can assign Lois or somebody to the investigation in Metropolis. I'm not exactly close here, you know."

"That's one of the reasons I'm asking you. They're not likely to suspect you."

Clark nodded. He was going to have to consider all the angles on her proposal. It could be incredibly dangerous for her. Intergang was not known for its leniency to people it considered 'annoying.'

Within a week, Cat Grant was on the evening news at WGBS. The station was on the cable and Clark was still in the habit of watching the news from Metropolis before seeing what was happening in the city he was in.

Perry called him a week later, suggesting he collaborate with Lois. She was working a different angle on Intergang and Perry felt there would be synergy between the two investigations. Lois didn't respond to any of his emails or phone calls.

\* \* \*

"You look tired," Clark told Cat six months later. Halloween was a week away. The sky was overcast threatening rain, possibly snow. Passersby ignored him and his companion as they walked the several blocks to McMann's for lunch, but no one tried to bowl him over. Clark still wasn't sure if it was due to a difference in attitude of the people on the street towards strangers, or a difference in him.

Again, Cat had flown in for the day, ostensibly to cover a breaking story for WGBS: the attempted assassination of the prime minister of Tazarastan by dissident exiled students attending the University of Chicago. Cat had handled the interviews with consummate skill. GBS and GNN would be feeding the story to the rest of the world.

"It's been a long six months," Cat told him. "But it's coming together, piece by piece."

"You're being careful?"

"Yup," she said with a grin. Clark wasn't sure he believed her. The information she'd been sending him on Edge and his activities was damning. They needed additional corroboration, additional evidence before they could publish. Intergang was big, dangerous. The case against it needed to be airtight.

Clark wasn't concerned for himself. It was extremely unlikely Edge's people had linked him and Cat together, more unlikely they'd linked him to Superman. Superman didn't do daily patrols of Chicago, wasn't associated with the Star. Besides, Mike had put him on International, granting him more freedom to be out of the office, out of the country, if need be.

Superman had a busy hurricane season. Florida and the Gulf Coast had been hit hard again. He'd done what he could to shore up the levies to keep the flooding to a minimum in an already damaged New Orleans. Finally, all he could do was try to get people out of harm's way, keep the death toll to a minimum.

Clark opened the restaurant door for his companion. McMann's reminded him of the Ace O' Clubs, warm, friendly, well worn. He spotted Esther seated in a booth waiting for them. Her sixteen-month-old son was in a highchair, working on oat rings. He hurried over to them, Cat in tow. Matthew gave them a toothy smile.

"Cat Grant, I'd like you to meet Esther Straker and her son Matthew," Clark said. "Cat and I used to work together in Metropolis."

"Pleased to meet you," Esther said. There was a twinkle in her eye as Cat settled herself into the booth. "I've heard so much about you."

"Some good, I hope," Cat quipped with a smile.

"Of course," Esther said. "You know Clark rarely says bad things about people, unless he's in 'revolutionary mode', and that's usually reserved for people like the President, Dobrozhky, Blair, Kim Jong Il, the current administration's foreign policies..." She laughed.

"Hey, Kim Jong Il is not on that list," Clark complained mildly. "The man just has serious issues."

"Clark, Superman won't visit North Korea without Peking giving him backup," Esther reminded him.

"Discretion is the better part of valor," Clark said. "Kim's threatened to blow up things if Superman shows his face there."

The bartender at the counter turned up the sound on the TV monitor. A mine cave-in in western Russia, hundreds of miners trapped.

Clark stood up, giving Esther a kiss on the cheek. "Sorry, I've got to run. If I'm not back by seven, go to the play without me. I'll try to meet you there."

Esther nodded, a touch of worry coming into her eyes. "I'll see you tonight."

As he hurried out of the restaurant, heading toward the narrow alley behind the building, he heard Cat ask: "So, where and how did you two meet?"

Clark smiled as he launched himself into the air, heading over the pole to Russia. He had a feeling Cat and Esther were going to be friends. He just wondered what the two of them would end up planning for him. That was when he realized he was tuned into Cat's and Esther's heartbeats. He had to concentrate to sense Lois Lane.

## Esther

### Now:

Archbishop Blackie Ryan managed to make his way to this assigned place before the altar, not a small feat for the short, stocky priest with thick glasses. He was notorious throughout Chicago for both his brilliance and absentmindedness.

Esther remembered him fondly. He had performed the wedding ceremony for her parents when she was five years old. A Chicago priest performing a wedding in Ireland for two Bostonians living in London. Esther was maid of honor for her very pregnant mother. Blackie had gotten lost crossing the dining room in the hotel they were all staying in.

Now she stood beside her husband-to-be in front of the altar in the cathedral. She marveled that they'd made it this far. He was so gentle, so kind, so sweet. She wondered once again by what grace they'd come together, two wounded spirits seeking comfort. *Do angels have to shine so bright? She's here. The one who hurt him. The one who drove him away.*

She knew he'd noticed her sitting in the row with Mike O'Hanlon, sensed that almost imperceptible intake of breath from both Clark and his mother, the almost imperceptible shiver in their auras.

One of the altar servers opened the lectionary to the proper place and the Archbishop adjusted his glasses to read. He seemed surprised to look up and see a filled church. He gave the traditional greeting to the congregation.

From the choir the famed singer Nuala McGrail led the choir and congregation in **Love Divine**: *Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven to earth come down; Fix in us thy humble dwelling; All thy faithful mercies crown!*

The Penitential Rite, the Opening Prayer. Father Leone read the Old Testament reading, the responsorial Psalm, the New Testament reading, the Gospel Reading, all familiar parts of Mass. Blackie Ryan gave his familiar trademarked thirteen minute strawberry homily.

She gave Clark's hand a quick squeeze. It was time. *I can't believe this is really happening*, Esther kept repeating to herself. *I can't believe this angelic being is marrying me.*

"Esther Krystin and Clark Joseph, have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?" Blackie asked. "Will you honor each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives...? Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?"

### Then:

She had a long weekend off, finally. The initial investigation into the computer failure of her plane had exonerated her. She would be back flying early next week. In the meantime, she had some time. She had called the Chicago Star looking for Clark Kent and was told he was out. She decided to visit the Star in hopes of catching him.

She hitched Matthew, her thirteen-month old son, higher on her hip as she walked into the newsroom.

"Is Mister Kent around?" she asked the first person she saw as she entered the newsroom. The man pointed vaguely at the desk filled room. She spotted the tall reporter at a desk, not far from the doors. He looked busy, but it was close to lunch time. *The man had to eat, didn't he?*

"Mister Kent?"

He looked up, surprised to see her. "Major Straker. How's the investigation going?"

"Classified, but I was cleared. I thought I'd take you to lunch to celebrate."

"Give me a few minutes to finish this, and we can go."

Lunch was at a new Thai restaurant a few blocks away. This time it was Esther's turn to

interview. He had already told her he'd worked at the Daily Planet before coming to Chicago, so she had started her research there, looking up all the articles he'd written, the official bio the Daily Planet kept on its reporters.

She read his work. His style was literate, learned, but he managed to not talk down to the reader as he explained background, personalities, issues. It was like having a conversation with a friend. You didn't have to agree with him, but you always came away with a better understanding of the subject and why it was important.

He was from Smallville, Kansas, a published writer and world traveler who graduated Metropolis University after majoring in journalism. He'd won two Kerth awards, one in partnership with Lois Lane. Then he disappeared for over five years. On his return, he went back to the Daily Planet, only to transfer to the Chicago Star three months later. The Metropolis Star's gossip column had him linked to one of the Daily Planet's society writers, but Esther didn't trust the Metropolis Star.

He was a Pisces. Her mother would appreciate that, but she wondered if her mother would appreciate knowing another crystal aura in need, even though his was stronger and brighter than any she'd seen before despite the foggy markings of pain.

"Okay, Mister Kent, I told you about me last time," Esther said as they waited for their meals. "Now, it's your turn."

"First, it's Clark," he said laughing. He had a nice laugh and she had the feeling he didn't laugh very often. "And it's my job to ask questions. So, what did you want to know, Major?"

"Esther. Please."

"Esther."

They talked. When lunch was finished, they walked, Clark carrying a tired Matthew.

"He doesn't usually take to new people. I think he likes you," Esther observed. "I bet you'd make a good dad." She saw his smile falter.

"I have a son in Metropolis," he said with a sigh. "His name is Jason. He was born when I was out of the country. I didn't even know she was pregnant."

"She doesn't want you around, does she?" she asked, suspecting his answer.

"She got married to someone else, and my presence was a 'complication' she didn't want." There was no bitterness in his voice, only resignation.

"And you are much too understanding to confront her to demand your rights," she said.

He shook his head. "It's complicated."

"It always is," she said watching him. "You're still in love with her."

He shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it."

Suddenly his head came up and a faraway listening look came into his eyes. "I have to go."

"Where?"

He shook his head as he handed Matthew back to her. "It shouldn't take too long. I'll catch up with you." With that he ran off down the sidewalk and disappeared around a corner. That was then she heard the radio that was tuned into a news channel. There was an oil tanker in trouble in the midst of a major storm off the California coast. The radio reported Superman's arrival on the scene as he carefully pulled the double hulled tanker off the sandbar where it had run aground during the storm.

Clark reappeared about twenty minutes later, finding her and Matthew, despite the fact she'd kept walking, heading for her car.

"Sorry about that," he apologized.

"Did you get the story?" she asked. It was the only logical explanation. He'd heard something on somebody's radio and ran to check it out.

He just stared at her a long moment. "Uh, um, yeah," he finally stammered out. "Have you got, um, plans tomorrow night?"

"No," she answered. "Do you?"

"They're doing **Uncle Vanya** over at the Performing Arts Center. I thought... if you'd like to...?"

"I'd love to. What time should I pick you up?"

"You're picking me up?" He sounded surprised, as though he hadn't thought of it.

*He's so cute when he does that.* "You don't own a car, Clark." She tried not to smirk.

\* \* \*

She picked him up at seven at his loft apartment in one of the lower rent neighborhoods on the east side.

"Nice place," she commented. It was simple, walls filled with native art and bookcases. Not much else in the way of furniture, a low table, a few chairs, a credenza with a small stereo system. There was a Persian rug on the hardwood floor and Esther suspected it was a genuine antique.

"No big screen TV?" she asked.

"I don't watch much TV."

She took a moment to look at the books on the shelves. Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Aristotle, Dante, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, both in their original languages and translations. History, science, politics, religion, fiction, especially fantasy and science fiction, some mysteries, both classic and new. A few techno-thrillers, Tom Clancy mostly.

"My mom would love your collection. How many languages do you read?"

"About twenty or so. I speak a lot more than that, at least well enough to make myself understood."

"How many?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, really. Lots. I have a knack for it. Comes in handy when I'm overseas, or in LA. I don't need translators very often." He gave a faintly puzzled look.

"Where's Matthew?"

"I figure Chekhov's a little heavy for a one-year-old," she laughed. "I've got a neighbor who runs a little daycare center and she's really flexible. She volunteered to watch Matthew tonight so I could go on a date." She didn't bother to tell him that her neighbor, Megan, had made it a personal project to get Esther a man. Megan had decided that Esther needed a life now that Steven had been dead over a year. *One year, fifteen days, ten hours... I should have been with him on that plane. He wanted me to go with him, to go flying, and I said no. He might not have crashed if I'd gone up with him. I was the better pilot. I might have been able to bring it down. He might still be alive.*

"Esther?" Clark asked. He'd noticed her reverie. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she lied. "It's just that I haven't been on a date since... well, Steven."

"We don't have to call this an official date," he offered. "We can just go out, as friends."

\* \* \*

The play was well done. She took him to coffee and dessert at a little club not far from the Performing Arts center.

"Clark, I do have a favor to ask," Esther said.

"What?"

"I told you the investigation board cleared me for flight duty."

He nodded.

"There's a little snag in the investigation," she continued. "They want to talk to Superman, only the investigators haven't been able to get in touch with him."

"I thought he gave them a report right after it happened," Clark said.

"They want a few more questions answered. Maybe he saw something he forgot to put in his report, something he didn't think was important," she said. "I've been told they've tried the usual channels, the Daily Planet, Lois Lane, Metropolis PD. Apparently he hasn't gotten the message. That or he's ignoring them, and that doesn't sound right."

"Superman hasn't been hanging around Metropolis much these last few months," Clark said. "Used to be the best way to get in touch with him was to be Lois Lane and yell 'Help Superman.' That doesn't seem to be working anymore, at least, not as well."

"But you seem to get most of the exclusives with him still," Esther pointed out. "Could you try to let him know?"

"I'll try." But Esther noticed there was worry in his expression, as though he really didn't want to do it.

Monday, she found out why.

Superman appeared at the base commander's office at eight AM. Esther was in the commander's office when he arrived.

"Superman, I see our message finally got to you," Colonel Graham said seeing the blue and red clad figure. The older man was obviously impressed.

"Sorry about the delay, sir," he said. "I really didn't hear until late last Saturday that the investigators needed more information from me. I would have been here sooner, had I known."

"I understand, Superman," Graham said. "They're on the third floor, office 314."

"Thank you, Colonel, Major Straker," he said, politely nodding in their directions before turning to leave.

Esther stared after him. She didn't often use her 'gift' while on duty. It was too distracting. But she'd opened that part of her mind out of curiosity, to see what a Kryptonian aura looked like. She saw a multi-hued aura, a familiar aura, strong, and bright despite the markings of pain. Clark Kent's aura.

"He's younger than I expected," Graham said, breaking her bemused train of thought. "And he certainly doesn't look alien."

"He's Kryptonian," Esther told her superior. *Clark Kent is Superman. I've been going out with Superman. Oh, dear God, what is he going to think when he finds out he's not the only extra-terrestrial living on Earth? And not one of us thought to let him know?*

## **Lois**

### **Now:**

Lois reached over to take Richard's hand. He accepted her grasp, but nothing more, no rubbing the back of her hand the way he used to. The way he did when they were first dating, when they were first married. *I should never have said yes to him, given him false hope that I would ever love him as I had him. And I did love **him** and now he's gone.*

The bride was tall and slender, blonde, blue eyes, almost inhuman in her beauty. The gown was unbelievable, all satin and Irish lace, obviously custom designed.

Lois had to fight down pangs of jealousy. She'd gotten married wearing a beige suit in a small side chapel by a minister who barely cared what their names were. She and Richard weren't members of his church even though they lived just down the street. It was Richard's promise to start attending services and to bring Jason to Sunday school that got them in at all. And except for a couple police officers, Maggie Sawyer and Bill Henderson among them, and coworkers from the Planet, there were few witnesses. Making the guest list, Lois realized she really had no friends outside of work, and the people at work couldn't really be considered friends. Except for Clark and it was obvious to all observers that he hadn't wanted to be there.

Clark was getting married in a cathedral to a fairy princess. *I'd forgotten how handsome he is, despite the glasses. At least he's not slouching as much. I hope she appreciates what she's getting.*

The little priest with the crimson trimmed collar continued: "Since it is your intention to enter into marriage, join your right hands, and declare your consent before God and his Church."

Clark and Esther joined right hands as instructed. Their eyes were on one another. No one else mattered. Not the priest, not the attendants, not Lois Lane-White and her foolhardy decision two years before.

"I, Clark Joseph, take you, Esther Krystin for my lawful wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

"I, Esther Krystin, take you, Clark Joseph, to be my husband. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life."

The little priest again, looking out at the audience, apparently surprised to see anyone there. "You have declared your consent before the Church. May the Lord in his goodness strengthen your consent and fill you both with his blessings. What God has joined, men must not divide."

"Amen." Lois intoned with the rest of the congregants. Perry's low voice mixed with Richard's higher one on either side of her.

*Clark is married now. To a woman named Esther. Why can't I be glad for him?*

### **Then:**

Superman no longer made Metropolis his home and Clark Kent had moved to Chicago. Cat Grant had quit the Daily Planet and was working for Galaxy Broadcasting System, although the rumor mill made claims that Perry had fired her, supposedly over her alcohol problems or maybe drugs.

Lex Luthor's fate had finally been discovered, or at least the Cuban government finally admitted to finding Luthor. The villain was found with his downed helicopter on a sand bar. There was no word on the fate of Kitty Kowalski. She hadn't been on the island with him. It

was reported that he attempted to co-opt the crew of the Cuban cruiser and ended up being killed.

The Cuban government found one of Superman's crystals on Luthor's body and returned it to him in trade for certain, undisclosed, 'favors'.

Lois and Richard settled into married life, not much different than their life before. Jason went to school, got decent grades in academics, not so good in sports but he was improving there. He was starting to outgrow his health issues. Fewer foods were now on his forbidden list and he was growing normally. Richard complained mostly jokingly that Jason was needing a new wardrobe every four months now, he was gaining height so fast.

Then the fighting started, the phone calls from the school that Jason had lost his temper, usually defending Superman. The other kids would blame the superhero for being absent during some minor disaster that local emergency workers could handle. Jason would over react to the criticism of his hero, using his new strength and height to take on all comers.

"Mrs. White," Jason's teacher said. "We cannot tolerate fighting. I know your son is one of Superman's biggest fans, but we cannot allow him to fight, not even to defend the Man of Steel."

"Superman saved his life, you know," Lois told her. "During the Luthor's crystalquake. And he's been missing him."

"We all miss having him around, Mrs. White, but that doesn't excuse Jason's behavior."

"I'll talk to him," Lois promised.

The woman handed Lois a business card. Lois glanced at it: Barbara Lassiter, family psychologist. "You're suggesting Jason needs professional help?"

"I am saying that in my experience, family troubles frequently manifest themselves in the child's behavior. Jason's need to defend Superman isn't something that just popped up out of nowhere. I'm told that your husband is not Jason's biological parent and the man who is moved away from Metropolis?"

"So?"

"I don't know the circumstances, but you might want to consider contacting your son's real father to bring him in on this problem."

"My husband *is* Jason's *real* father, and I will thank you to remember that."

\* \* \*

At work, Lois was following the trail of Intergang. In Superman's absence, gang violence had increased in Metropolis, much of it related to Intergang's attempts to drive out or recruit all competitors. She'd also come across indications that Intergang was trying to break into more legitimate businesses across the country, among them, television and radio.

She took her suspicions to Perry, who nodded and said: "It's a good start, but you really need to talk to Clark Kent, see what he has on them."

"Clark? What has he got to do with this?"

"I happen to know he's working the same subject from a different angle and I think it would be a good use of time and effort if the two of you pooled your resources," Perry stated.

"Perry, the man walked out and moved to Chicago," she reminded her editor.

Perry raised one brindled eyebrow at her. "He didn't 'walk out'. I arranged a transfer for him, and you know why. Now, either get in touch with him about this story or not, I really don't care. But, if I end up with two Intergang investigations on my desk, it'll be the better piece that I run. So don't forget that."

Lois did call Chicago. Clark was out, so she left a message for him to email her. He did,



the next day, although she had expressly asked that he get back to her as soon as possible. Twenty-four hours later didn't exactly qualify as 'as soon as possible' in her book.

Clark's email was short and to the point. He was tracking Intergang's relationship with the media and was looking into suspicions that criminal inroads into radio and television were far greater and deeper than originally suspected. He also indicated he had access to someone working in one of the media properties Intergang appeared tied to.

She emailed him back, asking for details, the name of the broadcasting group he suspected, more on his sources. Another twenty-four hours. *Isn't the man ever at his desk?* This time a flat refusal: 'Lois, I am frankly astonished you would even consider asking the names of the people who are involved in helping me in this investigation. As journalists we have an obligation to protect our sources, even from other journalists. I will be happy to share what information I have with you, but not that.'

She called him again, finally reaching him at his desk.

"Clark, this is Lois, remember me, Daily Planet?"

"Of course I remember you, Lois. But please make this quick. I don't have much time."

"About this Intergang thing. I'll give you my sources if you'll give me yours, okay?" She figured it was a fair deal.

"I'm sorry Lois, but I can't. I promised to keep their names confidential, strictly off the record. If anyone even suspected there were people talking... I can't, I won't. I'm sorry," he said. He sounded odd, no stammer, no stutter, not at all Clark-like.

"Clark, this is me, Lois, you're ex-partner. You can trust me. You know I protect my sources." She was nearly pleading and hated herself for it. Lois Lane didn't beg for anything, especially not from Clark Kent.

"Lois, this has nothing to do with whether or not I trust you," Clark tried to explain. "I've already told you I'm willing to share whatever information I get, assuming you do the same. But I will not divulge my sources. Not to you, not to Perry, not to anyone."

In the background Lois could hear a female voice calling Clark's name.

"Fine, be that way," Lois spat out and hung up. The gall of the man, refusing to give her what she'd asked for. She'd told him he could trust her, he always had before. Maybe he *didn't* trust her anymore. She hadn't been exactly nice to him before he left, but he should have been professional enough to put that behind him.

She dialed his number again, but got his voice mail this time. She left her cell number for him to call her back. He didn't call.

He emailed her several days later, from Guatemala of all places. "The answer is still no. But I think we need to talk, compare notes." *Fine, be that way.* She started sending his emails directly into the trash and erased his voice mails without listening to them. Perry had said he'd print the better story. She seriously doubted it would be from a hayseed in Chicago.

Three weeks later, Perry called Lois into his office. "Mike is running the first part of the Intergang story tomorrow. What have you got for me?"

"Give me fifteen minutes to finish it off," Lois promised. She ran back to her desk, opened the file and sat down to finish it. Fifteen minutes later, she sent it off to Perry to look over.

Half an hour later, Perry called her back into his office. He handed her a print out. "Lois, I told you I'd run the piece that was best. That one's the best."

She read the byline -- Clark Kent, Chicago Star.

"I would have liked you two to have shared that byline, pooled your resources," Perry

said quietly. "As good as his is, it would have been better with both of you together."

"I did call him. He wouldn't do it, wouldn't share his sources," Lois told him.

"Lois, I think I know who he was protecting," he told her. "And I wouldn't have told you either. I still won't tell you. But the next time I tell you to collaborate with someone, you *will* do it. So, do you want to call him? Work with him to rewrite these two pieces into one better one, or not?"

She scanned the article Clark wrote. It was a damning exposé of Morgan Edge, Intergang, the use of electronic media to skew public perceptions. Clark had documented Edge's misuse of Galaxy Broadcasting, WGBS and its sister stations, in furthering his criminal goals, laundering money, passing messages, drugs, dirty politics, racketeering.

She handed the piece back to Perry. "Run it. I doubt I can add anything to what he's already got there. He's covered both Metropolis and Chicago. I certainly didn't catch the WGBS connection. I hope his editor nominates him for some awards on this one. Clark deserves it."

Lois walked out of Perry's office and went back to her desk. She sat, putting her head in her hands. Richard spotted her and came over to her. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Have you read what Clark wrote on Intergang?" she asked.

"Yes," he admitted. "It's very good. But I think Perry's right. It would have been even better if the two of you had worked together."

The television monitor on the column a short distance from her desk showed Superman in the midst of a rescue, a flood somewhere in Southeast Asia, getting people out of harm's way.

"Richard, I can't go there," Lois said, watching the screen. "Don't ask me to."

\* \* \*

That night, when Lois and Richard made love, it was her ex-partner's name she murmured in the height of passion, not her husband's.

## Perry

### Now:

Nuala (pronounced *noola* according to Mike O'Hanlon) Anne McGrail stepped forward. The choir robes she wore didn't hide her height, or her raven black hair. It certainly did nothing to detract from her clear, strong voice as she sang the next hymn as a solo, **Lord of the Dance**: *I danced in the morning when the world was begun, And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun, And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth, At Bethlehem I had my birth.* The song went on.

Alice had bought all of McGrail's CDs and although Perry had given many of her books and CDs away, he had kept the Nuala McGrail ones. He was actually fond of **Nuala Anne Goes to Church**, although religious music was never his favorite. Perry wondered at how the Strakers managed to snag an internationally renowned singer as soloist and leaned close to Mike to ask.

O'Hanlon grinned. "Didn't you know the fellow helping the Archbishop is Nuala Anne's brother-in-law? And Esther's mom, Elizabeth Kathryn, isn't she a woman of influence in certain parts? Remember that series of murders around Dublin in '83?"

"Vaguely," Perry admitted. "Something about a famous sword and maybe IRA involvement."

"Weren't the bride's mom and dad the ones that cracked the case, with a little help from the Archbishop up there?" O'Hanlon asked him. "Didn't even they clear the 'lads' on that one? They're among the dark ones, Perry. But they're family, and don't they scare me to death sometimes? Especially our boy there."

"Dark ones?" Perry murmured the question. Sometimes O'Hanlon was determinedly Irish, despite hailing from Evanston.

"Fey, sighted, descended of the Old Ones."

"Clark?"

O'Hanlon chuckled softly. "Definitely."

Perry just shook his head. *What did I get Clark into?*

The solo ended and Nuala took her place back with the choir. The audience had to restrain itself to keep from applauding. She smiled, then apparently whispered something to the Archbishop, who looked at her in surprise before turning his attention back to the bride and groom. He took the pillow with the rings from the ring bearer, then had trouble untying the ribbons. It was obvious both Esther and Clark had started laughing as they helped him free the rings.

"Lord, bless these rings which we bless," here the Archbishop made the sign of the cross, "in your name. Grant that those who wear them may always have a deep faith in each other. May they do your will and always live together in peace, good will, and love. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen."

Clark managed to stop laughing long enough to place the band on Esther's finger saying: "Esther Krystin, take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Esther's smile was broad and radiant as she placed a wider band on Clark's finger: "Clark Joseph, take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The little Archbishop looked out over the congregation and smiled. At least this time he didn't look surprised. "The Lord be with you."

"And with your spirit," the congregation intoned.

Perry felt Lois begin to collect herself as if to leave. "There's another forty-five minutes, my dear," he whispered to her. She sat back, staring at him.

"Let us pray," the little Archbishop instructed.

**Then:**

"If you people are not ready in two minutes, I'm leaving without you," Perry announced, yelling into the newsroom from the elevator lobby. He was heartened to see both Lois and Richard scrambling towards him, Lois grabbing her purse as she ran. Lois was up for another award this year, this time for her in depth analysis of the failure of government services in the long term wake of the 'crystalquake' in 2006, only a few days after Superman's return. She wasn't the only journalist the Daily Planet had that had made the final cut, but this would be Lois's second Pulitzer, assuming she won.

Perry was glad, however, that her selection as a finalist was in a different category than Clark Kent's. Having them running against one another would be the makings of a catastrophe even Superman couldn't handle. He hadn't warned them that Clark would actually be at the award ceremony and dinner this evening.

The drive to the ceremony was uneventful, for which Perry silently thanked God. Both Lois and Richard appeared to be on their best behavior. It was quite a change from the past two and a half months where their bickering was threatening to have one of them sent to Tokyo. Perry hadn't bothered to ask what had started the problem, this time. It had been their choice to marry. What was the line? *Marry in haste, repent in leisure?* Although a four year engagement hardly qualified as haste, or maybe it did in Lois's case.

They found the table with their names without difficulty. A waiter took their drink order. Perry's doctor had warned him to stay away from alcohol, so he ordered iced tea. Lois chose a white wine while Richard ordered a vodka martini. Eduardo, the other Planet reporter up for honors, stuck with coffee. Clark arrived at the same time as the drinks.

"Hello Perry, Lois, Richard... Eduardo, isn't it?" Clark greeted them. They nodded back politely, although Perry noticed Richard's hastily covered frown. Clark picked a name card off the table and handed it to Perry.

"Apparently somebody on the seating committee has a nasty sense of humor," Perry said, reading the card. It had Clark's name on it, with the Daily Planet listed as his paper. Clark looked uncomfortable, standing by the chair next to Perry.

"Oh, sit down, son. I don't bite and if they do... well, they'd better not," Perry said, waving at Clark to sit. The young man did so.

"And for you, sir?" the waiter asked.

"Perrier and lime," Clark ordered. The waiter left.

"So, how long will you be in town?" Richard asked. Perry noted his nephew's attempt to be polite to Clark and assumed Clark did as well.

Clark shrugged. "I'm catching the red-eye to Chicago. Saturday I'm off to Tazarastan for however long. Probably six months, since the One-Twenty-Seventh air group is supposed to come home then." He glanced at Perry. "I got confirmation about an hour ago. Mike can't decide to be happy or upset about it."

Lois perked up at that. "I thought they weren't allowing western journalists into the country. How the hell did you manage it?"

Clark chuckled. "It helps that I've been covering the mediation process for the past year or so, and that Superman put in a good word for me."

"Yes, I've seen your byline on the Superman exclusives," Lois said. She sounded annoyed.

"I'm not the only one he talks to," Clark reminded her. "It's not my fault you told him you didn't want to talk to him."

Lois actually paled a little. "He told you that?"

"Not in so many words, but yes," he said.

The waiter arrived with Clark's drink and refills of ice tea and coffee. Lois ordered another glass of wine. Richard shook his head at a second martini.

"Won't it make it hard on your girl friend, you being gone so long?" Richard asked. Lois was glowering.

Clark gave Perry a questioning look.

"You know how bad the grapevine is around a newsroom," Perry told him.

Clark chuckled again. "I know *that*. Actually, being over there'll make it easier. My, uh, *girl friend* just got promoted to CAG for the One-Twenty-Seventh." He checked his watch. "She's most likely getting prepped for her morning mission briefing right now."

Lois and Richard just stared at him. Perry tried to keep the grin off his face. *Maybe I should have warned them. Naaa.*

Their meals arrived. Perry and Eduardo filled Clark in on the comings and goings at the Daily Planet. Clark told them what was going on at the Chicago Star.

"How's Cat fitting in?" Eduardo asked. She'd moved to Chicago, to the Star, ten days after Clark's Intergang exposé hit the newsstands.

"Like she's lived there all her life," Clark told them.

"Does your girl friend know about you and Cat?" Lois wondered aloud. Perry glared at her but she didn't seem to notice.

"Oh, I'm sure Cat's told her everything," Clark said. "Assuming there was anything to tell. Which there never was."

"The Daily Star didn't think so," Lois told him.

"And you believe everything you read in the Daily Star?" Clark asked her. She glared at him, taking a vicious bite of her boneless chicken.

Perry hushed them. The awards ceremony was about to begin.

He was familiar with all the entrants. All were worthy of being on their respective short lists. Lois was up against a writer in LA who had done a series on race relations in the City of Angels in the dawn of the Twenty-First Century. Her other competition was from Dallas, the effects of Homeland Security regulations on the economy of Mex-America.

Dan Reisman of the LA Times won the medal and the check. Lois sat back, face carefully composed.

Eduardo lost out to a writer in Seattle.

Clark's competition was even stiffer. A multiple award winner from the London Times and one from the Tokyo English Gazette. The Times article dealt with the changing face of Europe with the addition of the former USSR into the economic and racial mix. The Gazette series concerned the impact on the world economy, especially in the Far East, with the growth of China as a manufacturing powerhouse.

It was Clark's name that was called. His expression at hearing his name said it all. He honestly hadn't expected to win tonight. He made his way from the table, up to the small stage to accept.

"Uh, wow. I have to admit, simply being on the same short list as my esteemed colleagues

from the London Times and the Tokyo English Gazette is an honor unto itself. But to be the one chosen for a series my editor wasn't even sure he wanted to publish is both humbling and astonishing. The story of Tazarastan isn't finished by any means. I can only hope that my work has made it easier for people to see how far that part of the world has come, and how much farther it has to go before it can become an equal member of the world community. Thank you."

Clark still looked shell-shocked when he came back to the table. Eduardo clapped him on the back as he sat down.

Richard reached across the table to shake his hand. "Congratulations."

"Thanks, Richard," Clark murmured. Then his head came up in the way Perry recognized, as if he were listening for something only he could hear. "I have to go," he said, getting to his feet.

"Forget to feed your fish?" Lois's expression was dark and uncharacteristically bitter.

Clark gave her a puzzled look and shrugged. "I'll call you later, Perry," he said, and disappeared out the door.

"He hasn't changed," Lois complained.

"Why would you expect him to?" Perry asked. She didn't give him an answer.

## Cat

### Now:

Cat stood and let the intercession prayers wash over her. *Lord, hear our prayer.* She had no doubt at all that miracles happened. And angels didn't always have wings. One at least wore a red cape and boots, and another, the one who seemed to be her guardian angel, wore horn-rimmed glasses and stammered when he got upset. And of course there was Esther and Blackie.

Adam was fidgeting. It was a long day for him, and he'd been trying to act so grown-up so as not to disappoint Unca' Clark and Aunty Essie. He was one of her miracles. Not that he had been born, although children were always miracles, but that he was with her, here.

The little Archbishop again: "Almighty and eternal God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth: Mercifully accept the prayers of your people and strengthen us to do your will; through Christ our Lord. Amen"

Another hymn as Esther carried a covered container of communion wafers to the altar. Clark walked beside her, carrying a stoppered decanter of red wine and a flask of water. The Archbishop accepted the offerings, placing them on the altar.

"Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life."

Cat joined in the response: "Blessed be God for ever." She'd been raised Roman Catholic but had fallen away even before her disastrous marriage. During the wait for Superman to save the world from the Nightfall asteroid, she'd even gone so far as to proposition a priest so she wouldn't have to be alone when the end came. *Forgive me Father for I have sinned.* That was a night that young man would long remember, she was sure. He'd run away from her as though she was a succubus after his immortal soul.

The priest mixed the water and wine, spoke his quiet piece. "Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink."

Again the response: "Blessed be God forever."

"Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble and contrite hearts."

Archbishop Blackie handed the water to Priest George who had a towel folded over his left arm. The little Archbishop washed his hands, wiping his hands on the linen. "Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin."

*Blackie knows how to put on a good show,* Cat thought to herself, trying to keep from grinning. He wasn't nearly as lost as he sometimes seemed. Of course, general consensus was that his life force emanated from the cathedral, that he wouldn't last more than a week anywhere west of Evanston. East of Chicago didn't seem to be as much of a problem. He'd been present at the election of the new pope, assisting Cardinal Cronin while in Rome, had visited DC more than once. He'd even been to Metropolis at least once that he would admit to.

He continued. "Lord, hear our prayers and accept the gifts we offer for Esther Krystin and Clark Joseph. Today you have made them one in the sacrament of marriage. May the mystery of Christ's unselfish love, which we celebrate in this Eucharist, increase their love for you and for each other. We ask this through Christ our Lord."

The response from the congregation: "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good, and the good of all his Church."

"The Lord be with you."

"And also with you."

"Lift up your hearts."

"We lift them up to the Lord."

"Let us give thanks to the Lord our God."

"It is right to give him thanks and praise."

"Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks. You created man in love to share your divine life. We see his high destiny in the love of husband and wife, which bears the imprint of your own divine love. Love is man's origin, love is his constant calling, love is his fulfillment in heaven. The love of man and woman is made holy in the sacrament of marriage, and becomes the mirror of your everlasting love. Through Christ the choirs of angels and all the saints praise and worship your glory. May our voices blend with theirs as we join in their unending hymn."

One of the choir tenors stood up as cantor to sing: "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory, Hosanna in the highest, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest."

Yes, Blackie knew how to put on a show. And he was doing it for her two favorite angels. *Lois, eat your heart out.*

**Then:**

"I think I have a problem," Cat Grant told Clark Kent over the phone. "Joe knows I'm up to something." She was calling him from a payphone not too far from the WGBS studios. She didn't want any long distance calls to Chicago to show up in her company phone records, and she wasn't sure if someone had access to her cell phone call records. She knew there were ways to get that information.

"What does he know?" Clark asked. He sounded only a little worried.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "But he's in Metropolis and he caught me in my office this morning, making threats, saying he was going to kill the snitch. That he knew I knew there was a snitch. I don't know if he was drunk or high. But he scared me to death."

"Did he happen to put a name on whoever he thinks this snitch is?" Clark asked.

"No, just that he knew who it was."

"Do you want to pull out?"

She sighed. As scared as she was, she knew she had promised to get enough information on Edge and his cronies to bring them down. "Not yet," she told him. "I think they've got something big coming up. There've been a lot of little comments about Superman."

"What sort of comments?"

"Like he wasn't going to be able to stop them, and they've got a way to stop him. Things like that. I'm wondering if they have kryptonite," she said, watching the people moving past her on the sidewalk.

"Look, there's no percentage in being a dead hero. If you think going back will be too dangerous, run, get out. If I have to, I can get somebody over there to get you out," Clark said. She could hear the concern in his voice and it gave her a warm feeling. She'd made a good choice coming to him with her idea, as hair-brained as it seemed at the time. Edge really had been, really was, up to no good, using his media properties to provide a base for Intergang.

"Tell you what," she said. "I'll go back tonight, see what I can get out of the computer files. I'll call you as soon as I get done, okay?"

"Okay," Clark conceded, but she could tell he wasn't really convinced.



"Talk at ya' later," she said and rang off. She leaned against the side of the open phone booth, breathing deeply to calm her nerves. One more trip in to see if she could find out what they were planning against Superman, one more disk to over-night to Clark. *Maybe I should have asked him to ask Superman to keep an eye on me? No, Superman's a busy guy and I'm just not that important. But this story is.*

\* \* \*

She stopped and had a cup of coffee and a sandwich at the deli down the street from the WBGS studios. The executive offices closed down at five but no one would question her being there late. *I hope.* She was frequently on the upper floors after hours, taking care of last minute things for Morgan Edge. Metropolis wasn't the only city he had businesses in and he liked a hands-on approach in all his enterprises -- especially the shadier ones.

A shadow fell over her table and she looked up to see a tall, well-built man with black hair standing over her. He was wearing aviator sunglasses, a biker jacket and worn jeans. Worn leather biker boots and a black t-shirt completed the ensemble.

"Miss Grant?" the man said. The voice sounded impossibly familiar. Deep, authoritative.

"My friends call me Cat," she said, inviting him to sit with a wave of her hand. "Do I know you?"

He smiled, a thousand watt smile. "We've met. At the Daily Planet."

Cat flushed at the memory of throwing herself at every adult male in the Planet newsroom. She'd even thrown herself at Superman when he'd come in to talk to Perry White about something Lois was working on. "I can show *you* a *super* time," she'd told him. He'd just given her a concerned look, like she'd lost her mind and he was wondering how soon her keepers would show up.

"A mutual friend asked me to help out, in case there was a problem," he added. "He figures it might be better if there was someone 'super' around."

"Would that friend live in the Windy City?" *Superman? In aviator shades and a biker jacket? Who'd believe it?*

"Indeed."

Remembering her manners: "Would you like some coffee? Something to eat?"

"Coffee's fine."

She waved to the water: "Another coffee over here please?" She turned back to her 'guest.' "So, what do your friends call you?"

He chuckled. "You can call me Kal. Kal Ellis."

His coffee arrived and she watched as he doctored it for himself. Three sugars, about half the little pitcher of half-and-half. "My friend out west must have introduced you to coffee. That's how he likes it, although for the life of me, I can't figure out how he doesn't gain weight with the way he eats."

Another chuckle. "He gets more exercise than you probably think."

*I'm having coffee in a deli with Superman.* "So, how many other people know you hang out in coffee shops, wearing jeans and sunglasses in your off time?"

This time he actually laughed. "Our mutual friend out west, a few others. Not many."

"So, do you often go out like...?" She gestured to his outfit, lifting one eyebrow in a question.

"It's hard to have a quiet lunch in the other outfit," he said. "Primary colors are a little... attention getting." He watched her for a long moment, expression growing more solemn, although she couldn't see his eyes behind the sunglasses. "Our mutual friend briefed me on

what was happening, about the threats to you, and to me."

She checked her watch. A little after five. Across the street she could see other members of the administrative staff leaving the building, waving and nodding good byes to one another as they headed for the subway, the bus stop, the parking garage down the street.

"A few minutes more," she said. "I haven't seen Joe or Morgan leave the building, but I know there's another way out besides the obvious exits."

Kal lowered his glasses to peer over the frames. Cat had forgotten how blue his eyes were. "There's a sub-basement that goes under the street a ways. I can't make out details. It's lead-lined. Must be new. I don't remember it from the sweeps of the city I did right after the crystalquake."

"Doesn't New Troy have rules about using lead in new construction and remodels?" Cat asked.

"I doubt the building inspectors have seen that sub-basement," Kal reminded her.

\* \* \*

Getting in had been as easy as she had expected. Cat introduced her companion to the building security guard manning the entrance to the executive suits as her new boy friend, Kal. From her own computer she managed to access much of the data she had promised Clark, but some of it needed to come from Edge's on computer. She hadn't been able to access the information through the network.

"Blast," she murmured to herself when she realized the precautions Edge had put into place.

"Problem?" Kal asked. He looked relaxed, sitting in a chair beside her desk facing the door to her office, ostensibly reading one of the film magazines she kept on the table beside the door. He looked relaxed, but she knew he was keeping an eye on the hallway outside, the elevator shaft just down the corridor, the security people on their patrols.

"Morgan forgot to give me the network passkey for the stuff he wanted me to work on for him," she said. They were both assuming her office was bugged, that there were listeners.

Suddenly, Kal stiffened.

"Something wrong?"

He shook his head, but she knew he was covering up something. "Are you about done? This place gives me the creeps." She stifled a smile at his statement. Even in civvies he was an impressive guy, obviously able to handle himself. But there was a definite whine in his voice.

"Half-an-hour maybe," she said. "Once I'm done with the stuff I promised to finish for my boss. I'll have to go next door for that, though."

"It can't wait for tomorrow?"

"The boss leaves for Gotham tomorrow morning. I should have had this all done this afternoon, except my idiot ex barged in there, got me too upset to work."

Kal nodded, but he obviously wasn't happy. He kept looking at the wall between the two offices. Cat handed him the SD card she'd just finished filling and he dropped it into the inside pocket of his jacket. Then she went to the door that adjoined her office with Edge's, opened it with her key, and stepped inside. She felt a breeze blow past her.

What happened then was a blur. The room beyond exploded in a white hot ball of fire. Then she found herself in the air, high above the burning building in the blue clad arms of Superman. "What happened?"

"A bomb, set to go off when the adjoining door was opened," Superman explained.

"Someone really wants me dead?"

"You, or someone else with a key to that door," he said. "Janitor, security, even one of his other assistants, possibly even Edge himself."

"You didn't put out the fire," she pointed out.

"I have what you needed," he said, shifting his hold on her to free up one hand. He held up a computer hard-drive in his now free hand and handed it to her. "I doubt they'll realize it's missing."

"How do I explain that I'm still alive?" she asked as he landed in the alley behind the Daily Planet. He set her gently on her feet.

"I'll take care of that," he said. "If anyone asks, you and Kal decided to leave only a minute or so before it happened."

The he disappeared into the air faster than she could see.

*Lois Lane, how could you possibly have given that up for Richard?*

## **Jimmy**

### **Now:**

Jimmy glanced over to Penny, standing with the bridesmaids. She returned his glance, grinned at him. He hadn't realized how long a full-blown Roman Catholic wedding with all the bells and smells would be. Oh, he'd been warned it would be long, a lot longer than running off to the Justice of the Peace, or Vegas, but still... He wondered at how CK and Esther were holding up. Neither of them were people who craved the limelight. From all reports, CK was still more than content to be an investigative journalist, even though Jimmy was sure an offer for promotion to an editor's post had already come his way. Esther seemed content doing what she was doing, being an Air Force officer, mother and now wife to a journalist.

Archbishop Blackie started reciting the Lord's Prayer and the congregation started reciting along with him. It wasn't quite the translation that Jimmy had learned from his grandmother, but close enough. At least it wasn't in Latin. Clark had jokingly threatened to ask Blackie to do the mass in Latin. Esther had managed to talk him out of that, at least.

"For yours is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory Forever and ever, Amen"

The little Archbishop turned to the bride and groom and they joined hands. Even standing on the step above them, the Archbishop was much shorter than Clark. He was almost invisible behind the bride and groom.

"My dear friends, let us turn to the Lord and pray that he will bless with his grace Esther Krystin now married in Christ to Clark Joseph and that through the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, he will unite in love the couple he has joined in this holy bond."

A moment of silent prayer. Then the little Archbishop raised his hands for the blessing.

"Father, by your power you have made everything out of nothing. In the beginning you created the universe and made mankind in your own likeness. You gave man the constant help of woman so that man and woman should no longer be two, but one flesh, and you teach us that what you have united may never be divided.

"Look with love upon this woman, your daughter, now joined to her husband in marriage. She asks your blessing. Give her the grace of love and peace. May she always follow the example of the holy women whose praises are sung in the scriptures. May her husband put his trust in her and recognize that she is his equal and the heir with him to the life of grace. May he always honor her and love her as Christ loves his bride, the Church. Father, keep them always true to your commandments. Keep them faithful in marriage and let them be living examples of Christian life.

"Give them the strength which comes from the gospel so that they may be witnesses of Christ to others. Bless them with children and help them to be good parents. May they live to see their children's children. And, after a happy old age, grant them fullness of life with the saints in the kingdom of heaven.

"We ask this through Christ our Lord."

"Amen."

Maybe he could talk Penny into eloping.

### **Then:**

Clark had moved to Chicago. Then exactly four months later, Cat Grant took a job with Galaxy Broadcasting, working with Morgan Edge himself. Rumor had it, at least the rumors that didn't start out 'About time Perry got rid of that lush, did you hear...?' had it that Edge himself had made the offer for her to join his team. Cat was extraordinarily photogenic.

Jimmy knew there was more to her leaving than the rumor mill suggested. He'd seen Cat

with Perry in his office late, only a few days before she left. Jimmy had been working late as well, sorting through his proofs, trying to organize his mess. Cat and Perry had a long discussion. Jimmy couldn't hear what was being said, but he could read their expressions.

Perry was worried, like he usually was before Lois or any other reporter went out on a dangerous undercover assignment. Cat's expression was exactly the same as Lois's used to be when trying to talk Perry into letting her go on an undercover assignment that promised to run too many risks. There was no shouting, no outraged tears. Only concern from Perry and earnestness from Cat.

Then Cat simply didn't come into work the next Monday. Instead, she was on the WGBS news as a reporter. She'd toned down her wardrobe for the camera. Worsted suits in blue and gray, silk shirts and scarves instead of her usually garish, skin-tight outfits that left little to the imagination.

Lois was furious that Clark had left without saying good bye to her. Jimmy didn't bother to tell her that Clark had said good bye to his friends, and she was no longer considered among them.

Lois had grabbed onto the rumors about Clark and Cat, the nasty little comments about Clark's old habit of disappearing without rhyme or reason, Cat's alleged problem with alcohol. Lois had never been one to feed off the rumor mill, but Clark and Cat had gotten under her skin, especially the day the photo of Cat and Clark together showed up in the society column of the Daily Star with speculation that Clark Kent was Cat Grant's newest boy toy.

When Clark left, Jimmy had hoped Lois would calm down, stop sniping at her co-workers. When Cat left, Lois got a little better, but seeing Cat on the monitors five days a week... it took Lois a long time to get over that. But finally, things settled into place. Perry hired new people to fill the vacancies Clark and Cat had left. But Jimmy started to notice odd things. Perry would take calls and shut his office blinds for privacy. It was something he only did when he had something big on the fire, something he didn't want people to know about just yet.

Life went on.

\* \* \*

"Olsen!" Perry yelled from his office. They were both working late. The flu was going around the office and a number of reporters were down with it, leaving the rest to pick up the slack. Perry had even allowed Jimmy to write a few simple pieces for the third page.

Jimmy jumped at the sound of his name. "Yes, Chief?"

"WGBS is on fire," Perry told him. "Get down there, NOW!"

Jimmy grabbed his camera and some extra SD cards and ran to cover the story.

The Galaxy Communications Building was about a mile east of the Daily Planet. Traffic was tied up, probably from the emergency vehicles trying to get to the building. Jimmy stayed on foot -- it was faster than trying to find a cab in this mess. When he finally got there the fire was already out, although the upper three stories of the skyscraper were scorched, windows shattered. One upper corner looked like it was completely gone. He snapped off a dozen pictures.

He spotted something, someone, that hadn't been seen on the ground in Metropolis in over a year: Superman talking to the fire chief and police officers. He clicked his telephoto lens into place and focused on the hero. Through the camera he saw Superman looking back at him, and for a moment, Jimmy thought he saw a smile flicker across the Man of Steel's face. His expression went impassive once more and Jimmy pressed the shutter button. He got

several more shots of Superman before the superhero took off into the sky. *Perry is going to be so happy.*

Jimmy hurried back to the Daily Planet, to his desk to download the photos onto his hard drive for cropping.

The blinds to Perry's office were down, but Jimmy could see the shadow of a second person on the blinds. Perry opened his office door and looked out, spotting the young photographer.

"Olsen," Perry called. "In here please."

Jimmy all but ran to the office door. Something was definitely up. Perry never, *ever*, said 'please' to a staffer. He stepped inside and Perry shut the door behind him, making sure it was closed. Standing by Perry's desk was a woman wearing a gray suit that was covered in what looked like ash. Her hair was disheveled and also streaked with ash. She turned to look at him.

Cat Grant. In Perry's office.

"Jimmy, you used to be pretty good with computers," she said, pulling a hard-drive out of her purse. "Do you think you can access the data on this?"

"Where'd it come from?" Jimmy asked, taking the device from her hand.

"Never mind that," Perry told him. "Can you do it?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Maybe, but I know somebody who definitely can." Jimmy picked up the phone on Perry's desk and tapped in an extension. "Penny, Jimmy. Are you free for a while? Perry's got a hard drive that needs some help getting data off it."

Penny was in Perry's office within ten minutes. She and Jimmy had dated a few times, had hit it off. It was too early to tell yet, but Penny said she liked him and it was looking promising.

It took Penny about forty-five minutes to access the data on the hard drive. "Now, what are we looking for?"

"Anything incriminating," Cat said. Two hours later, Penny and Jimmy handed the woman an encrypted CD with the damning documents on them.

"Thanks, Jim," Cat said as she started to leave. "You kids be good to each other, okay?"

\* \* \*

Clark's series on the depredations of Intergang ran in the Chicago Star *and* the Daily Planet. It was picked up the next day in every major newspaper in the country. Within a week it was around the world.

Lois's reaction surprised Jimmy, though. She didn't seem angry that Clark had gotten the story out first, just resigned, almost as though she'd known it was going to happen. Jimmy knew Perry had given a copy of the incriminating files to her. He didn't know whether she even looked at them.

Cat Grant was not on WGBS evening news that following Monday. If Perry knew where she was, he wasn't saying.

\* \* \*

Jimmy checked his pocket for his wallet and passport as he stepped off the plane in Berlin at Berlin-Brandenburg International. He wasn't sure why Perry sent him along with Walter Smith to cover the Tazarastan peace conference, except that Superman was one of the key mediators between the warring parties. Smith was International; working under Richard White, Jimmy was just a photographer.

The press was being housed at the Mercure Hotel Berlin, not far from the Swissôtel, where the meetings were being held. The hotels were only a short train ride from the airport

and the E.U. customs agents at the airport had been polite and efficient. It was Jimmy's first time in the European city, but Smith had been here many times before and had promised Jimmy a tour of the town during their off hours.

Clark was waiting in the lobby of the Mercure for them. With him stood a tall blonde woman with blue eyes. She gave Clark a kiss on the lips. He murmured something to her. She smiled as Jimmy wove his way through the lobby toward them.

"CK! Great to see you!" Jimmy pulled the big man into a hug. He pulled back, a huge grin on his face. "Man, it's great to see you. You're looking good." Clark did look good, more relaxed, calmer, happier. Jimmy finally remembered his manners, holding his hand out to the woman. "Jimmy Olsen, Daily Planet."

"Esther Straker," she said. She turned to Clark. "See you tonight," she told him and kissed him again. Jimmy felt a pang of jealousy as she strode away. He and Penny were friends, working on moving to the next step.

"Way to go, CK," Jimmy said. Clark ducked his head and Jimmy thought the tall man was actually blushing.

"Oh, her?" Clark chuckled. "That was Major Straker. She's my... she's my fiancée." Jimmy almost laughed at the bemused expression on his friend's face. *Way to go, CK.*

## Martha

### Now:

The little Archbishop peered benignly at the congregation through his thick glasses, looking for all the world like an aging cherub with curly brown hair streaked with silver paint. "The peace of the Lord be always with you," he announced.

"And also with you," came the response.

"Let us all offer each other a sign of peace..."

Martha pulled Ben into a hug, giving him a quick peck on the cheek as she disengaged to reach across the back of the pew to shake hands with Clark's current boss and his wife, then Perry White. Martha recalled that Perry's wife had died nearly a year before. Perry took her hand, and then leaned forward to hug her.

"You have no idea how happy I am for him, for the both of them," he murmured to her. "They're good people."

"Thank you, Mister White."

He pulled back and shook Ben's hand. Martha reached out to Lois and her husband. The young man was polite, giving the Peace as custom dictated. The woman's response was perfunctory, as though she wanted to be somewhere else. Esther and Clark and the rest of the wedding party came down the aisle to give the Peace as well. Martha watched her son's delight at seeing Perry there, the careful shuttering of his expression when he was required to come into contact with Lois Lane-White.

"Congratulations," she heard the younger Mister White say.

Finally, everyone went back to their places for the next part. Archbishop Ryan made his way back to the altar, broke the large wafer.

"Lamb of God, You take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us. Lamb of God, You take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us. Lamb of God, You take away the sins of the world: grant us peace." The congregation sang along with the Archbishop and the choir.

Clark and Esther both knelt before the altar. Martha and Ben knelt on the padded kneeler that flipped down from the pew in front of them. Her knees hurt a little, but Ben grabbed her hand and gave it a tiny squeeze. The usher came to the end of their pew, indicating it was their turn to go up to the rail. Martha had been worried about going up, taking communion in a cathedral, but as Esther pointed out, *if there was only one right way to God, why were there so many places to find Him?*

Martha had always considered herself Protestant, even though religion hadn't been a major part of her life, even as a child. When Clark was a child, the family attended Sunday service more for Clark than for herself or Jonathan. A child should have some sort of religious upbringing they had told themselves and since the only church within fifty miles of the farm was Assembly of God, that's where they went. That's where Clark got baptized.

For Clark, on the other hand, Sunday school brought with it more questions than answers. The God they talked about in class didn't match the one the preacher orated about, nor the one he read about. Finally, she and Jonathan had let the subject of Sunday School drop, allowing him to sit with the adults during service until he was old enough to insist he didn't want to sit through Reverend Wallace's sermons any longer and was old enough to stay at home by himself. They managed to get him into church on the holidays, but after Jonathan died, she doubted Clark would ever darken the door of a church again.

As she stood to go back to her seat, Martha looked over at her son kneeling beside his bride. His head was bowed, his eyes hidden behind a shock of black hair that had fallen over



his glasses. She had the urge to go to him, brush the thick hair out of his face as she used to do when he was a boy.

*My baby is married.*

**Then:**

"Mom, you will not believe what's happened," Clark said over the phone. He sounded like a teenager.

"Well, don't leave me in suspense, honey," Martha instructed. Ben was sitting at the table across from her sipping his coffee, a bemused smile on his face.

"I've met someone."

"A girl, I hope."

"Mom!" he protested.

She laughed. "Tell me about her."

"Her name is Esther, and she's beautiful, intelligent, strong," he told her. "She's a good person."

"Complicated?" Martha asked, remembering how he had described Lois Lane so many years before. Before he left and then returned to Earth. Before she broke his heart. Before she ordered him out of her life, out *their* son's life.

"Of course she's complicated. She's a widow with a little boy and, well yeah, she's complicated."

"How did you meet her, son?" Ben asked on the extension.

"Remember that air force plane Superman rescued at the air show last month?" he asked.

Martha did remember the incident. It was one of the few rescues he'd done in the past six months or so that hadn't involved a natural disaster.

"The pilot was a woman, and we've been gone out a couple times," he said. "I know it's early and you're going to tell me not to rush things... but I think you'd like her."

"I'm sure I would," Martha said. "But Clark, be careful..."

Clark chuckled. "Considering my last relationship turned into a federal disaster, yeah, I'm being careful."

\* \* \*

Clark had been staring at the coffee in his cup, not speaking, just sitting at the kitchen table in Martha and Ben's kitchen in their cabin in Montana. Ben had gone to town for supplies, so she and her son were alone.

"So what happened? You told me you were going to meet her parents," she said, trying to get his attention. He looked over at her, eyes dark with confusion.

"I did. They flew in from Metropolis for some meetings, we had dinner with them. They seem like nice people..."

"But?" she prompted.

"But, then Esther's mom told me she knew I was Kryptonian the first moment she met me and Esther knew I was Kryptonian the second time *she* met me as Superman. They said it was something about my aura. That it's unique, whatever that means."

"Is it so bad that they know? I mean, wasn't that one of the problems you had with Lois? That you were afraid to share your secret with her?" Martha asked.

He nodded, finally sipping his coffee. He grimaced and stared at the cup a moment. Steam started to curl up from the cup. "It just hurts a little to think she's been laughing at me behind my back all this time."

"Clark, I'm sure she hasn't been laughing at you."

"Then why didn't she tell me earlier?"

"Maybe for the same reason you didn't tell her? Maybe she was as afraid of your reaction as you were afraid of hers?" She studied his face a long moment. He looked thoughtful. "Clark, there's something else, isn't there?"

He nodded. "I'm not the only alien on Earth," he said. "I'm the only Kryptonian, but Esther's people are from off-planet too, originally. She's fourth-generation Danaen-American. And there are other extra-terrestrials living here, too. They just forgot to tell Superman." He gave her a bemused look, as if he couldn't quite decide whether to burst into laughter or tears. "It's seriously weird to be on the receiving end of 'Uh, honey, I've been meaning to tell you, but I'm an alien from outer space.'"

He looked disconcerted when Martha laughed. "Oh, honey, why did any of us assume you were the only one? The universe is a big place."

"And there are more things in heaven and earth... I just needed a little time to get my head around this..." He finally smiled, chuckling. "The funniest part is, sort of, I was getting my courage up to tell her about Superman, and they beat me to it."

"So, what are you going to do now?"

He took a deep breath, expression thoughtful, and reached into his jeans pocket. He pulled out a small velvet covered jewelry box and flipped open the top. An engagement ring.

"Oh, Clark, it's beautiful," she said. It was a beautiful ring, elegant, understated. A simple platinum band, a pear-shaped blue-white diamond. "I'm afraid to ask how much it set you back."

"Most of the advance I got for the book on Intergang that I have to have to my publisher in six months."

\* \* \*

Martha looked around Clark's apartment. She hadn't seen his place in Chicago before. She hadn't seen his last place in Metropolis at all, and the one he had before he left for Krypton she'd only visited once, the last Christmas before he left.

He hadn't moved into one of the better neighborhoods in Chicago, but it was a nice building. The other tenants were young up and coming professionals looking for an inexpensive place to live near downtown.

It was a simple loft apartment in a converted warehouse. The off-white walls were covered with native art he'd collected in his travels and the wooden bookcases were filled to over-flowing. He didn't have much else in the way of furniture, a low table, a few leather chairs, an oak credenza with a small stereo system and a pile of CDs beside it. She recognized the rug on the hardwood floor as the one he'd brought back on one of his first overseas trips. From a village somewhere in Pakistan as she recalled. He'd tried to talk her into using the rug at the farm but she had refused. It was much too nice to have work boots tromping on it.

She settled into one of the chairs to wait. He'd left a short time before to get his fiancée and her son so she could meet them.

Clark had called her from the conference he was attending in Berlin to tell her that Esther had said yes, had accepted the ring. When he finally got back to Chicago after the end of the conference, he arranged for Martha to fly to Chicago for Mother's Day.

She heard a key turn in the door lock and looked up to see Clark come in, followed by a tall woman with pale blonde hair pulled into an elegant twist, and a small, dark-haired boy who peered at her shyly.

"Mom," Clark said, closing the door behind them. "I'd like you to meet Major Esther

Straker and her son Matthew. Esther, my mother, Martha Kent."

"How do you do, Missus Kent?"

Martha stood as Esther came closer. She took the younger woman's hands into her own. Her hands were cool, fingers long, nails trimmed short with clear polish. Hands that weren't afraid of work.

Martha decided she might like the woman who was taking her son away. *Maybe.*

## **Richard**

### **Now:**

To Richard's surprise, Lois joined him and Perry at the altar rail for communion. He knew that technically none of them should have gone up to the rail. They weren't Roman Catholic, but somehow he suspected the Archbishop wasn't going to call them on that.

He couldn't remember the last time Lois had even gone to church aside from their wedding. Richard took Jason to church on Sunday. Jason didn't especially like it, but he was resigned to it. Lois spent her Sunday mornings in the office even though it was technically her day off.

Richard and Jason had stopped going in to the Planet to join her for lunch, choosing to go flying instead. Jason loved going up in the plane. After only two years of marriage, Richard and Lois were further apart than they had been before their wedding.

The little Archbishop had come to the top of the altar steps again, peering out at everyone through his thick glasses. Then he settled on Clark and his new wife who had come to stand before him once again. He smiled broadly at them, as if overjoyed and a little surprised that they were there.

"May almighty God, with his Word of blessing, unite your hearts in the never-ending bond of pure love. May your children bring you happiness, and may your generous love for them be returned to you, many times over.

"May the peace of Christ live always in your hearts and in your home. May you have true friends to stand by you, both in joy and in sorrow. May you be ready and willing to help and comfort all who come to you in need. And may the blessings promised to the compassionate be yours in abundance.

"May you find happiness and satisfaction in your work. May daily problems never cause you undue anxiety, nor the desire for earthly possessions dominate your lives. But may your hearts' first desire be always the good things waiting for you in the life of heaven.

"May the Lord bless you with many happy years together, so that you may enjoy the rewards of a good life. And after you have served him loyally in his kingdom on earth, may he welcome you to his eternal kingdom in heaven.

"And may almighty God bless you all, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

He looked out at the congregation again. "May I present Mister and Missus Clark Joseph Kent!"

Clark leaned over to kiss his bride. She reached up and pulled him closer into a deep, sensuous kiss. Applause broke out as the pair came up for air and Clark held out his right arm for Esther.

Earlier Richard had noticed six uniformed air force officers in mess dress, white gloves and sabers standing with the wedding party. Now they moved away from the party, arranging themselves on either side of the aisle, sabers held upright at their right shoulders. A command from the last man on the left: "Present Sabers." The officers moved their sabers to in front of their faces, hilts at their chins.

"Arch sabers." Right arms were extended, wrists rotated so the cutting edge of the saber was up, away from the couple. The bride and groom walked under the arch, stopping just beyond the last officer.

"Present Sabers... Order Sabers... Carry sabers." Richard found himself smiling. At least they didn't swat Clark on the behind to welcome him into the military like they would have a

woman.

The recessional music began: *The Finale to Handel's Water Music*. The wedding party followed the Clark and Esther down the aisle.

Richard looked over at Lois. Her face was blank, frozen, but he thought he saw tears brightening her eyes.

*How the hell are we going to get through the reception? How the hell do we ask Clark Kent to ask Superman to help us again?*

**Then:**

Richard checked the business card in his hand against the brass nameplate on the office door. Barbara Lassiter, family psychology. He opened the door, and ushered Jason in.

The reception area was comfortable, functional, all beige and brown. A young woman sat at a desk behind an interior window. She looked up incuriously as he stepped closer, taking the clipboard she held out to him.

"Fill out both pages, please."

He sat down on the sofa next to Jason to fill out the paperwork.

"Isn't Mom supposed to meet us here?" Jason asked.

"She's supposed to, but you know how she gets when she's on a story," Richard told him. They both knew Lois wasn't likely to show up for this initial meeting with the psychologist. The only reason Lois had even given Richard the woman's business card was that the councilor at Jason's school had insisted Jason go see her.

"I guess Mom also forgot to tell Uncle Clark he needed be here," Jason said matter-of-factly. He was just seven, but sometimes he seemed far older than Richard.

"You're probably right," Richard admitted. "Your mom isn't real happy that Clark beat her out on a couple big stories. But it still wouldn't be easy for him to be here. He's overseas somewhere."

"Jimmy told me Clark has a girl friend, Esther something. She's a pilot."

"I've heard the same thing," Richard said. He finished filling out the form and handed it back to the receptionist. After a few minutes the inner door opened and a short, gray woman smiled at them.

"Mister White and Jason I presume?" Doctor Lassiter asked. "I don't see Missus White."

"She had to work late tonight," Richard told her. He assumed he wasn't lying, that Lois really was on a story and not just avoiding her responsibilities, avoiding facing the truth. The truth that things were falling apart. The truth that they had made a mistake.

He gently pushed Jason ahead of him as they headed into her office.

\* \* \*

"Lois, you promised Jason and me that you'd come to see Doctor Lassiter with us," Richard began. "You've promised us that every week for the past three weeks."

"You know I'm working on a big story and it's taking a while to put together," Lois told him. She brushed her hair back from her face. "I will go when I have time."

"Jason needs you there with him. *We* need you there," Richard insisted. "Jason isn't the only one with a problem here. I never see you anymore. Jason never sees you. We're supposed to be making a life together! Isn't that why we got married?" Richard found himself shouting at her.

Her cell phone chimed and she opened it, listened to the voice on the other end. "I'll be right there," she said, then folded up her phone. "I've got to meet a source. Don't wait up for me."

"Lois," he said as she grabbed her coat from where she'd thrown it on the sofa. "If Jason and I weren't here when you came home, would you even notice?"

She stopped and stared back at him. "We'll talk about this in the morning." She ran out the door.

"No we won't," Richard said to himself.

\* \* \*

Jason had woken up screaming. Richard ran into the boy's room to find him huddled in the corner, hands over his ears. Richard didn't wonder where his wife was. She had headed off to work early, or maybe she hadn't come home at all. He wasn't sure which.

"Jason, what's wrong? Tell me what's wrong." Richard asked, crouching in front of the boy.

"Make it stop," Jason moaned. "It's so loud, make it stop."

"Jason, listen to my voice, concentrate on my voice," Richard urged, keeping his voice soft. "Concentrate on my voice," he repeated.

After a several moments, Jason pulled his hands away from his ears, eyes wide with worry. "What happened, Dad?"

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

"Everything got really loud, like it was really close and I could hear things really far away, too," Jason explained. "And I couldn't stop it." Jason looked up at the man he'd always thought was his father. "Do you think that's how Superman hears?"

"I don't know," Richard admitted. "Maybe we can ask him, sometime."

"But Superman doesn't live here anymore," Jason reminded him. Jason put his hands over his ears again. "It hurts..."

Richard hurried to the master bedroom and grabbed his cell phone. He hoped he'd hadn't deleted the one number he was looking for, equally importantly, he hoped the number he had still worked.

Thankfully, the number was still in his phone.

"Kent here," the voice on the phone said after about three rings. *Thank God.*

"Clark, it's Richard White," Richard announced. *Don't hang up!* "I need to get hold of Superman." He said it in a rush, trying to get the words out before Clark hung up on him.

"Why? What's wrong?" Clark asked.

"Jason," he said. "A few minutes ago he started to hear things, like he has super-hearing. I don't know how to help him."

"Where's Lois?"

"I don't know," Richard admitted. "Can you get a message to him?"

Almost as if in answer, there was a tapping on glass. Superman was hovering outside the locked window. Richard opened the lock and threw open the window. Superman floated into the room, settling silently to the floor. He knelt on the floor beside Jason, his crimson cape flowing onto the floor. Superman pulled Jason's hands away from his ears.

"Jason, can you hear your dad's heartbeat? Find your dad's heartbeat..."

Jason nodded, eyes wide as he watched Superman's face.

"Concentrate on his heartbeat; block everything else out but that sound..."

Richard watched Jason relax, relief evident in his face.

The other man stood up, one effortless, graceful motion, and helped Jason to his feet. "Now all you need to do is practice. Blocking the sounds, picking out the important ones. Your dad's heartbeat will be your anchor."

"Is that how you do it?" Richard asked softly. "There's a heartbeat you listen for? That you use as an anchor?"

Superman looked at him and Richard felt the inhumanly blue eyes watching, studying him. When he started speaking, Richard had to strain to hear.

"When I first came to Metropolis, it was so loud, so confusing. I thought I was going to lose my mind. Then I found a heartbeat that I could use as a beacon, as an anchor. That was my compass until the day I left Metropolis to find Krypton. That was the sound I listened for when I came back."

Richard found himself afraid to ask the next question. "Do you still listen for it?"

"No," he said very quietly. "She got married and I was a complication she didn't need. Definitely one she didn't want around."

The silence between them was heavy, pregnant. Richard half expected Superman to vanish out the window.

"Before you go, what's the next thing I should expect?"

Superman gazed at Jason and Richard mentally kicked himself for not seeing it earlier. They had the same eyes. Oh, the resemblance to Clark Kent was there in the face, the body language, but there was no doubt in Richard's mind who Jason's real biological father was. *Did Clark know he wasn't Jason's father?*

"Vision will probably be next, telescopic, microscopic, x-ray," Superman said. "Heat vision shouldn't show up for a few years, sometime around puberty, I should guess. You'll want to get him glasses with flint glass lenses. It'll help remind him to focus on the visible light frequencies."

"Is that why...?" Jason started then he stopped as Superman raised an eyebrow. *They have a secret.*

"Your strength was coming in over a year ago," Superman said. "What about speed?"

"I'm getting pretty fast," Jason admitted. "But I make sure I don't go too fast."

"Good," Superman said. "Remember, humans fear what's too different, what they don't understand. Fear can make them dangerous. You're very fortunate to have your Mom and Dad. They understand quite a lot."

"I know," Jason said, matching Superman's solemnity. "Thank you, father."

Superman bent down and kissed Jason on the top of his head. "Good bye, son. Remember, you are never alone."

Then he was gone. The only sign of his having been there at all was the open window and Jason's tears.

*What are we going to do? We're raising Superman's son! And Lois didn't say anything.*

## Clark

### Now:

The limousine was waiting to take them to the reception at the Lakeside Westin. The driver and Clark both waited as Esther fell into the back seat, pulling off her shoes. Clark followed her into the car, settling in beside her as Bruce and Cat climbed in with Adam and Matthew.

"So far so good," Bruce announced. "Now it's just five hours of reception to get through."

Clark turned to his new bride. "Remind me again why we didn't elope?"

Esther giggled. "My mother. For some bizarre reason, considering how long it took for her to get sanctioned by the church and state, she decided her daughter's wedding was going to be a no holds barred affair. For that matter she's still not completely convinced we didn't have to get married. Dad doesn't really care. He's just glad I found somebody he can tolerate and a party means he can show off to all his old buddies."

"Your father tolerates him?" Bruce asked with a grin.

"Let's put it this way," Esther told him. "I'd better make this work because I've already been warned. If we break up after all this, they're keeping *him*."

"Somehow that worries me," Clark told her. "Maybe we should have waited until we had to get married."

"Do people even do that these days?" Cat wondered aloud. "I mean, getting married because they *have* to? I know they're doing the other stuff."

"I have no idea," Clark admitted. "I'm just glad Lieutenant Austin didn't decide to swat me with that blasted blade and welcome me into the Air Force."

Esther giggled again, swatting his arm. "Welcome to the Air Force, Mister Straker... He *was* thinking it really loud."

Clark raised an eyebrow at her.

"I was not reading his mind," she protested. "It was just too obvious."

The limousine pulled up to the main entrance of the hotel. The car was abruptly surrounded by men and women with cameras and microphones.

"Time to smile for the photographers, Boy Scout," Bruce announced.

"Have I told you how much I hate paparazzi?" Clark wondered aloud.

"Incessantly," Cat commented, as the chauffeur opened the door and let them out. She smiled and flirted with the cameras. "Come along boys and girls. It's show time."

### Then:

"Cat, how are you?" Clark asked as she walked into the newsroom of the Chicago Star, carrying her travel bag. She gave him a tremulous smile, then pulled him into a hug.

"Thanks for sending Kal to help, Clark. He saved my life, you know," she said.

"So I've heard," Clark admitted. "So, are you okay?"

She nodded. "I've been reading your series. When I suggested going after Edge, I never imagined what else he was involved in. Joe's dead, you know. He was in the building when the bomb went off, in the office below Edge's. Who knows what he was doing there?"

"Kal didn't mention seeing anyone there," Clark told her. "But he did say there was a lot of lead paint in the building."

"And Kal doesn't do so well with lead," Cat added. "Yeah, I read everything Lois wrote about him. He's cute, but I kinda' think I like your type better."

"My type?" Clark managed to say. Cat could be completely outrageous at times.

"Yeah, the quiet, wholesome, shy type," she told him with a grin.



"I have somebody," he reminded her. "I'm meeting her parents tonight."

"Oh, well," Cat said. "At least she knows a good catch when she sees him, unlike other people I know."

He was trying hard not to show the pang of pain he felt at the mention of 'the other woman,' but the softening of her expression told him he had failed miserably. She patted his arm gently.

"By the way," she continued, obviously changing the subject. "With Joe dead, my lawyer is working on getting Adam away from Joe's mother. It's looking promising."

"Glad to hear that," Clark told her. He really was glad for her. Cat Grant, for all her past reputation, was a good woman, and a good friend. "So, what are you doing in Chicago this time?"

"I can't stay in Metropolis, too much has happened," she said. "Perry put in a good word for me with Mike, so here I am."

"Mike's office is right over there," Clark told her, pointing out the office of Mike O'Hanlon, editor of the Chicago Star.

"Wish me luck."

"Cat, you know you make your own luck," Clark told her. She gave him a cheeky wink and sauntered into Mike O'Hanlon's office. Clark couldn't help but notice the eyes that followed her into the office and he allowed himself a grin. *Windy City, here comes the Cat. Chicago will never know what hit it.*

\* \* \*

The Chicago Star building didn't have the panache of the Daily Planet. The building itself was plain, no art deco guardians, no ornate globe announcing its presence to the world. It was utilitarian, with little flair beyond its massive stone and glass facade. But like the Planet before it, Superman made the top of the building his perch as he watched the city.

He wasn't Chicago's guardian like he'd been for Metropolis. Metropolis had survived his moving on, away from it. He wasn't going to get caught playing favorites again. He still wasn't sure if Luthor's attempt to destroy Metropolis nearly eighteen months before had been an insane attempt at revenge against the city for seeing the madman as he was or if it was punishment for his, Superman's, presence there. He was inclined to believe it was a little of both.

Lex Luthor was dead. He'd confirmed that much personally. The Cuban ambassador to the Congress of Nations had come to the Daily Planet, looking for Clark Kent and Lois Lane. Lois had been out of the newsroom on a breaking story. Clark spoke to the ambassador alone, promising to contact Superman for him.

It was Superman who went down to Cuba -- Clark Kent would never have been allowed. The Feds were still doing a half-hearted attempt to verify his presence in South America for five plus years, but he'd planned his story fairly well. Small mountain villages kept lousy records and weren't inclined to cooperate with their own governments, much less the U.S.

He verified that the body in the Cuban prison morgue was in fact Alexander Luthor, the sociopathic criminal mastermind that had tried to destroy the United States not once but twice. The current U.S. regime was labeling Luthor a terrorist, but that wasn't correct. Terrorists had political agendas, terrorists could be understood if you tried. Luthor hadn't cared about politics. He hadn't cared about money, really, except for the power it could buy.

What Luthor had craved was power, the power to create fear, the power to create awe. Awe in his alleged superior intellect, his superior ambition. He had considered himself a

Nietzschean superman, so far above the common herd that morality -- law -- had no binding on him. Would-be tyrants loved Nietzsche, Clark mused from his perch.

In return for confirmation that the man they'd killed was in fact Lex Luthor, a Cuban official had given Superman the crystal Luthor'd had hidden in the lining of his coat. The crystal had glowed green at Superman's touch -- the Father Crystal containing the knowledge of twenty-eight galaxies in compressed and encrypted form. He knew the official had seen tears in his eyes at the sight of what he'd been sure had been lost forever.

"What would you like me to do for you?" Superman had asked.

The Cuban had looked at him solemnly. "I am sure you have heard that *El Presidente* is ill?"

"Yes," Superman said.

"He is not expected to live. Six months, a year perhaps," he was told. "It is hoped that upon his death, the United States government would feel that talks are in order."

"I'm not a member of the government," Superman reminded him. "But assuming *El Presidente's* successor is amenable to talking, I'll do what I can to bring that to the world's attention."

"That's all we dare ask," the official told him before he flew off, back to Metropolis, back to face Lois and her growing hatred of Clark Kent. He hid the crystal within the Fortress of Solitude, burying it with the structure. He would come back later and recreate the rest of the lost memory crystals, power up the Fortress.

Clark wrote the article detailing Luthor's death at the hands of the Cuban Navy, including the exclusive interview with Superman on his dealings with the Cuban government, the fact that the Cubans had been able to do what the U.S. government had failed to do so many times. They'd put a stop to Lex Luthor's depredations, even if it had required a summary execution. He also mentioned the recovery of one of the stolen crystals. He didn't specify which one, or what Superman had promised in return. The article was on the front page, above the fold, again. *Lex Luthor Is Dead*, the headline screamed.

Lois had been furious, again.

From his perch on the Chicago Star, Clark Kent reflected on the past fifteen months, since his move to the Planet's sister paper. Was the world a better place? His was, that much he knew.

*I need to tell Esther about Superman, he decided. I won't do to her what I did to Lois, even if it means losing her. I can't keep living the secret.*

\* \* \*

"Esther, do you really think they'll like me?" he asked her. He'd met and interviewed presidents, prime ministers, dictators, tyrants of all stripes, psychopaths, sociopaths, perpetrators and victims, but none made him nearly as worried as meeting his girl friend's parents.

"Just stay way from U.S. politics and they'll love you," she advised him with a grin. He marveled at how beautiful she was -- not the dark-haired winter that Lois was, hard and edgy, strong yet brittle in her strength. Esther was Spring. Soft warmth and promises of newness coupled with the storms that cleared away the detritus so the land could renew itself.

"Esther, later, there's something I need to talk to you about," he told her.

"Cat's moving to town and she wants her boy toy back? Not happening, boy scout," she told him.

"It's not that, I promise," he assured her. "She has to find another boy toy. I'm taken." *I*

hope.

\* \* \*

Dinner was at *Chez Bon*, at the top of one the skyscrapers overlooking the lake. The general and his wife were waiting for them in the bar.

Clark had seen photos of them in Esther's apartment. Elizabeth Straker was a stunning woman, tall with auburn hair streaked with silver, green eyes. If Esther was Spring, her mother was Autumn.

General Edward Straker had finely sculpted features that would have served him well at the box office. He had been a fighter pilot in Viet Nam, a test pilot, an astronaut, a film studio executive, head of EPRAD. For her part, Elizabeth Komack Straker'd had a notable career in scientific research as well as business. She'd spent many years managing the film studio her husband had founded, although Clark suspected there was more there than was publicly admitted. He suspected the same was true for her husband -- military career officer to business man, then back to military officer was not the usual career path for a four star general.

"You must be Clark," General Straker said, getting up and shaking Clark's hand. He was shorter than Clark had expected, only about five-ten, then he recalled that the men chosen early on to be astronauts were not tall men. "Esther's told us so much about you."

"Some of it good, I hope," Clark managed to get out.

Elizabeth chuckled. "Oh yes." She was watching him with a peculiar expression, almost as though she was trying to place him, as though they had met before. Clark was certain they hadn't. One of the advantages of an eidetic memory.

Dinner was pleasant. At least they didn't hate him. Lois's general father had held Clark in open disdain. They asked about the newspaper business, his travels. He hadn't realized how much he'd told Esther of his travels before college, or how much she remembered. They stayed away from politics.

After dinner they went over to their suite at the Majestic.

"Esther, have you had a chance to tell him about what we've talked about?" Elizabeth asked her daughter as the general swiped the key card to open the door.

Esther looked guilty. "We were going to talk tonight."

"Hmm." Elizabeth gave Esther a sidelong glance as they entered the hotel suite. She turned to Clark. "I'd offer you a drink, if I thought it would help."

Clark chose not to comment as Elizabeth went to the suite's bar and poured two drinks. She handed one to Esther. She glanced at her husband who shook his head. Clark recalled Esther saying her father didn't drink.

"So, what did you want to talk about later?" Clark asked. There was something odd going on. He knew *he* had secrets, at least one big one, but he hadn't suspected Esther of having any. He'd thought they were friends at least and had hoped they were more.

"Probably the same thing you wanted to talk about," Esther said, watching him carefully. "At least I suspect so. You know there are aliens on Earth, don't you?"

"I know there's one," Clark said. "Superman."

"You're not the only one, Clark," Esther told him. "There are at least five other humanoid races that have taken refuge on Earth. The Danaen, the Rokan-shou, the Aurisans, the Chou-chin, and the Mell-da'ash. Mom and Dad and I are Danaen."

"You look perfectly human," Clark observed. *You're not the only one, Clark.*

"We are perfectly human. Our ancestors originally came from Earth," Elizabeth told him. "As I suspect yours did."

"Mine?" Clark squeaked, pushing his glasses up his nose. He didn't believe what was happening. There were other aliens on Earth and Esther and her parents were among them? *You're not the only one, Clark.*

"Clark, you can't hide your aura. It's unique, and it's Kryptonian," Esther told him. "I can even see the scar Luthor left on your back. It shows as a sort of gray spot in your energy field."

Clark straightened up and took off his glasses. He knew that he was admitting they were right. It no longer mattered. He couldn't hide. *They know.* "How long have you known?"

"I figured it out the moment you walked into the bar with Esther," Elizabeth said.

"And I figured it out the second time I met Superman," Esther told him.

Clark sat down in one of the chairs. He looked over at Esther's father, the only one who hadn't said anything. He was simply sitting and watching.

"And how long have you known?"

Edward shrugged. "Oh, I've suspected since about 1976 or so. But officially, I found out just now. I don't see auras they way they do. I'm not sure if it's a sex-linked thing or not."

Clark swallowed hard. "What do you intend to do?"

Edward raised one eyebrow. "Absolutely nothing. Superman's been on my watch list since he first showed up in Metropolis. Nothing malevolent. It's just nice to know where the players are and what they're up to."

"I... I need a little time to process this," Clark said. He couldn't decide if he was hurt, angry, disappointed, or all three. In the space of five minutes, his world had come apart again. Not as bad as when Lois decided she wasn't merely rejecting Superman but hated Clark as well, but bad enough. *The government knows who I am. I have no place to hide.*

"Clark, if you're worried that this information will get out, you don't need to be," Edward told him. "My people keep an eye on over a quarter million extra-terrestrials and their descendants living on Earth. It's nobody else's business who they are so long as their technology doesn't get away from them. And I understand that in your case, Luthor took extraordinary measures to steal it and misuse it. You're not being held responsible for his actions."

"Thank you, sir," Clark said. "Look, this has all been a bit much to take in... I... I have to go." He headed for the door.

"Clark?" Esther called, worry in her voice

"I'll call you later," he promised and closed the door behind him. He could hear Esther crying inside the room, could hear her mother trying to comfort her.

*She didn't trust me enough to tell me she knew and that she was different too? She didn't trust me.*

## **Esther**

### **Now:**

Esther hunted for her shoes on the floor of the limousine as the driver held the door open and the others got out. She finally found them, slipping them on as she followed the rest of her party into the hotel. She hated those shoes. They hurt her feet and she wondered if anyone would notice if she went through the reception in stocking feet.

The cocktail party preceding the reception had already started, but that's not where they were headed. Hors d'oeuvres and drinks, in this case soda pop, were served. It wouldn't do for the wedding party to faint from hunger before the buffet started.

The session with the photographer took a while. Adam, Matthew and Rebecca were already tired and cranky.

Finally, the official wedding photos were handled and it was time to go to the reception.

"Ready, boy scout?" Esther asked. It was hard for her to believe it had finally happened. She and Clark were actually married.

Martha Kent, Esther's parents and the rest of the wedding party assembled itself again to enter the reception room: Esther's parents, Martha, the bridesmaids and groomsmen in pairs, Cat and Bruce, Adam and Rebecca, followed by Esther and Clark.

The honor guard assembled itself again in front of the door, waiting. Esther and Clark paused as the rest of the party entered. Waited for the arch to be formed. Esther gave Lieutenant Austin a warning glare and he managed to look contrite. *If you dare embarrass me, I'll have your liver for lunch*, she thought at him. She knew he couldn't hear her, but he did manage to flinch away from her as she passed.

"Esther," Clark muttered into her ear. "You don't need the scare the kid out of his wits."

"Are you a telepath too, now?" she asked softly.

"No, but it's pretty obvious he's terrified," Clark said, still smiling as if amused. "And you were thinking it pretty loudly."

"Fear is a good thing," she said softly, grinning as she pulled him down to kiss him.

"Especially for green lieutenants."

### **Then:**

"Clark, are you okay?" Esther asked. He looked at her, as if not quite sure if he was okay or not. He'd just come back from covering a land slide in China. She didn't ask how he managed to get to China and back so quickly. She knew, even if he didn't know she did. They didn't talk much about Superman and she knew he assumed she thought he simply interviewed the superhero after the fact, or got a ride to the disasters with Superman. She knew that's what his coworkers thought.

*I have to tell him soon. Tell him I know about him, tell him about me, about the others.*

He'd finished his article on the disaster and had filed it, but he'd also allowed her to read the story. He didn't often do that. She suspected he was a little embarrassed that other people thought so highly of his work, including her.

He'd covered the disaster, both the causes and the results -- one hundred twenty-two school children dead, thirty-three teachers and parents. An entire generation in one small town that made its livelihood from mining, gone within a minute. A repeat of Aberfan Wales October 1966, when a hill of coal slag came down and buried an entire school, killing a different generation. Nearly forty-two years later and across the world, there'd been no change, no one learned, no one cared.

As fast as Superman had gotten there, it was already too late. The simple block buildings

had collapsed, unable to withstand either the initial quake that started the slide, or the tons of slag that had come down. The earthquake has so minor it had caused no other damage.

He was staring off into space and she suspected he was lost in the horror of his recent experience. Did anyone else know how badly these things affected him? Did everyone else assume he simply walked away from the face of death without feeling anything? That he just flew off to the next disaster?

"Clark?"

"I'm sorry," Clark said. He focused on her face and tried to smile.

It was Friday and it was her turn to do dinner. Usually they went out and then took in a movie or a play. This time she'd made dinner for them at her apartment. Matthew was sitting in his oak youth chair at the table, waving his spoon about as he tried to figure out how to get his spaghetti into his mouth without using his fingers. Finally he gave up and the hands went into the pasta on his plate.

"Oh well, so long as he can use the flatware before he heads to college," she said with a laugh. Her expression turned more solemn as she regarded Clark. "I saw the disaster on the news. It looked bad."

"It was," Clark told her. "I don't understand how the authorities there could have allowed that to happen. Why haven't they learned?"

"Because bureaucrats are the same all over. Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah," Clark told her. "It's always bad when there are kids involved. All he could do was help dig out bodies. Bodies of boys and girls Jason's age, kids only a few years older than Matthew."

She took a deep breath. "Clark, let's not go out tonight. We can watch a DVD here."

"What did you have in mind?" he asked, taking a sip of wine he'd brought for dinner.

"Something light, unless you want to watch a Bond film," she suggested. He shook his head. "The **Producers**?"

"Which one?"

"The original?"

He nodded and a little of the bleakness left his eyes.

Matthew was asleep before the movie was over and it was Clark who put him into his crib. Matthew had taken to Clark almost immediately and now after five months, Matthew probably thought Clark was his daddy. When they were out together, people would comment at how good Clark was with his 'son.'

*I have to tell him.*

She put on some music, **Dream**, by Kitaro. It was one of his favorites. She sat down on the sofa beside him, pulling her legs under her. He was warm. That was something she'd noticed when she first met him. His core temperature was high enough to be considered fever. It was just how he was.

He leaned toward her, giving her a gentle kiss. He was so gentle. She pulled him to her, their kiss growing in passion. "You know you don't have to go home tonight," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

\* \* \*

"Mom, I've lost him," she said to her mother. Tears ran down her face. Clark had just walked out and he could now be anywhere on the planet. Superman wasn't bound by national boundaries or terrain.

He'd been shocked when he was told that she and her parents were aliens, that there were aliens living on Earth and had been for many years. She'd heard how ragged his breathing had become when he realized that she and her parents knew that he was Kryptonian, that he was Superman. He'd actually gone white when he realized that her father, General Straker, not only knew but was part of the government. The U.S. government knew about him.

*He's gone. I've lost him.*

"Honey, I know it's cliché, but they do say 'If you love something...' her father said. It didn't make her feel better.

*He's gone. I've lost him.*

\* \* \*

He didn't call. She left messages, but he didn't call. Finally, Esther decided to take the bull by the horns. She went over to the Chicago Star newsroom to look for him.

Cat Grant spotted her coming out of the elevators. "Esther?" Cat called, running over to her. "What's happened, what's wrong?"

Esther knew she looked awful. She hadn't slept since he took off last Monday. "Have you heard from Clark?"

Cat's eyes widened. "You guys had a fight? Are you okay?"

"No, we didn't have a fight, exactly," Esther tried to explain. "I'd been meaning to tell him something and I finally did, or me and my mom did. He didn't take it very well."

"You're not pregnant, are you?" Cat asked. "I know he's a little skittish sometimes, but..."

"No, it's not that," Esther assured her. "Nothing like that."

"So, what was it?" Cat asked gently. "Clark's usually pretty level headed..."

"I know, but I'm worried. I haven't heard from him since Monday night and I... He was so upset when he left, Cat," she said. She hadn't meant to start crying again.

Cat led her through the newsroom to Mike's office. Esther had met Mike O'Hanlon once before, on her first visit to the bullpen. She'd liked him. He reminded her of her dad's pal, Alec Freeman, a big teddy bear of a man.

Mike looked up as the two women entered his office.

"Chief, do you know where Clark is right now?" Cat asked him.

"Embedded with the Congress of Nations' WMD team in Tazarastan," Mike told her. "What's wrong?"

Cat nodded her head in Esther's direction. "Clark and Esther had a tiff and she got worried when she didn't hear from him."

"I was wondering why he agreed to go so fast, aside from it being Tazarastan," Mike commented. "I know how much he hates going into war zones... Oh, I know he's no coward. I think it's more the futility of the whole thing that bites at him. I assume he's told you he's on one of the Pulitzer committee's short lists for a prize for his work on background of that whole fockin' mess."

Esther didn't hear him. One of the curses of the Danaen kicked in. A vision of horror, a not so distant time that folded into now. A future time, unless the paths were altered. The past had a different feel.

*Clark laying bleeding, dying, on pale rocky soil surrounded by the dead in CN uniforms, surrounded by angry men in brown uniforms. 'Call for Superman,' the angry men were saying. Clark shook his head, even though it was obviously an effort. One of the angry men raised his rifle and...*

"Esther?" Cat asked, shaking her shoulder. From Cat's expression she knew the horror she

felt was reflected in her face.

"We have to get him out of there," Esther choked out. "He's walking into a trap."

Mike gave her an odd look, as though he believed her but wasn't sure why he should. He picked up the phone on his desk and tapped in a number from memory. "Clark has a satellite phone with him," Mike explained. "At least he should have it, I hope." After a few moments: "Clark? Mike... something's come up here..." He handed the phone to Esther.

"Clark, get out of there right now, it's a trap," she said.

"Esther?" he asked, confusion obvious in his voice. "What's going on? How do you know?"

"One of my 'gifts,'" she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "I'll explain it when I see you back here. But right now, one of factions is laying a trap for Superman and you're the intended bait." She could almost hear the worry, the confusion, spinning in his head.

"You know that Superman refuses to enter war zones," Clark told her.

"Just because you know it and I know it doesn't mean they believe it," she argued. "Get out of there now!"

In the background she heard voices, then Clark saying to someone: "My paper's just gotten an intel report. This is a trap. One of the factions is in there waiting for us."

"But..." one of the background voices began.

"We're advised to come back with reinforcements," Clark told them. "The main bunker is lead-lined," Clark said into the phone. His voice was low, as if he didn't want to be over heard. "How did you know?"

"Clark, never mind that," she said. "Just get your butt out of there."

"I have a story to write," he argued. "I do know how to be careful."

"Clark, I want you out of there now," Mike announced, taking the phone from her. "I want you to call me from the airport and I want you back here as soon as the next plane can get you here, if not sooner. No story is worth your life. We'll let GNN cover it."

Esther heard Clark sigh on the other end. "Understood. I'm heading out of here. I'll call you when I reach the capital."

"Feeling better?" Cat asked Esther.

"I don't know."

\* \* \*

"How did you know?" Clark asked. He'd shown up in Chicago only a few hours after Mike had ordered him back. He'd told Mike that Superman had checked out the area from high altitude and confirmed the 'intel' report. After Clark had left the scene, the WMD team had apparently decided to go ahead with their inspection. They were now dead, the GNN video team with them. The final video feed from the GNN camera confirmed that the faction involved not only had a nuclear device, they had kryptonite as well.

Congress of Nation forces were being mustered to go in a clean up the mess, the Tazarastan government was in shambles -- the nuclear device and the 'rebel' forces had been traced back to them.

Superman gave Clark a lift back to Chicago -- at least that was Clark's explanation. Esther didn't know how much of it Mike believed.

"My people have 'gifts' too," Esther told him, not meeting his gaze. They were in back booth of the deli not far from the Star.

"A little easier to hide than yours I suspect," she continued. "But occasionally useful. Clark, I saw you die, and the feeling was that it was immanent." She finally looked over at him.



He was watching her with open curiosity. "I probably shouldn't have gone to your boss with it, but I didn't see any other way."

"How long have you known?" he asked.

"That I'm not *normal*? All my life, really," she said. "I had flashes even as a child. Portents of the future, the past. I should have told you sooner. Hell, my father should have contacted you the first week you showed your face in Metropolis."

"Why didn't he?"

"The psychological profile his people put together on you indicated you might not handle government interference very well. At least that's what he told me."

"Your father did a psychological profile on me?" Clark managed to ask.

"Not personally, no," she said. "And before you ask, I haven't seen it. It's classified and I don't have high enough clearance."

Silence.

"Clark?"

He sighed. "I'm sorry I took off like that," he said, finally. "It was just a little bit of a surprise."

"Clark, you turned white," she told him. "I didn't think that was even possible for you."

"We have a lot to work on," he admitted.

"Well, I guess trust is a big issue for us E.T.s. My dad nearly freaked when he found out in '84. That he was an E.T. defending the planet from invading hostile E.T.s."

"I'm not an invader," he said, a touch defensively.

"No, you're a refugee, just like the rest of us," she explained softly. "Some of us have been here for generations, some only a few years. But we're all survivors. And we all bring something to the mix" She smiled tentatively. "Some more than others."

He didn't seem to notice, watching the bubbles rising to the surface of his glass of beer. "So, where do we go from here?"

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

"I have a bad habit of running, hiding," he said. "When things got strange after high school, I took myself around the world. I left anytime people started to suspect there was something odd. In Metropolis, I had the disguise, but when things got iffy with Lois, I left, again. I told myself I needed to find my roots. I needed to find myself. When I came back, things got even worse and I left again. I'm tired of running away."

"So stop running," she said.

"Easier said than done. A lifetime of bad habits."

"Then let's just take it one day at a time," she suggested.

"Today I will not flake out?"

"That works," she said softly.

He gave her a troubled look. "Esther, you're looking at a man who fell in love with a woman arrogant enough to seduce Superman. A woman who was arrogant enough to tell him to bugged off when he came back and disrupted her life."

"Clark Kent, you are sitting in a deli in Chicago sitting across from a woman who is arrogant enough to prefer an award winning journalist over a superhero," she said with a grin.

He finally smiled at her. "I do know how to pick 'em, don't I?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet covered jewelry box. He flipped open the top. A simple platinum band, a pear-shaped blue-white diamond.

"This isn't exactly the way I'd planned it, but, um, Major Straker, would you do me the

honor of becoming my bride?"

"Why, Mister Kent. I would be honored."

## Lois

### Now:

Lois watched as the receiving line assembled itself just inside the ballroom reserved for the reception. The second saber arch had been an interesting touch and Lois had caught the threatening look the bride had shot at one of the young officers. She'd chuckled quietly at the look of terror on the young man's face. *Trust timid ol' Clark to get hitched to a woman who could make pilots blanch with a look.*

Mother of the bride, father of the bride, the bride, the groom, mother of the groom, maid of honor, best man. Clark and Bruce were by far the tallest, towering over everyone else. Lois noted that Clark wasn't slouching at all as he greeted the guests coming through the line and there was no trace of the stammering timidity she had associated with him for so long. His tuxedo was as impeccably tailored as Bruce Wayne's. *How long has Clark known the Prince of Gotham? The man hates the press. But he's a friend of Clark's.*

Lois took a moment to study Clark, and his new bride. At the ceremony, Lois had mostly an impression of the bride. An impression of a fairy tale princess in satin and Irish lace. On closer look, the bride -- *Esther?* -- was still a fairy tale princess. High cheekbones, perfect peaches and cream complexion, blonde hair pulled into a French braid, blue eyes, almost as blue as Clark's eyes. *Had Clark's eyes always been so impossibly blue?*

Richard took her elbow, interrupting her observation of the newlyweds. Perry was already shaking General Straker's hand. Lois had to hurry to keep up with Richard as he joined the line. She heard him murmur introductions, congratulations.

Then it was Lois's turn to run the gauntlet.

"I'm Elizabeth Straker, Esther's mother," the mother of the bride said. Lois couldn't even guess her age, but there was little doubt as to where Esther got her looks. The woman was stunning, bringing to mind Deborah Kerr and Maureen O'Hara.

"Lois Lane-White," Lois introduced herself. "Clark's partner when he was at the Daily Planet."

"Ah, yes," Elizabeth said with a smile. Lois wondered what, if anything, Clark had told them about her. She was afraid to ask, afraid to find out what Clark really thought of her after what she'd done to him.

"General Edward Straker, Esther's father," the father of the bride said with a smile. "Lois Lane, right?"

Lois nodded.

"I enjoy reading your work," he said.

"Thank you," Lois responded. Few people remembered who wrote the articles they liked. "Maybe we can talk when we both get back to Metropolis."

"Maybe," Straker said. "We'll see."

On to the bride. "Congratulations," Lois told her. "I hope you realize what a catch you made."

"I know," Esther assured her. But there was, maybe, too much self-assurance there. *What does she know that I missed?* She moved on.

"Congratulations, Clark," Lois said. "I mean that."

"Thank you, Lois," Clark responded. "By the way, *she's* a pilot, and she doesn't much like horror movies."

"Touché," Lois murmured. "I guess I deserved that." She took a deep breath, trying to gauge his mood, his reaction. *Once upon a time, I wouldn't have worried about how he'd*

*react.* "Before you and Esther leave today, Richard and I need to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Jason, and Superman."

**Then:**

"Lois, please believe me when I tell you I never would have left if I'd known you were pregnant," Superman told her.

"Do you mind telling me how that happened?" Lois asked. She was trying not to be angry with him, trying not to snap at him. But too much had happened. He had disappeared for more than five years then come back, apparently expecting everything to have stayed the same for him, that the world would forgive his betrayal.

The world might forgive him. But she wasn't sure she could. She thought she might be able to when she saw him wounded but still flying into battle, flying away from her to save the world. She thought she might be able to when he fell to earth and she thought he was dying. She told him Jason was his son. It was the least she could do for the man who'd single-handedly saved billions of lives.

He looked nervous as he regarded her, the two of them standing on the roof of the Daily Planet. He wouldn't meet her eyes. "I thought I could have you. I thought I could live as a 'normal' man, have a 'normal' life. I thought wrong, and when I tried to make it right, allow you to go back to your life without remembering what happened, I made it so much worse. You told me you couldn't take having to share me with the world, never being able to tell anyone about us. It never occurred to me anything more could have happened. I didn't think it was possible."

"You didn't think? Well, that part is right," she spat. "You decided to *allow* me to go back to my life, you decided without consulting me?"

"You said it was killing you," he told her. The regret in his voice was palpable. "I thought I was doing what you wanted. I didn't know about Jason. It never occurred to me."

"It never occurred to you?" Lois found herself screaming. "We have sex and you decide I don't need to remember it? How do I know that I even agreed to it? How do I know you didn't rape me?"

He actually went white at her accusation. She didn't care.

"I would never do that," he said. His voice was shaking. "You know that."

"Do I?" she told him. "*You* decided I didn't need to remember, that I didn't have a need to know what happened between us. *You* decided."

"I would never have left if I had known," he started again. *Was he crying? Superman was crying?*

"You wouldn't have left if you'd known I was pregnant?" she asked. "I wasn't enough to keep you here? The fact that we, apparently, were lovers wasn't enough?"

He had nothing to say to that. And that made her even angrier. He didn't care enough to fight back? The most powerful man on the planet couldn't be bothered to defend himself.

"You forfeited your right to my son when you left on your little adventure," she told him. "I've agreed to marry Richard. We've set the date. He's a good man. He's been here for Jason and me. He'll be here. You won't."

She ignored the pain in his eyes. "I don't need you in my life. Jason doesn't need you."

"And when his powers come in?"

"I'll worry about that when it happens. Just leave us alone."

\* \* \*

Lois took a deep breath to calm her nerves as she stood outside the office door. Barbara Lassiter, family psychology, the brass nameplate read. She wanted a cigarette, but she didn't have any with her. This was her second week without a smoke. She'd been told it would get easier, the cravings would pass -- so far it wasn't getting easier.

She opened the door into the beige and brown reception area. The inner door opened and a short, matronly woman stepped into the doorway.

"Missus White, I presume," the woman said. "I'm Doctor Lassiter."

Lois followed Doctor Lassiter into the inner office. Richard and Jason were already there, waiting.

"I told you I'd make it once the story was in," Lois told them. There was an odd mixture of relief and fear on Richard's face, as though he'd been afraid to hope she'd been telling him the truth this time.

Lois took a moment to look around the office Richard and Jason had spent every Wednesday night at for the past six weeks. It was comfortable. An overstuffed sofa, three upholstered chairs, a small desk was set against the wall by the window. The color scheme was pale green and beige. A couple of innocuous landscapes graced the walls.

"Let's get started," Lois announced, settling down in one of the chairs. Richard and Jason were already seated on the sofa. Jason's hair was in his face, over his glasses. *When did Jason start wearing glasses? He had perfect vision on his last check-up.* Lois gestured to her own reading glasses, still on their chain around her neck.

"His last checkup showed Irlen's syndrome," Richard explained, obviously catching her meaning. "The glasses help. Besides, it was a recommendation from his biological father."

"You told me Jason's father was unavailable," Lassiter reminded him.

"Jason's father *is* unavailable," Richard said. "He's a public figure and he can't ever claim paternity. For him to acknowledge that he had a relationship with Jason's mother, no matter how brief, would be catastrophic for all three of them."

"You know that anything you tell me will be held in the strictest confidence," Lassiter said, looking from Richard to Lois.

"Let's just leave it, okay, Doctor?" Richard said. "Jason's biological father can not be brought into this."

"Richard, how...?" Lois asked.

"I'll tell you later," Richard promised. "In the meantime, let's work on *us*."

"Is there an *us*?" Lois asked.

"We won't know unless we try."

\* \* \*

"Okay, spill it," Lois demanded as soon as the three of them got into the house. "Jason has Irlen's syndrome, needs glasses? And his biological father is a public figure? I thought we were agreed that Clark was his father, even though I don't remember it."

"Lois, I seriously doubt Clark Kent's son would have super hearing, or x-ray vision," Richard shot back.

"What?"

"Lois, his powers are starting to develop," Richard told her. "His hearing kicked in and he was screaming. I got hold of Clark and he got hold of Superman to help Jason."

"And you never told me?" Lois was beyond furious.

"You never told me I was raising Superman's son," he reminded her. "What else haven't you told me?"

"Richard, honest to God, I thought we'd be able to handle it," she said earnestly. "I mean, I didn't even realize there was something else going on until that incident on the *Gertrude*. He threw a grand piano across the room. I still don't know exactly how I ended up pregnant with his child, or how Clark was involved in all of it."

"So, what do you want to do?"

"Richard, I married *you*. You're the man I chose to marry, the man I agreed to spend the rest of my life with," Lois told him. *Please believe me.*

"Lois, what do you want to do?" Richard repeated.

"We do what we have to," Lois said. "We keep going."

"And what about Clark?" he asked.

"What about him?" Lois asked.

"Are you ever going to tell him he *isn't* Jason's father?" Richard asked. "That he's been shouldering the blame for something Superman did? You know that Jason still asks when he's going to come back."

"Richard, we both know Clark Kent isn't coming back to Metropolis," Lois told him. "He's out of Jason's life, out of my life. He has his own life to live, and it doesn't include any of us."

*So why does he show up in my dreams? Why is it Clark I see in the crystal palace and not Superman?*

## **Perry**

### **Now:**

Perry permitted himself a self-satisfied smile. Clark looked happier than the Daily Planet editor had seen him in years. And he hadn't missed Clark's little remark to Lois in the receiving line.

*"By the way, she's a pilot, and she doesn't much like horror movies."*

*Good for you, son.*

The receiving line was going to take a while longer. Perry grabbed a glass of champagne from one of the waiters' trays. He knew his doctor didn't want him drinking, but this was a party. *That damn pill-pusher can go hang. Not everyday your favorite writer gets hitched to a general's daughter.*

He found a relatively quiet corner to watch from. Lois seemed to be barely holding together, Richard holding onto her arm as if he was afraid she would get away from him. Jimmy and Penny had grabbed champagne for themselves and were heading toward him.

"Some party, huh, Chief?" Jimmy observed.

"EPRAD and Straker can afford it," Perry told him. Perry nodded to the military uniforms with their masses of gold braid and the middle-aged businessmen and women with their spouses.

"You're a cynic, Chief," Jimmy stated.

"I prefer to think of myself as a realist," Perry corrected mildly. "Do you really think more than a handful of people here know or care who Clark and Esther Kent are? This is a prime example of a social event being warfare concealed. Straker is marking his territory in front of his peers, showing off his power. I can just about guarantee the only people here who even know Clark's a writer are all from the media or family. And I doubt even the media people here have read his work outside of what's in the Star." He shrugged. "Well, maybe they've read his book on Intergang," he amended.

"Do you think Clark and Esther realize that?" Penny asked.

"I can guarantee it," Perry said, taking a sip from his glass. "Neither of them are stupid or naïve. At least not that way." He looked around at the growing crowd. In one corner a young man was setting out CDs, checking the connections to his sound equipment. He punched a button and some light jazz started playing.

"I wonder why Superman didn't show up," Penny commented. "He's supposed to be a friend of Clark's, isn't he?"

"If Superman came in wearing a tuxedo instead of the red cape, would anyone here recognize him?" Perry asked.

Perry noticed Clark's eyes on him and raised his glass to him. Clark smiled slightly and gave a hint of a nod in acknowledgement.

"I'd like to think I would," Jimmy said.

Perry just chuckled.

### **Then:**

"Perry, how could you?" Lois fumed from the back seat of the cab.

Perry was in the front seat, peering back at her benignly, which apparently infuriated her even more. Richard was patting her hand, trying to calm her down. Perry had known Lois wasn't going to be easy to live with for a few days, maybe week. She hadn't won the Pulitzer she'd been short-listed for. More to the point, Clark Kent *had* won in his category, then left in his old familiar, perplexing, hurry. At least they hadn't been in direct competition.

"How could I have done what, hon'?" Perry asked, pretending he didn't know what she was talking about.

"I don't believe for a minute that the seating committee would make a mistake of listing Clark with the wrong paper and putting him at our table," she explained. "So what were you playing at? I mean, the man walked out on you, us, more than a year ago."

"Lois, he didn't just 'walk out' and you know it," Perry reminded her. "What I don't understand is why you keep insisting he did and why you keep on feeding those rumors that he was involved in unsavory things before he left. We're talking about Clark the Boy Scout, the choir boy, here. The one who wouldn't say shit if he had a mouthful." He was finally getting exasperated with her. He couldn't believe his best investigative reporter could be so dense.

"You're still upset he beat you out on that Intergang exposé, aren't you?" Richard observed. Lois hunkered down in her seat, glowering at both of them.

"Lois, you knew the rules I laid down on that," Perry reminded her. "It was your choice not to work with him on his terms. And I've no doubt he'll be on a Pulitzer short list for next year as well. If not for that series, then for the book he's writing on it."

"You didn't tell me he got a book contract out of it," Lois fumed.

"It's not my job to tell you what other journalists are up to, except for the ones who work here," Perry reminded her.

The cab stopped in front of the Daily Planet. Perry paid the driver and led the way into the building. As they waited for the elevator doors to open onto the newsroom floor, Perry wondered a little how he was going to explain why he did what he did.

"Yes, Lois, I did ask for Clark to be seated at our table," Perry admitted as they left the elevator, heading for his office. "That call I took just before we left for the ceremony? That was Mike O'Hanlon letting me know that Clark had agreed to go into Tazarastan again, and given what happened last time he was there, tonight may well be the last time any of us see him alive."

"What do you mean?" Richard asked. "I mean, Clark's not that much of a klutz, and he's certainly not one to just walk into danger. At least he wasn't."

Lois snorted. "Clark hates guns, and has no stomach at all for violence. He fainted the first time he was mugged."

"You're sure about that, are you?" Perry asked. Lois snorted again. "You both remember the WMD investigation team that was murdered five weeks ago?"

"Sure," Richard said. "The current regime blamed a splinter military cell for it." His forehead was creased into a frown. "But what does...?"

"Richard, you're International. Who was the U.S. journalist embedded with that team?" Perry asked.

Richard sighed. "Clark Kent, Chicago Star. The story I got was he was recalled to the States only a day before it happened, no explanations."

"Make that half an hour before," Perry told them. "Mike got hold of an intelligence report -- and don't even ask where he got it, he won't even tell me -- that one of the factions had targeted Superman, and Clark was meant to be the bait. Clark made it to the main airport and Superman brought him home. The rest of the team went ahead with the inspection and we all know what happened then. Mike thinks Clark agreed to go back in order to find the people who killed the WMD team and were targeting Superman."

"But Superman was the one who negotiated the peace accord, got the factions to sit down together," Lois reminded them. "Isn't it a little late to go after him now?"



"Revenge isn't logical, Lois," Richard reminded her. "You of all people should know that."

"One more thing," Perry said. "Mike told me they asked for a photographer, too. He thought it might be a good idea if that came from the Planet. I'm going to ask Jimmy if he wants to go."

\* \* \*

Perry watched Lois and Richard's relationship seem to go from bad to worse. Losing the Pulitzer gripped at her. She was spending every waking hour working on a series of investigations on the aftermath of the fall on Intergang. There were days she didn't go home at all, meeting with sources at all hours of the day and night. She was a woman driven.

Lois didn't even seem to notice the hurt and pain in Richard's face when he came to work. But Perry noticed.

"Richard, what's wrong?" Perry asked, finally. Lois was gone again, whether on the aftermath story or another one she'd been assigned, Perry didn't know, or even much care. If she was out of the office, she wasn't causing trouble for anyone else in the newsroom.

"Nothing," Richard stated. He was staring at his computer monitor, refusing to look up at his uncle.

"I haven't been in this business as long as I have been and not be able to read my own family," Perry told him. "Out with it."

"I found out last week that Lois hasn't been entirely truthful about Jason's paternity," Richard said softly. "It's not Clark."

Perry raised one eyebrow. "So, who was it?"

Richard looked up at him, made a small 'swoosh' motion with his hand.

*Superman?* "You're kidding," Perry said aloud. "Does he know?"

Richard nodded. "There was a problem last week. I called Clark to get hold of Superman. He was right there to help. He gave me some advice before he left. Even told me what kind of glasses to get Jason to help him learn how to manage."

"Does Clark know about Superman...?"

"I don't know," Richard admitted. "I suspect so. My call made it pretty obvious, if he thought about it at all."

"And what about Lois?"

Richard sighed. "I haven't talked to her since I found out. I've hardly even seen her. All her energy, all her time, is going into this investigation," he said. "I hope she gets done with it soon. I'd like to have my wife back. Jason would like to have his mother back."

"Is there anything I can do?" Perry asked, knowing the answer.

Richard shook his head. "We'll get through this. I just hope it's soon."

The first article of Lois's series was on the front page the following Monday. Like Clark's Intergang series almost five months before, it was picked up by the Planet's sister papers, then internationally within a week. Privately, Perry considered it one of the best pieces of reporting he'd seen in years. Certainly the best Lois Lane had produced. If she didn't win the Pulitzer for this one, the judging committee had no idea what they were doing.

As soon as the article hit, Richard and Lois's relationship seemed to improve. Lois started going to family therapy with Richard and Jason on Wednesdays. That seemed to help too. But Perry still wondered what was happening with Jason. How he was holding up. Jason didn't come to the newsroom as often as he used to. *Jason is Superman's son. No wonder Lois is so messed up.*

\* \* \*

"Clark's getting married?" Lois asked Perry. A small announcement had shown up on the newsroom bulletin board. A clipping from the Chicago Star announcing the impending wedding of Clark Joseph Kent and Esther Krystin Straker.

"Yes," Perry acknowledged. "I already have an invitation. It's in April, right after Easter." He watched her reaction. *Disbelief?* "Lois, did you think it would never happen? That he wasn't capable of making a life for himself? That he wouldn't be able to get over you?"

Lois gave him a sharp look. "Did you think I didn't know he was in love with you?" Perry asked.

"That was his problem. I certainly never gave him any ideas," Lois told him.

*Liar.*

"I'm just a little surprised, that's all," Lois admitted. "Do you know what she's like?"

"Ask Jimmy," Perry told her. "He spent a lot of time with her and Clark while he was over there. He says she's good people."

"I'm glad for him," she said.

Perry wasn't sure he believed her. But maybe she was finally getting over her anger at Clark. *Maybe. But then maybe not.* Perry hadn't posted the Pulitzer short lists yet, but this year, Lois Lane and Clark Kent were both on the list for investigative journalism. They'd both won Kerths earlier in the year for their work on Intergang, Clark in the Midwest chapter and Lois on the East Coast.

*Lois is going to have kittens.*

## Cat

### Now:

Cat Grant had seen receiving lines like this before -- celebrity weddings where they'd gone all out to flaunt their fame, the wealthy and influential with families showing off and returning favors. This wedding and reception didn't fit any of those categories, really, but influential came closer to any other description -- at least for the bride's family. But having to stand through a receiving line for the rich and famous was something else again.

Following Esther's lead, Cat had also shed her dress pumps in favor of a pair of low dancing shoes.

The line was thinning out and Cat took a moment to check on Martha, standing beside her. The poor woman looked worn out, gamely keeping a smile on her face as she shook hands with people she'd never heard of, people who wouldn't recognize her tomorrow, much less next week. Heck, Cat didn't know many of them and that was her job.

On her other side stood Bruce Wayne, looking as cool and dapper as ever. The millionaire, make that billionaire, was in his element here -- the concealed warfare of the social event. Again, she marveled at how one of the wealthiest men in the country, one who was well known for his dislike of the press, happened to be close friends with one particular member of the press. Close enough friends to be his best man.

The receiving line was breaking up. Clark had taken his mother's arm and led her to the family table near the wedding cake and the neatly stacked piles of tiny boxes of groom's cake.

Clark nodded to the DJ in the corner, who turned up the music. On cue, Bruce moved to stand in front of the family table. "Ladies and gentlemen, if we could clear the floor..." His deep voice carried well and the floor began to clear.

"First, a toast," he said, holding up a champagne glass. "Here's to the bride and the groom. We'll ask their success in our prayers, and through life's dark shadows and sunshine that good luck may always be theirs."

The audience lifted their glasses.

"Now it's time for the first dance," he announced. "May I present, the bride and groom, Esther and Clark Kent."

The light jazz piece that was being played was turned down as Clark took Esther's hand and led her to the center of the floor. The first dance song started its instrumental intro and he took her into his arms.

*You know when you give your love away  
It opens your heart,  
everything is new.  
And you know time will always find a way  
to let your heart believe it's true.\**

There was no trace of the clumsy farm boy who had moved to Metropolis, the one who tripped over his tongue and feet in the newsroom of the Daily Planet. Clark and Esther spun together across the dance floor, flawlessly in tune with one another. "I learned from a Nigerian princess who studied ballroom dancing in England." Clark had told Cat once.

*You know love is everything you say;  
a whisper, a word,  
promises you give.  
You feel it in the heartbeat of the day.  
You know this is the way love is.*

*Amarantine...*

*Amarantine...*

*Amarantine...*

*Love is love is love\**

Cat looked around at the audience. Perry was standing on the far side of the room, watching the newlyweds. He was smiling.

*You know love may sometimes make you cry,  
so let the tears go,  
they will flow away,  
for you know love will always let you fly --  
how far a heart can fly away!\**

*Amarantine...*

*Amarantine...*

*Amarantine...*

*Love is love is love\**

Cat spotted Lois and Richard not too far from her. She couldn't read Lois's expression, but there was pain in Richard's face as he stood behind his wife, arms around her waist. He seemed to notice he was being observed and put on a neutral expression as he watched the couple dancing in the center of the polished oak floor.

*You know when love's  
shining in your eyes  
it may be the stars  
falling from above.  
And you know love  
is with you when you rise,  
for night and day belong to love.\**

The dance ended and the audience applauded. Clark and Esther separated, each stepping over to the parents' table.

"The bride and groom, and parents," Bruce announced. Esther went to her father. The general stood up and took her hand, heading out onto the dance floor. Clark took his mother's hand, speaking to her softly. Finally she accompanied her son to the center of the room. Clark towered over her. He started to slouch and Martha hit his arm. He straightened up, a sheepish grin on his face as the music started.

*It must have been cold there in my shadow  
To never have sunlight on your face  
You've been content to let me shine  
You always walked a step behind  
I was the one with all the glory  
While you were the one with all the strength  
Only a face without a name  
I never once heard you complain\*\**

There was no doubt in Cat's mind that Clark had chosen that song. It was just like him.

*Did you ever know that you're my hero  
And everything I'd like to be  
I can fly higher than an eagle  
But you are the wind beneath my wings*

*It might have appeared to go unnoticed  
But I've got it all here in my heart  
I want you to know I know the truth  
I would be nothing without you\*\**

More time to observe the audience. Jimmy and Penny were standing beside Perry. Jimmy had his hand around Penny's waist and they were both swaying to the music.

Cat looked across at Bruce. There was a pensive, almost sad, look on his face as he watched the two couples. Like Richard before him, he realized he was being observed and smiled for his audience, but Cat noticed that the smile didn't extend to his eyes. Poor man.  
*Does Clark know that Bruce is jealous of him?*

*Did you ever know that you're my hero  
And everything I'd like to be  
I can fly higher than an eagle  
But you are the wind beneath my wings  
You are the wind beneath my wings\*\**

The song ended and Clark kissed his mother on the cheek, murmuring something to her. Cat didn't need to hear to know what he was saying: *Thank You*.

Clark was just too good to be true sometimes. But then, so was Bruce.

**Then:**

The judge at the family court in Gotham City agreed that, in the face of incontrovertible evidence that Joseph Morgan had been involved in Intergang's criminality, custody of Adam Morgan should be given to his mother, Catharine Grant. The judge ordered the boy be turned over to his mother. The fact that his mother lived in Chicago was irrelevant -- she had a good paying job, references, the support of her employer and friends.

Lilliana Morgan, Joe's mother, had been caring for Adam on behalf of her son. She glared at Cat when the judge announced her decision and ordered Adam be brought to her chambers the next day to be turned over to his natural mother.

Lilliana did not appear the next day. An arrest warrant was sworn out on her. Police and child protective services were sent out, but Lilliana had cleared out. There was no sign of them.

"Clark," Cat said over the phone. "Even the FBI can't find them. What can I do?" Cat knew there wasn't really anything Clark could do. He'd been in Tazarastan for the past two months. But he was a friend, and he had friends.

"Cat," Clark said. "There are two people you want to get hold of. First, Archbishop Ryan over at the cathedral, then Alfred Pennyworth in Gotham City." He gave her both numbers and she jotted them down.

"Why them?" Cat wondered aloud.

Clark chuckled on the other end of the phone line. "The Archbishop has a reputation as a problem solver as does Mister Pennyworth. Tell Alfred that Clark referred you and he'll point you in the direction of some serious help."

"Do you think Kal would be of any help?"

"Get Blackie and Alfred on it first," Clark advised. "Then if it needs Kal's talents, we can bring him in. In the meantime be careful, Cat. I don't think I like the games they play in Gotham City."

"Who does?" Cat asked. It was a rhetorical question. Even with Batman in residence, Gotham City wasn't the bright beacon Metropolis was.

"Keep me posted, Cat," Clark said.

"I will," she promised, hanging up her phone.

\* \* \*

A dark-skinned teenage girl ushered Cat into a comfortable sitting room inside the rectory of Holy Name Cathedral. Cat sat down in one of the over stuffed chairs, wiping her hands on her skirt. She was more nervous than she ever wanted anyone to know. The last time she'd been near a church had been during the wait for Superman to save Earth from Nightfall. That hadn't been the proudest moment of her life.

After a few moments, the teenager returned with a compact man wearing a black shirt with a crimson-edged roman collar and thick glasses that reminded her of Clark's. He smiled at her benignly. "Megan here says you're a friend of Clark's and you need some help."

"Um, yes, Your Reverence," Cat said.

"Call me Blackie," he instructed. He seemed all right. Innocuous, in an impish sort of way. He had curly brown hair streaked with silver and bright eyes peered out at the world from behind his thick glasses.

She told him of her ex-husband and her problems with him, his death and now her son's disappearance along with her ex-husband's mother. "Clark seemed pretty sure you'd be able to help," she added.

"Indubitably," the little Archbishop said with a smile.

"Clark also gave me the number of someone in Gotham City, an Alfred Pennyworth," Cat told him.

"I'm told he's already at work on the case."

\* \* \*

The Archbishop invited her to tea at the Reilly Gallery. The owners, Mike Casey and his wife Anne, were charming and attentive, asking questions that would be appropriate for a police detective, assuming there were any detectives in Chicago who were actually willing to help her. The two FBI agents that were supposedly on the case had left her cold.

Mike Casey was a tall, lean man with silver hair trimmed close to his scalp. Anne, his wife of twenty-plus years was one of those women who aged well, thanks to a combination of excellent genetics and attentive personal care. She kept Cat's cup filled with herbal tea as Cat told yet another person her story.

"Miss Grant, aside from Clark and now us, who else knows that you were Clark's source in Metropolis for the Intergang exposé?" Casey asked finally.

"Superman," Cat told him. "But I was one of the people known to be in the building just before that bomb went off at the GNN building and I moved to Chicago almost immediately after."

"So it could be anyone," Blackie observed, taking a cookie from the plate Anne held out to him.

"I'm going to arrange to have protection for you," Casey announced. "Even a crippled Intergang isn't anybody to mess with and I've no doubt that's why your son was taken."

"If that's true, he may already be dead," she pointed out to them.

"If he were dead, they would have made sure you knew about it," Casey said.

"So there's still hope?" she asked.

"Arguably," Blackie said, taking another cookie. "Our friends in Gotham are on the case and have high hopes of a successful resolution."

"I hope so," Cat told him.

\* \* \*

"Miss Grant?" Cat looked up to see a tall, distinguished looking elderly man standing in the door to the society page office. Cat was alone in the office. Her three co-workers had either gone home for the day or were preparing for their evening assignments.

It was nearly a month after her meeting with Mike Casey. An off duty police officer still drove her to and from work. Security at her apartment was beefed up, including a monitored alarm system. At work, Mike O'Hanlon had 'promoted' her to society page editor, a job that kept her in the office during normal working hours. The regular editor was off on maternity leave and hadn't yet decided if she wanted to return to work.

"Yes?" she asked.

He stepped forward. "I'm Alfred Pennyworth. And I have someone here who would like to see you." He had a smile on his aged face as he stepped aside, allowing a tall dark-haired man enter the office. Cat recognized the man from his society page photos -- Bruce Wayne, the handsome, debonair, playboy prince of Gotham City. In his arms was a small boy with strawberry blond hair. Behind him stood the little Archbishop, smiling benignly at her.

"Adam?" She couldn't believe it. Bruce Wayne was bringing her son to her. *He's alive. He's okay.* "How?"

Bruce smiled, handing the boy over to his mother. Adam grabbed his mother's neck tightly and Cat discovered she was crying as she ran her hands over his body, confirming that he was unharmed, that he was real, that he was here with her.

It was the Archbishop who spoke. "I told you our associates in Gotham were on the case," he reminded her.

"I happen to be one of those associates," Bruce said. "I'm also one of Clark Kent's friends and he asked if I would help out."

"He's never mentioned you," Cat told him.

Bruce chuckled. "I don't mention him to my acquaintances either," he admitted. "But we have been known to help one another out on occasion."

"How could he possibly be of help to you?" Cat wondered aloud.

"You'd be surprised," Pennyworth told her. "Master Clark has many unsuspected talents, as does Master Bruce."

"Indubitably," Archbishop Blackie agreed.

"Such as?" Cat asked. It wasn't just her reporter's instincts. She was genuinely interested in finding out how mild-mannered Clark Kent happened to be on a first name basis with one of the wealthiest men in the United States -- one with an open disdain for the press. *And how was said playboy-millionaire involved in the rescue of her son?*

Bruce laughed again. He had a nice laugh, a genuine laugh. "He warned me you were as curious as your namesake," he said. "Let's just say that as an investigative journalist, Clark is more than a little bit of a detective. He's pulled my fat out of the fire more than once, while sticking my nose in places it probably shouldn't have been."

"Does it happen often?" Cat asked, disbelieving.

"More often than I care to recall," Bruce admitted.

"And you have helped Master Clark more often than he cares to recall, I'm sure sir," Pennyworth said with a small chuckle.

"Yeah, for a smart guy, he does tend to get into trouble," Bruce said with a grin.

"At least *he* came back *before* he was declared dead," Pennyworth reminded him with a smile.

"You're not going to let that go, are you?"

"No, sir."

Cat held her son tightly in her arms. No one was going to take him away from her now. Having him here, now, was a miracle. "Is there anything I can do to repay you for your help?" she asked Bruce.

"You can come with me to the Founder's Ball in Gotham City in two weeks."

\* \* \*

The Founder's Ball was as grand as Cat remembered. Bruce flew her to Gotham City in his private plane. Adam was being watched by Mike Casey and his wife.

Bruce was a marvelous dancer and he knew all the socialites, introducing her to them, filling her in on all the latest gossip.

The party was over too soon.

"I enjoyed tonight immensely," Bruce told her, driving her back to the plane that would take her home to Chicago and her son.

"So did I," Cat admitted. "I'm a little surprised you didn't make a move on me though."

"Disappointed?"

She shook her head. "Just surprised."

He smiled at her in the dark. "Clark is too good a friend for me to put the moves on a friend of his."

"One of these days, I'm going to find out how the two of you got to be friends," she promised.

"Let's just say that in a godforsaken part of the world, we found out we had a lot more in common than either of us realized," Bruce told her. "Good night, Miss Grant. And say hi to Clark for me."

"Good night, Mister Wayne. I hope to see you again sometime."

"I've no doubt we will, Miss Grant," he said. "I've no doubt at all."

*\*Amarantine, © Enya, from the album of the same name*

*\*\*Wind Beneath My Wings, © Larry Henley/Jeff Silbar*



## Jimmy

### Now:

Jimmy loved dancing with Penny. They had both taken lessons in ballroom dancing to be prepared for the wedding. Not to mention that it just wouldn't do to step on your fiancée's feet. After the first two dances, the newlyweds went and sat down at the family table.

The dance for the rest of the wedding party. Clark and Esther chose to sit this one out while Cat and Bruce took center stage along with groomsmen and bridesmaids. Cat and Bruce looked good together as they danced, laughing and chatting, enjoying each other's company. The dance seemed to have improved Bruce's impending moodiness, at least a little. Odd that Clark was buddies with a moody spoiled playboy, but then, Clark had friends in lots of odd places.

Jimmy turned his attention back to his own fiancée.

"We are *so* eloping," she murmured in his ear.

Jimmy chuckled. "There's a conference next month in Vegas. Perry's sending me."

"Remind me to take that week off," Penny said. "I'll meet you there."

"Clark'll be at the conference, too," Jimmy told her. "I'll ask him to be best man."

"Sounds like a plan."

### Then:

Walter Smith groused at the fact that Jimmy seemed to prefer hanging out with Clark Kent and his fiancée than with the staffer from the Daily Planet International section. Jimmy ignored him. Smith was a well known complainer. If it wasn't the photographer assigned to him, it was the accommodations. If it wasn't the accommodations, it was the weather, or the food, or his allergies.

The Tazarastan peace conference was going well enough and Jimmy had managed to get some good shots of Superman speaking to the government officials and representatives of the various involved parties. But even Superman was getting worn down by the difficulties of mediating between parties that were only interested in destroying one another. The animosity ran deep, especially after the Tazarastan interim government admitted to wanting Superman out of the picture and they were absolutely against the fact that women were involved in the security arrangements.

"So, what do you think Superman will do now?" Jimmy asked Clark over dinner. "I mean, if the interim government is balking at having him involved, what can he do?"

"I think it's only one person in government group that's actually against Superman," Clark explained. "That's General Akim Kahn. And he's been implicated in a plot to kill Superman and may have been involved in the deaths of the WMD inspectors last month."

"Unfortunately, there's no proof," Esther reminded them. "And he's the nephew of the current Prime Minister."

"So, where does that leave the negotiations?" Jimmy asked. Having dinner with Esther and Clark was like taking a college level class with food as a perk.

"The other parties are unlikely to request Superman to absent himself, especially since he's been assisting in the reconstruction efforts," Clark told him. "He's acceptable as a neutral mediator so long as he stays out of the way of their defense efforts. And he's been doing that."

"But the problem of their objections to having women involved in any capacity isn't going to be solved so easily," Esther reminded them. "The pre-revolution government had started secularization and allowing women to participate in the economy. When that fell apart under pressure from their more conservative neighbors, their economy and everything but the

military took a big hit."

"But they don't believe it, do they?" Jimmy asked.

"Change is a scary thing, especially change that demands a rethinking of nearly every social belief a society is based on," Clark said. "Especially when those beliefs are so self-important, so skewed in favor of one gender, one class, one clan. When it's so easy to be part of a system that blames the victims for their problems, and lets the perpetrators of atrocities not only get away with it, but be applauded for their actions."

"You've thought a lot about this, haven't you?" Jimmy observed.

"I'm on the short list for a Pulitzer for my research on this whole mess," Clark reminded him. "Yeah, I've thought a lot about this. And I don't see a way out for them. It may take generations for them to recover from everything that's happened."

\* \* \*

"Olsen, my office," Perry yelled into the bullpen. Jimmy saved the digital photo he'd been working on and hurried into the editor-in-chief's office.

"Jimmy," Perry began. "I've been asked to send a photojournalist to Tazarastan."

Jimmy found himself holding his breath. "And you're asking me if I want to go?"

Perry nodded. "Clark is going."

"When do I leave?"

\* \* \*

Clark and Jimmy sat on the carpets in the mud brick hovel. Both were dressed in native garb, the long tunic with a wide belt and vest, loose white trousers. Clark's glasses looked incongruous under the dark turban.

"Now, tell me why we're here again?" Jimmy asked as their host went to get more tea.

"Well, Mir Kharim Naseer is a local scholar and leader," Clark explained. "He's also a friend of mine from way back."

"You have friends in strange places," Jimmy commented.

"Remember, I spent about four years just traveling the planet. Spent most of my time in villages like this one."

"I thought you spent your last sabbatical in South America?" Jimmy said.

Clark smiled. "I spent about six months here right before college. They're good people, so long as you let them make up their own minds, don't try to force them into anything. They're proud and independent. But this is where change takes place. These are the hearts and minds that have to be won."

They had come to the village to ask Mir Naseer about the militia groups that were still terrorizing the area. Naseer told them what he knew over tea and a meal. At least Jimmy assumed Naseer answered Clark's questions. Jimmy had only picked up a smattering of native words in the three months he'd been in the country. Clark, on the other hand, seemed to speak like a native. Jimmy had caught him reading Arabic language newspapers their first week in the country.

"Does that include crazy generals?" Jimmy asked as Naseer came back one of his daughters and the tea.

"Yes, it does," Naseer answered. His accent was thick but understandable.

"You've been practicing," Clark accused with a smile.

Naseer shrugged eloquently. "It is always good to learn your neighbor's language."

"It is also good to learn your friends' language, my friend," Clark replied.

"And your enemies, Kalil," Naseer told him, referring to Clark by the name he'd been

given in the village fifteen years before and clapping him on the back.

"Especially your enemies," Clark agreed in English.

\* \* \*

Jimmy looked up at General Akim Kahn standing on the grate overhead. Jimmy and Clark had been traveling cross country, visiting villages, talking to the people. Then a uniformed militia unit took them hostage at gun point, taking them to what appeared to be an abandoned, half destroyed prison. They'd been forced to climb down into a stone-lined pit that was barely large enough for them to lie down in and an iron grate slammed shut on them.

"I don't like Americans," Kahn told the two men in the pit. "I especially don't like American spies."

"General," Clark said calmly, "you are well aware that we are journalists, not spies. You also know that people will be looking for us."

"I know you have value as hostages," Kahn told them. "I know that you are friends of Superman."

"Superman does not enter war zones," Clark reminded him. "He does not interfere in politics, even when they've devolved into violence." Clark added something in another language that Jimmy couldn't make out but the general's companions started laughing. The general himself went white with rage.

One of his companions spoke to him quietly, apparently urging away from the prisoner pit. With a final inchoate shout at them, the general allowed himself to be led away. The man who had been urging the general away stopped for a moment, looking down into the small stone lined holding pit.

"If you value your lives, you will call Superman," he advised.

"And what does General Kahn want with Superman?" Clark asked. He seemed unnaturally calm, sitting on the cold stone floor of the cell looking at the man standing above them. The man crouched down to get a little closer.

"Ten years ago, the general's home village was attacked by..." he began. "It doesn't matter who, only that they bombed one of the mountain dams. His family -- his mother, father, wife, sons -- all killed when the village was washed away. Superman did nothing."

"Superman does not enter war zones," Clark repeated. "And as much as I feel for the general's loss, I do not understand the demand for blood payment from someone who does not condone violence and was powerless to prevent it."

"The general doesn't care."

"Why am I not surprised? For those setting out on revenge, first dig two graves," Clark told him. "Superman will not come for us. But our blood price will be exacted. Make no mistake about that." There was something very cold and alien in Clark's expression. Something Jimmy had never seen before and he wasn't sure he ever wanted to see it again.

\* \* \*

Most people thought the Middle East was hot desert. Jimmy knew better. The cell was bitterly cold. Jimmy rubbed his hands together to keep his circulation going. Clark was sitting quietly, legs crossed, staring at the wall as almost as though he could see through it and the yards of dirt beyond.

"CK, do you really think somebody is looking for us?" Jimmy asked finally. He'd fallen asleep for a while and was now stiff as well as cold. He didn't think Clark had moved at all.

"If I give you a boost, do you think you can reach the grill?" Clark asked, finally unfolding himself and standing up. As tall as he was, the grill was a good two feet beyond his

reach. He put out a hand and pulled Jimmy to his feet.

"I'm pretty sure they locked it," Jimmy reminded him.

"Try it anyway?" Clark suggested, weaving his fingers together to give Jimmy a foothold. Clark was stronger than he looked, Jimmy realized as he climbed onto the taller man's shoulders to get to the iron grill above them. He pushed up on the metal and to his astonishment, the lock mechanism shattered, allowing him to swing the grill out of the way. "It's open," Jimmy said quietly.

Clark gave him an additional boost and Jimmy clambered out of the pit. Jimmy looked around for the ladder the militiamen had used when forcing them into the pit. He didn't see it, so laid down on his belly to reach for Clark's hand to help him out. Clark ignored his hand, coiling himself like an athlete, then jumped, catching the edge of the stonework. Jimmy grabbed the back of his shirt and helped him out of the pit.

Clark settled the grate back over the pit, then beckoned Jimmy to follow him down the unlit corridor to the outside, and possible freedom. As they got closer to the exterior of the building, Jimmy could hear gunfire.

Suddenly, a man appeared in the open doorway carrying an automatic rifle. Mir Naseer. "Kalil, Jimi, I was told you needed rescuing," Naseer told them with a grin.

"What are you doing here?" Clark asked, keeping his voice low.

Naseer handed Clark a package the size of a ream of paper wrapped in oiled cloth. "You must leave now, out the back," Naseer instructed. "Do not come back until Superman is welcome here."

"You know I can't do that," Clark told him.

"Then may Allah and his angels watch over you," Naseer said, pushing the two men toward the back way out of the compound. "As they watch over all fools."

\* \* \*

It was announced the next day by official sources in the Tazarastan government that General Kahn had been killed in a firefight between government forces and one of the insurgent militias in the area Jimmy noted that the announcement didn't mention which side the general had been on, or that he'd taken two journalists hostage.

One week later, the general's uncle, Prime Minister Amin Kahn stepped down from office and sought refuge in Italy.

Jimmy asked Clark what was in the package Mir Naseer had given him. Clark just smiled and said: "Ask Superman in about five years."

\* \* \*

Oslo City Hall, Oslo, Norway. Jimmy looked around at the hall the Nobel Peace Prize would be awarded. The ceremony was set for early afternoon. As at the ceremony in Stockholm, the dress code for ceremony itself merely dictated dark suits for men and dresses for women, but the banquet was strictly formal. Jimmy wasn't too unhappy that he wasn't expected to attend the banquet following the candlelight parade.

Security was tight around the building. Helicopters whirred overhead and both uniformed and plainclothes police were patrolling the area around the hall. Of course they were cautious. Over a thousand diplomats, royalty, film and TV stars from all over the world were in attendance. He knew Clark and Esther were somewhere down there with the other attendees. It had been Clark's research that had have given Superman the edge he'd needed in the mediation.

He'd gotten some good shots of Superman landing earlier in the day. The ceremony of

lighting the lamp of peace with Oslo school children was in the morning, then Superman visited the palace to meet members of the Norwegian royal family.

The audience was settling down in the hall and Jimmy made his way to where the rest of the press was assigned. The fanfare was sounded and the audience stood as the main doors to the hall opened.

Superman entered the crowded room to thunderous applause. Through the telephoto lens, Jimmy could see a faint flush rising into his face. Superman and the Norwegian Nobel Committee chair were followed by the royal family and their security. The royals made their way down to the front, near the stage as Superman and members of the Nobel committee went up the steps to chairs set up on the right side of the stage. The committee chair went to the podium to present his speech.

As a member of the press, Jimmy had a small earpiece to hear the translation of the speeches into his own language. He noted that although there had been a similar headset on Superman's chair, the Man of Steel wasn't wearing it.

The Committee Chair began his speech, welcoming Kal-El to the ceremony, introducing him as this year's recipient of the Peace Prize for his work on the peace process in the war torn areas of Tazarastan and its neighbors.

Jimmy watched as Superman frowned slightly at the effusive praise being heaped on him. Jimmy remembered something Clark said at the airport in Tazar City as he was preparing to get on his plane back to the States. The Nobel committee had just made the announcement the Superman was this year's winner. *'What good is a bloody prize when every time you turn around, the tyrant-wannabes tear down everything you helped build up?'*

Jimmy saw much of the same frustration in Superman's face as he sat and listened to the speeches.

Finally, it was time for Superman's speech. The essay had already been given to the press so it could make it into the papers.

"I am both honored and humbled by this honor," he began simply. "I am not a diplomat, and frankly I have no wish to become one. I don't know why the government of Tazarastan asked for my help, although I have suspicions and this is neither the time nor the venue to air them. I am honored that my meager assistance was accepted and that it seems to have done some small good. I am humbled to know that it was not really my work that has made a difference.

"That honor belongs to those men and women of the hamlets, the villages, the neighborhoods and towns who have chosen to follow the rule of law over the rule of passion, have chosen self-determination over tyranny, have chosen to build up rather than tear down. These are men and women who have chosen a different honor, one that values life over death, an honor that values truth above everything, especially over the tales and promises of tyrants, diplomats, and politicians.

"These are the men and women who know from brutal experience that liberty is earned, not granted, taken, not given, and that peace must be fought for just as hard as liberty. But that battlefield isn't the streets, or in the skies. That battlefield is found in the heart, in the mind, around the dining table, around the conference table. It is found in the careful balance between your needs and mine, his needs and hers, this village and that one. It is found in the realization that this is one small planet in a very big cosmos and if we cannot live together, we will not live at all.

"Like liberty, peace is neither granted nor given by tyrants, diplomats or politicians. Like

liberty, peace is earned by those who will not abide the orders of tyrants, those who value life, those willing to tell the tyrants 'I will not fight for you. I will not send my children to fight for you. But, I will defend myself and I will defend my children, against you.'

"This honor belongs to them, and I am honored to have walked alongside them, at least a little ways, on their path."

The audience sat stunned for a moment, then rose to their feet in applause.

*Way to go, big guy.*

## Martha

### Now:

Martha sat quietly at the family table, picking at her food. Ben Hubbard had joined her there. It had been his choice not to be a member of the wedding party. They both knew Clark would have accepted having Ben stand up as his step-father if Ben had asked to, even though Martha and Ben weren't married.

Clark had never asked Martha why she and Ben hadn't tied the knot, but he accepted Ben's part in his mother's life, mostly. She knew Clark had questions about their relationship, but her son was too much the gentleman to ask.

Martha was tired. It had been a long day with too many people. She wasn't used to dealing with so many people. She didn't want to even guess what this reception was costing the Strakers. At the moment, she wanted it over, to go up to her hotel room and sleep for a week, then fly back to Montana with Ben.

More dancing, more speeches, more toasts. The one from Perry surprised her a little. "Clark, just reminding you what Oscar Wilde said: No man should have a secret from his wife. She invariably finds it out."

Esther giggled and Clark's cheeks turned pink.

Finally, it was time to cut the cake. Martha had noticed a saber laying on the table behind the ornate cake. There were no decorations on the hilt, nothing to indicate it was being used at a wedding. The standard decorated knife lay beside the sword.

Clark and Esther stepped over to the cake, waiting a moment for the photographer to position himself on the far side of the table.

Clark lifted a champagne glass, facing Esther: "My wife: we will not be together forever For death will us part... But while this life lasts I will hold you in my arms, I will cherish you in my heart, I will protect you with my life, I will be true and faithful to you, I will care for and nurture you, I will be here for you in joy and sorrow, for that is all I have to give."

Esther repeated his gesture: "My husband: because of you, I laugh, I smile, I dare to dream again. I look forward with great joy to spending the rest of my life with you, caring for you, nurturing you, being there for you in all life has in store for us, and I vow to be true and faithful for as long as we both shall live."\*

They clicked their glasses together, entwined their arms in the traditional manner, and sipped the champagne.

Then, setting the glasses aside, Esther picked up the saber. Clark laid his large hand over hers and they cut the cake with the sword.

"Grandma?" a small voice asked. Martha looked down to see a small dark-haired boy with big blue eyes standing at her knee.

"Hello, Matthew," Martha said with a smile as he climbed onto her lap to watch the cake cutting. She kissed the top of his head. *My son is married and I'm a grandma.*

\*Author unknown

### Then:

"Martha, Jonathan," Doctor Doyle began, "I'm sorry, but the tests came back negative."

"And what does that mean?" Jonathan demanded. Martha and Jonathan had been married nearly ten years and had been trying to conceive most of that time. Time was running out -- Martha's biological clock was winding down. She'd had three miscarriages, for no reason the general physician in Smallville could come up with.

Doctor Doyle was their last hope to conceive a child of their own.

"It means that without extraordinary measures, you and Martha are unable to have children together," Doyle said. "I'm sorry."

"You said extraordinary measures," Martha reminded him. "What are they?"

"Drugs, in vitro fertilization," Doyle explained. "It'll be very hard on you physically. It's also very expensive. Frankly, I'd suggest you look into adoption. I know there are many children out there in need of a good home."

"We'll think about it," Jonathan said, ushering Martha out of the office. She had started crying. All their hopes for a child had been pinned on Doyle. "Thank you, Doctor," she heard her husband murmur.

The drive back to Smallville was spent in near silence. "What do we do now?" she asked finally.

"We keep going," her ever practical Jonathan said with a sad smile.

\* \* \*

They applied for adoption. A farm was a good place to raise a child, but Jonathan had a family history of heart disease and had started having angina pains when he overdid things. Doctor Baker had warned him to hire help and start taking things a little easier.

When the state adoption agency people found out about Jonathan's medical issues, they turned down their application even for an older child.

"What do we do now?"

"We keep going."

\* \* \*

Reverend Wallace's sermon hadn't been especially uplifting, but at least the conversation over coffee had been interesting. The Harrises were expecting another child any day now. Rachel was about two, all bright eyes and curiosity. Martha agreed to watch the little girl while her mother was in the hospital. It was the least she and Jonathan could do. The Harrises had been steadfast friends all through the Kent's ordeal to first conceive, then adopt, a child of their own.

Neither Martha nor Jonathan was paying much attention to the road in front of them as they drove home. The road was straight and familiar.

They were driving past Schuster field, only a mile from the farmhouse. They heard the 'meteorite' before they saw it: a roaring like a fire out of control, a jet engine at full throttle. The ball of fire passed in front of the old truck, plowing into the fallow field, leaving a deep burnt gouge in the earth before the fireball came to rest.

Startled, Jonathan drove the truck off the road, nearly landing them in the ditch. Jonathan pushed open the truck door and headed down the gouge to the object that had come to rest.

"Jonathan, be careful," Martha warned.

"There might be a pilot still inside," Jonathan called back to her as he moved closer to the end of the gouge. She climbed down into the field to follow him.

Whatever it was that had crashed certainly didn't look like an airplane or even a missile. In fact, it looked like a huge melted Christmas ornament. As Jonathan got closer, the charred top of the object seemed to split apart, revealing the inside. A small dark-haired boy stood up and smiled at them. He couldn't have been more than three years old, and he was naked as a jay bird. He held out his arms to them.

Jonathan picked up some blankets from inside the *whatever* and wrapped the boy up in them before picking him up. "Who the devil would put a baby inside a contraption like that?" he asked, shaking his head.



"Well, whoever they are, they don't deserve to have him back," Martha told him, taking to boy from his arms. His eyes were an almost unearthly shade of blue.

"And what if they come looking for him?"

She looked at the object in the field. "I don't think they will. I don't think they're from around here." She smiled at her husband. "We can name him Clark. Clark Joseph Kent."

\* \* \*

He was their gift from heaven. Even when it became apparent exactly how different he was from the other kids, even when it became apparent that they'd misjudged exactly how far away his people had to have been, he was their child, their little angel.

Clark grew into a fine young man. Martha and Jonathan never spoke about the possibility of grandchildren. They both knew how unlikely it was they would ever see Clark's children. He was simply too different.

Jonathan died when Clark was a senior in high school only a few months from graduation. Almost as soon as the graduation ceremony was over, Clark went north and she didn't see or hear from him for nearly a year. Then he called from Japan to tell her he was working his way around the world.

Three years later he was in Metropolis, going to college. He never mentioned girls, aside from asking about Rachel, Lana, a few other girls he'd gone out with occasionally before he left. He graduated magna cum laude with a degree in journalism and a minor in history. He got a job at the Daily Planet and fell in love.

Then he left for Krypton and she thought she'd never see him again. He came back and discovered he was a father. Of all the miracles in the universe, neither of them had expected that her son would be able to give her a grandchild.

"She hates me, and I don't know what I did," Clark told her.

"Do you really think she wants you out of her life completely?" Martha had asked.

"That's what she said. I have no reason to doubt her."

*My grandson doesn't even know I exist.*

\* \* \*

"Mom," Clark said. "I'd like you to meet Major Esther Straker and her son Matthew."

Martha crouched down beside the small dark-haired toddler. His eyes were blue, not quite as bright a blue as Clark's were, but very blue nonetheless.

"Hello Matthew," Martha said with a smile.

The boy looked at her with a solemn expression. "Mommy says you're going to be my grandma. Are you really my grandma?"

"Would you like me to be?" Martha asked. *He's so small.* He nodded shyly, his thumb going into his mouth.

She looked up at her son and his fiancée. Clark was smiling at her, but she saw tears in his eyes as well.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Martha asked them. They both shook their heads. "I have a grandbaby to spoil. And I expect more of them in the future."

"We'll do our best," Clark promised. "But I think we should wait until *after* the wedding."

## Richard

### Now:

The first piece of cake was cut with the saber. Clark and Esther shared the first taste of cake amid giggles that Richard only partly attributed to alcohol. They looked good together and Richard was positive that Clark's apparent loss of his farm boy geekiness was due, at least in part, to Esther's influence. The woman was obviously patient and gentle in a way his own wife never would be.

But then, that was one of the reasons he'd fallen in love with Lois Lane. Her fire, her drive, her ambition. She would never settle for second best -- at least that's what he'd been telling himself for the past two and a half years.

They'd danced together for the first time in - *how long? Ages?* Not since the last White Orchid Ball, and that was work related. Lois had been trying to get an interview with Alexander Luthor Jr., Lex Luthor's alleged son and Metropolis's newest philanthropist-industrialist. The man had managed to parlay his father's writings and inventions into something useful.

Richard went home alone that night. Lois went straight to the office to write a front page story on the Luthor legacy of evil.

He loved how she felt in his arms as they danced. *We have to do this more often. Be a couple, relearn how to be a family. It's been too long.*

Richard spotted Esther and Clark heading for the ballroom door. He nodded to Lois. *It's time.*

"Clark, we still need to talk," Lois said, following Clark and Esther into the hotel elevator. Richard was right behind her. Clark shrugged and Richard saw a little of the old nervousness return. Clark suddenly didn't look comfortable in his own skin. Esther seemed to notice, took his hand, and whispered something that Clark smiled at. *Yes, she's good for him.*

The elevator doors opened and Clark led the way down the plush carpeted corridor to a corner suite. He swiped the magnetic lock, and nothing happened. Esther chuckled, pulled out her own card and got the door open. "It's a wonder the magnetic stripes on your credit cards work," she commented.

"Who said that they do?" he asked. "Most of the time the cashiers have to key in the numbers. My watch stopped working again, too. I don't know why I bother to wear one."

Esther chuckled again as she entered the dark room beyond, turning on lights as she went. "We're going to have to pay for that keycard if you've actually demagnetized it, you know."

"I know," Clark said with a sheepish smile. "If we're lucky, it's just the lock that hates me. I swear anything more complicated than scissors is my mortal enemy."

"It's your magnetic personality," Esther said with a grin. She looked back at Richard and Lois. Richard had followed Lois into the sitting room section of the suite. She looked over her shoulder at Clark. "Do you want me to stay?"

"I think it'll be okay," Clark told her. He seemed even more nervous as he took off his jacket, cummerbund, and tie, tossing them on a chair by the window.

"I'll just be in the next room, okay?" Esther told him, heading through the double doors to the bedroom. Clark nodded as he watched her close the doors.

"So, you said you needed to talk to me about Jason and Superman," Clark reminded Lois. As he spoke, he went to the overnight bag on the fold-up stand and pulled out a dark blue long-sleeve knit shirt. He tossed it on the chair with the tuxedo jacket and started to unbutton his shirt. Lois had taken a seat in one of the chairs by the sofa. Richard stood behind her.

"Um, specifically, we need to talk to Superman about Jason," Richard said. He put his hand on Lois's shoulder and was gratified when she reached up and took his hand. "It's important. Do you think you could get in touch with him for us?"

"Possibly," Clark told them. He had his back to them as he shrugged out of the pleated white shirt, laying it down as he picked up the knit one.

Richard heard Lois's sharp intake of breath, the murmured "Oh my God." She was squeezing his hand so hard it hurt. He looked down to see Lois staring at Clark's naked back. Richard was surprised to see how muscular and well-defined Clark's upper body was. There wasn't an excess ounce of fat on the man. *God, he's in great shape. How does he do it? He doesn't have any more time than I do. No wonder Lois... No, Lois fell for Superman, not Clark. And that was a long time ago.*

"Oh my God," Lois repeated. Her eyes were wide with astonishment and... was that *recognition?*

"Lois?" Clark asked, half turning to face her. Richard's eyes followed Lois's gaze to a faint white semi-circular scar on Clark's back, over his right kidney.

"Um, Clark, when did you get that scar?" Richard asked, fearing the answer he was going to hear. Lois's reaction had told him everything.

"Scar?" Clark asked as though he hadn't understood the question.

"The one on your back," Lois said in a choked voice. "How did you get that?"

"Oh." Clark took a deep breath, took off his glasses and pulled the knit shirt over his head. He didn't put his glasses back on. "I think you both know where that came from, and when."

*It all fit. Oh, God, it all fit. The same height, same build, same coloring, both gone for five-plus years, both back in Metropolis on the same day. Clark left Metropolis for Chicago. Superman left Metropolis for the rest of the world. Glasses. Clark wore glasses. That was what Jason meant.* "Just one question," Richard managed to choke out.

"Just one?" Clark seemed amused.

"Are you really Clark or...?"

"My birth name is Kal El, but I've been Clark since I was, oh, about two, two and-a-half, maybe? When I first came to Earth. I don't actually remember being anyone else," Clark said. "So Clark Kent is who I am, a farm boy from the edge of the Bible Belt who happens to be a pretty good writer. The other part, well's that's what I do, what I can do. Until I was eighteen, krypton was an inert gas, not a planet. Now, you said you needed to talk to Superman? So talk."

He sat down in the upholstered chair on the far side of the sitting area, facing Richard and Lois. His elbows were on his knees as he watched, waited. It was a little disconcerting, Superman wearing Clark Kent's clothes, Superman's eyes looking out of Clark Kent's face.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lois asked softly.

"You knew, once," he said. "It didn't work. It was an impossible situation and you know the rest."

"And when you came back?" she asked, voice getting louder in anger. "Why didn't you say something then? I had your child, damn it."

"You never gave me the chance," he reminded her quietly.

She sat back heavily in the chair and sighed, the anger suddenly gone out of her. "I'm sorry," she said. *What happened between them?*

"So am I, but it doesn't change a thing," Clark told her. "So, what about Jason?"

Lois didn't say a word as she stared at her feet.

Richard spoke. "I don't know if Perry's told you what's been happening with Jason at school..."

"Perry and I don't talk all that often," Clark said.

"Jason needs to be around his biological father, his real father," Richard said. "He needs to be around you, to learn from you."

"You said something about school?" Esther asked, coming into the room. Richard had no idea how long she'd been listening. He nodded.

"First grade was pretty rough for him," Richard said. "Superman isn't nearly as popular as he used to be in Metropolis, but Jason was, still is, your number one fan. He got into fights over it and the school has a zero tolerance policy on violence. It's a little better this year. Therapy's helped a lot. He's not fighting, but he was attacked and the boy who did it ended up with a broken jaw. I have no idea how it happened. I just know that Jason doesn't know his own strength and nothing we've tried has helped. We're at our wits end. At least I am."

Richard didn't mention that he could no longer allow Jason to hug him, or Lois. Jason had broken two of Richard's ribs not many days before the incident at school. Those ribs still hurt. *A father shouldn't be afraid of his eight-year-old son.*

"So, what do you want me to do?" Clark asked. "Neutralize his powers?"

"You can do that?" Richard asked. It was something that hadn't occurred to him. Lois hadn't mentioned the possibility. *What else hasn't she told me?*

"It might be possible," Clark told him. "The Fortress neutralized my powers once and it was hell getting them back. But he's half-human. It might kill him." He looked at them both earnestly. "So tell me, what are you asking?"

Lois spoke, finally. "If you lived in Metropolis, it would be simpler. We could arrange for visitations, have him stay with you and Esther on weekends, during the summer. You could teach him what he needs to know."

"But I don't live in Metropolis and I doubt we'll be moving back there any time soon," Clark reminded her. Esther came to stand behind him, hands on his shoulders.

"I know," Lois admitted. "But we were thinking, maybe the two of you could take him for the summer?"

Clark stared at his hands a long moment and there was something in his expression, something determined and sad at the same time, something very Superman-like. If Richard had any doubts as to who was sitting in that chair, they were gone now.

Richard felt his heart go into his throat. *Lois thought he was such a pushover. She was wrong and I'm going to lose my son to his real father. I'm losing my son to Clark Kent. Not to Superman. To Clark Kent.*

"Esther and I have talked about getting some land, a house, well outside of the city. A place with room, with fields, away from prying eyes." He swallowed hard, as if he didn't really want to go to the next step but had no choice. "I'll make you a counter proposal. How about I acknowledge paternity? Esther and I get custody, and you have him on holidays and summer breaks. There are some real good schools in the area."

Lois tensed under Richard's hand. He felt her take a deep breath to calm herself. "There are some legal issues to be taken care of, as well as a court-approved DNA test." She looked up at Richard, her expression bleak. "It would be better for all of us if we didn't have to take this to court."

"And doesn't Jason get a say in all this?" Richard wondered aloud. *Don't I get a say? This*

*wasn't what we discussed. He's my son too.*

"Do you really think Jason will object to living with Superman?" Lois asked, standing to leave. "Besides, we're going to have Child Protective Services on us if we have anymore incidents at school like the last one." She turned back to Clark. "We're going to be at that conference all week. You'll be there, won't you?"

"Yes, as much as I'd like to get out of it," Clark admitted, getting to his feet. "I'm giving one of the seminars."

"We can work out some details over lunch then," Lois told him. "We really screwed things up, didn't we?"

"Whether we did or not no longer matters, does it?" he asked. "We made our choices. And I, for one, am happy with mine."

Esther put her arm around his waist, whispered something in his ear Richard couldn't make out.

"By the way, I'm told congratulations are in order," Clark said, looking at Richard. Richard gave him a puzzled look and Clark chuckled. "You two have things to talk about tonight. And not just Jason."

**Then:**

"I'll kill him," she was screaming. "I swear I'll kill him for this."

"Remember your breathing, Lois," Richard was reminding 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 Lois. Push," he 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."

Lois laid back to rest for a moment until the next contraction hit. Then her face screwed up in concentration and effort once more.

"Push, you can do it!" Richard urged her. Then there was a new sound in the room, a wail of outrage from between Lois's 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 son," the doctor said.

Lois sat up a little and looked down at the cause of all her recent effort. The doctor clamped off the umbilical cord and offered Richard the scissors to cut it. As soon as the baby was free, Lois picked him up, checking his fingers and toes.

"We need to get him cleaned up," one of the nurses told them, taking him from her arms and bundling him in a cotton blanket. "Does he have a name yet?"

"Jason... Jason Samuel White," Lois told her.

Richard looked down at the newborn in the nurse's arms. *His son?* Not biologically, he knew that, but his son, nonetheless. *But what will I do when, if, his real father comes back?*

**Seven Months After The Wedding:**

"She's beautiful," Richard White told his wife of three years, kissing her on the forehead. "Ya done good."

Lois gave him a tired grin. Richard could see the exhaustion in her face. She wasn't as young as she'd been when Jason was born. But the baby was strong and healthy. This would be Lois's last child. Her doctor had already warned them not to have more children.

"I should call Jason," Richard said. "Let him know he has a sister."

"He'll still be at school," Lois reminded him. "Call Clark or Esther. They'll let him know, and Clark will drop Jason off this weekend for Christmas. Winter break starts this Friday. That'll make my parents happy and maybe they'll lay off for a while about the whole custody thing."

Lois's parents had been infuriated when Jason when to live with his father. Neither understood Lois's reasons for sending Jason to a suburb of Chicago of all places. They didn't understand how sending Jason away from his mother, his family, was going to help him. But, Jason seemed to be happy and was doing well in school so far this year -- he was pulling down A's in all his classes, except P.E. of course.

Clark and Esther had moved into a rural area with acreage, a big house, goats, chickens, two horses. Jason had room to run, to practice as his powers came in. His allergies were almost non-existent. Esther and Clark's first child was due on Valentine's Day and Richard realized he really was glad for them.

Richard looked down at his newborn daughter. Her tiny starfish hands flailed about as she rooted about for a nipple. *I never thought I'd see this. I have a daughter. She's mine and no one can take her away from me.* "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Richard," Lois said. "Don't ever forget that."

"But do you regret...?" he began.

She put a finger to his lips. "I don't regret choosing you over him. Clark's a good man, but I'm not very good at sharing. *You're* the one I married. *You're* the one I chose. *You* are the father of my daughter. *You* are the man I love."

"Do you regret giving Jason over to him?" he asked. Richard wondered if that part would ever stop hurting. Lassiter said the grief over breaking up his family would lessen eventually. He wondered if it ever would. *He was my son for nearly eight years.*

"I wish there'd been another way," Lois admitted. "I wish Clark could have seen his way to coming back to Metropolis, to the Planet. But he's happy where he is and he's good with Jason. Jason's going to be okay. We're all going to be okay."

## Epilogue

Lois Lane looked over at the tall dark-haired man sitting across from her in the hotel coffee shop. He hadn't aged much in the past twenty years since his wedding. He was fifty-seven and looked closer to forty, except for the gray at his temples. She suspected that was combed in to keep his two identities separate. Superman wasn't gray. Clark Kent was. Lois knew she hadn't fared quite so well. There was more than a little gray in her hair, but she figured she'd earned every bit of it.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make Esther's funeral," she told him, taking a sip of her coffee. They hadn't simply sat down and talked in -- how many years? *Much too long*. They'd hardly said more than two words to one another since Jason's high school graduation, and that was ten years ago. Tonight, after their son's wedding rehearsal dinner seemed as good a time as any to catch up. "It must have been awful for you, not being able..."

He shook his head, hair falling over his forehead. He still kept his hair unfashionably long, bangs hanging over his glasses. "She... it was her choice. A quick passing due to an accident, or a slow painful one from inoperable cancer. She died instantly. It was no one's fault. Jason and Amanda offered to delay the wedding but she wouldn't have wanted that."

"How are the rest of the kids handling it?"

"Well, you've talked to Jason, I'm sure. Matthew is gifted the same way his mother was. He knows she'll be back. Laura and Jon take more after me, but they're doing okay. They don't see her quite the same way Matt and I do, but they know she's around, watching, smiling." He smiled at her gently. "Death is not the end, only another door."

"Do you really believe that?" Lois asked.

He nodded. "I know that's what she believed. I've no reason to doubt her," he said quietly.

"Will your in-laws be at the wedding?" she asked.

"Maybe," he told her. "The general and I don't see eye to eye on a lot of things, and you know he wasn't well pleased when Esther and I took Jason to raise. He was definitely not happy when he discovered that just because I married his daughter, it didn't give him some hold over me. I think he was thinking that just because I don't approve of violence, that I was a pushover."

"More the fool him. He obviously never read your Nobel essay," Lois commented. "You were never a pushover."

"Except for you..." He smiled again, but there was a wistful sadness in it. "How's Richard doing?"

She gave him a crooked smile at the change of topic. "His new trophy wife is keeping him hopping. I could have told him that, but he was taking his late mid-life crisis so seriously. New car, new job, new wife. Sam isn't speaking to him at the moment. She thinks he made an incredibly stupid mistake leaving us for a bimbo only a few years older than she is."

"Hmm... self-expression is not one of Samantha White's problems," Clark said with a laugh. "How old is she now?"

"Nineteen and a half going on forty," Lois told him. "But you know that. She's interning at the Planet this summer."

He chuckled. "I'm trying not to interfere. Wouldn't look right," Clark admitted. "But she does take after you. Thank God for spell check."

She peered into his face. He still looked too young to be managing editor of the Daily Planet. He'd accepted that position five years earlier, after Perry White had died of a heart attack in the middle of the bullpen. She knew that was the only reason he'd returned to

Metropolis, to take the reins of the Daily Planet after spending two years as editor of the Chicago Star. He was now the last of the old guard, the last of those who rose to management after starting in print-on-paper. They were both dinosaurs.

"What are you going to do when you can't hide that fact that you're not aging as fast as you should be?"

"Oh, I figure in a few years, ten at the outside, Clark Kent will have a fatal accident, plane crash in the deep ocean, I think. And I'll relocate somewhere, maybe Canada. I'm already starting to outlive my peers."

"How lonely for you," she said, meaning it.

"Better than the alternative, I guess," he said. "How's L.A. treating you?"

"Not bad," she admitted. "The Times isn't the Planet, of course."

"Of course," he repeated with a gentle smile. "There's always room at the Planet for you, if you want to come back," he said.

"You'd do that for a washed up old bitch?" she asked.

"I would do that for Lois Lane, the best of the best," he told her. "Even if she is a bitch."

"I think that was always my problem. I was so wrapped up in being the best, being a woman in a man's field, that being a bitch just came too easily," she said. She laid a small hand on his larger one. "Clark, I want you to know how sorry I am about everything that happened back then."

"I think we both made more than our share of mistakes back then," he said.

"But have we learned anything?"

"I hope so," he said, sipping his own coffee. He still fixed it the way she remembered, three sugars, two creams. "It would be very boring to have to keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again." He gave her a solemn look. "You know, even when you hated me openly, I couldn't hate you back. I just couldn't."

"You took Jason away from me," she reminded him.

"I did what I had to, for his sake," he told her. "You know that. And it's worked out. He's a good man, and it's nice to have a little help at the other job."

There was a long silence as the waitress came by and refilled their coffees. "Clark, it's taken me a long time to figure out what happened, to come to terms with what I did to you," she said. "I think the part of the problem was, I did love you, but I couldn't have you. I wanted it all and couldn't have any of it. I was furious. At me, you, the universe."

"You *did* love me? Past tense?"

"I don't think I ever stopped. I simply gave up trying for the fairy tale ending," she said softly. "I thought you didn't want me. At the time, I thought that if you wouldn't fight for me, wouldn't fight *with* me, you couldn't possibly love me. And then Richard was there for me, and you had Esther."

"And now?"

She gave him a cheeky grin. "They say there's only one way to console a widow. I wonder if that holds true for a widower?"

"My dear Ms. Lane," he grinned back at her. "Are propositioning me? The woman arrogant enough to tell Superman to bugger off?"

"We're both free agents now. Clark Kent's not a bad looking fellow. And he has a better track record for sticking around than Superman has."

"But what will the children say?" His tone was facetious.

"Well, the eldest thinks it's about time his parents got their heads screwed on straight,"



Jason White-Kent announced, walking up to them. "Go get a room. Just make sure you're back at the church in time for my wedding ceremony, okay?"