

Fictitious Persons

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Rated PG

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Summary: A little girl is found unconscious by the side of a country road in Delaware. When she wakes in the hospital the next morning, she has an impossible story to tell.

Best read in a non-plain-text format.

Chapter 1: Meet Jane Doe

Dr. Emily Jordan took a long drink from her styrofoam cup of coffee, then made a face. “Yuck.” She hesitated, then drank the rest. *I need the caffeine tonight.* She put the cup on the desk in front of her, in one of the few spots not covered in papers, then reached back and redid the scrunchie holding her dark blonde hair in a ponytail. She closed her eyes and massaged her forehead.

She went back to work, hoping to get a bit more done before the next interruption. However, a moment later she heard the siren of an ambulance pulling up at the emergency entrance.

So much for finishing that report. She stood quickly, hurried to the door of the staff room, pulled it open, and nearly collided with a nurse, an older woman, who’d been about to knock.

“Doctor? That little girl the cops found out on Cedar Beach Road just arrived.”

“Thanks, Jean.” Emily followed Jean out into the E.R. proper; thankfully, it was empty at the moment. It was late on a Wednesday night and there hadn’t been much traffic, so far, and no bad trauma cases — yet. This was her first rotation in the E.R. at Milford Memorial, and she was still getting used to dealing with what came through the doors some nights.

At that moment two EMTs were maneuvering a gurney through the ambulance entrance; they were followed by a Sussex County police officer. Emily hurried over to the patient, and cringed inwardly. A pretty little girl, about eleven, with beautiful light golden blonde hair. Emily couldn’t help but think of her little sister, who was only a couple of years older.

The girl was still unconscious, as the EMTs had radioed. Emily reached out a hand to her patient’s forehead, and this time winced for real — she was quite hot. Jean was already taking her temperature.

Emily turned to the EMTs. “You called in her temperature as 120? She should be having seizures, or be dead. The world record is like 115, and that was an adult.”

Jean finished and stood up, shaking her head. “I get 106.2.” She immediately set about putting a cuff on the girl to take her blood pressure.

Emily frowned. “Still pretty high, but reasonable.”

The EMTs looked at each other. The older one, a stocky Hispanic man in his forties, shook his head. “We took it twice, Doc. And she was *really* hot to the touch.” His partner, a tall young man with bright red hair and freckles, nodded.

Emily shook her head. “Never mind that now.” She’d been taking the girl’s pulse as Jean measured her pressure. Steady at 110, definitely elevated but not unusual for a patient with a fever.

Jean announced, “88 over 60, Doctor.”

The policeman tried to interrupt. “Can we...”

Emily held her index finger up to hold him off. “A bit low; between the fever and the exposure she’s probably dehydrated.” She listened with her stethoscope; breathing and heart sounded

normal.

She shook her small patient gently. “Honey?” There was no response. She pulled out her penlight, pulled up the little girl’s eyelids and shone light in her blue eyes. They reacted as expected. “Pupils normal.” She sighed slightly in relief; the girl wasn’t dying, despite the urgent radio from the ambulance. Emily wasn’t sure why she was unconscious and feverish, but at least she was stable.

She turned to the policeman. “I’m sorry, you were saying, Officer...?” She held a hand out. “I’m Emily Jordan.”

The officer, in his forties with salt and pepper hair and a mustache, shook her hand. “Ed Kabanek, Sussex County Sheriff’s office. Doctor, given the circumstances, we’d like you to examine her for signs of assault.”

Emily felt her stomach lurch, but nodded. “Just a moment.” She turned to the EMTs again. “Guys, can you tell me anything else?”

The two EMTs shook their heads. “It was a short trip over from where they found her. About five minutes. We just had time to take her vitals and check for trauma...” The older man trailed off again.

Emily shrugged. “You might need to calibrate your equipment, guys. 120...” She shook her head. “We’ll take it from here; you can go take care of the paperwork. And thanks.” After another glance between the two of them, the EMTs waved and headed off.

Emily turned to Jean. “Let’s get her into a gown, OK?” Jean nodded and moved off with the gurney, pushing it into one of the curtained exam cubicles.

Emily turned back to the policeman. “OK, what were the circumstances? How did you find her?” She beckoned him and they followed Jean into the cubicle. The nurse was already undressing the little girl, and Officer Kabanek averted his eyes.

“We got a call from a motorist who noticed her, on Cedar Beach Road just past the fork with McColley. I was the responding officer. She was just lying by the side of the road wearing those clothes.” He nodded at the clothes that were now piled on a bedside table: a pale blue turtleneck and jeans with hearts embroidered on the pockets.

Emily frowned. “A bit thin for October. Nothing else, no bag, no jacket, nothing to identify her?”

Officer Kabanek shook his head. “Nothing. She didn’t have anything with her, like she would if she was a runaway. That’s why we think someone dumped her there. And that’s why...”

Emily frowned again. The little girl was quite pretty and an obvious target. “Yeah,” she sighed. “Officer, if you could step out for a moment?” She pointed outside the privacy curtain, then turned back to her patient.

Ed Kabanek blew out a sigh. “Nothing?”

Emily was equally relieved. “Nothing. She’s fine.” She turned to look at the girl, who still lay unconscious on the gurney. “Why would someone dump a little girl by the side of a country road? Cold feet?” Ed shrugged. “Do you think she’s local?”

The officer shook his head. “No, there’s no missing person reports locally that match her description. We’ve passed it on to the FBI. Do you think we’ll be able to talk to her tonight?”

Emily frowned. “If it were just the fever we should be able to rouse her. It’s already dropped to 103.2. There’s no sign of anything else that could explain it, either; as far as I can tell her basic brain functions are OK. Without knowing why she’s unconscious I can’t say when she’ll wake up.” She paused. “I have a hunch from her responses that she might be drugged. We’ll know more when we get the report on the blood sample back from the lab, but that test’ll take hours. If she *is* drugged, it should wear off by morning. If we can’t rouse her then we’ll have to do more tests.” Emily felt a shiver of unease. *I hope the poor*

kid doesn't have brain damage...

Jean came into the exam room wheeling an IV pole in front of her. Emily stood up. "Did you get a white count, Jean?"

"It's only slightly elevated, Doctor."

Emily frowned, perplexed. "Well *that's* weird."

"I know!" said Jean. "After a fever like that?"

Emily shook her head. "Huh. Then just saline for now; I want to get her re-hydrated." The nurse nodded. "If the fever goes back up we'll start an antibiotic to be safe. And let's get her into a room; she's obviously going to be here overnight."

She turned back to the officer. "Do you have any idea how long she was lying out there?"

He shook his head. "Nope. From the time the call came in to the time she was here at the E.R. was about fifteen minutes, though. We spoke to the motorist and she said she called it in immediately. She pulled over and stayed with the girl until we could get there."

Emily raised an eyebrow, and Ed responded, "I know it sounds suspicious, but it was one of the local farmers. Unlikely, but whoever gets the case will look into it just the same."

"Speaking of which," he said, rising, "I'd best be on my way. A detective from the Milford police will pay you a visit tomorrow if she's awake. I don't know if we'll hear back from the FBI by then or not." They shook hands again. "We need to talk to this young lady as soon as we can."

Maria Santarosa stepped into room 112 to check the vitals on the young Jane Doe who'd been brought in late last night. It was around seven-thirty and the room was starting to brighten as the rising sun lit the world outside.

Maria took the girl's wrist for a pulse and was pleasantly surprised when her young patient started to stir. The girl's eyes fluttered open and she blinked, confused, at Maria.

"Good morning, honey," chirped the nurse. "How are you feeling?"

"Kinda sleepy," replied the girl. "Where..." She looked around. "Is this a hospital?"

"Right you are, honey. An ambulance brought you here last night; they found you by the side of the road. What's your name, by the way?"

"Kara Kent." She yawned. "With a K."

"Well, Kara with a K, I think some folks have lots of questions they'll want to ask you, but first I need to take your temperature. Let me just put this under your tongue, OK?" Kara nodded and acquiesced.

While the thermometer did its job, Maria pushed the call button by the side of the bed. The box squawked to life: "Yes?"

"Mina, page Dr. Jordan and tell her the patient in 112 is awake. She wanted to know right away." She smiled at the girl. "And her name is Kara Kent. With a K." She winked at Kara.

"Got it, thanks."

The thermometer beeped, and Maria pulled it out. "99.5. That's a bit on the high side, but still normal."

"Are my parents here?" asked Kara anxiously.

"Well, honey, we didn't know who you were so we couldn't call them. I bet they're really worried about you, so let's call them right away. Can you tell me how to get in touch with them?"

"My mom's cell phone is 668-555-2049." Maria pulled out a small notebook and jotted the information down.

"And what's her name?"

"Lois." Kara raised her arm. "What's this thing in my hand?" She made a face. "It hurts a little."

"That's an intravenous line, sweetheart. We had to put that in you last night because we couldn't wake you up to have a drink of water, and you needed some. I think now that you're awake we can take that out a little later, OK?" Kara nodded. "Let me go

take this number to someone who can call your parents. Your doctor will be in to see you in just a minute, OK?"

"Do you think my parents will be here soon?" asked Kara, still worried.

"I'm sure they'll get here as fast as they can once they find out where you are, honey, so don't you worry. We'll take good care of you for them." Kara nodded and seemed to relax.

Emily Jordan came through the door just as Maria was leaving. She had dark smudges under her brown eyes, being near the end of an overlong shift, but she pulled out a bright smile for her young patient. "Hi there! My name is Emily; I'm your doctor. You're Kara, right? It's nice to finally meet you!"

Kara smiled cautiously. "Hi Dr. Emily. It's nice to meet you too."

Emily pulled the chart from the end of the bed and scanned the fresh vitals. "You look like you're doing much better this morning! How do you feel?"

Kara thought. "OK, I guess. A little tired and my arms and legs hurt. How did I get here?"

Emily smiled and sat on the bed next to Kara, brushing the girl's hair back. "Well, you had a bad fever last night so that explains the aches; they should go away soon. As for how you got here, that's what we'd like to know, sweetie. The police found you by the side of a road, and you were brought here by ambulance. We couldn't wake you up last night, though, so the police will be back today to ask you some questions."

"Do you think I can go home soon?"

"You're looking pretty healthy this morning, but we want to make sure before we send you home, OK? We wouldn't want you to fall over on your face because you're still sick!" Emily mimed passing out, making Kara giggle.

Just then there was a knock at the door. "Breakfast..." A candy-striper came in with a tray, and set up the bed table while Emily raised the bed up.

Emily smiled. "Why don't you eat breakfast, honey, and then rest or watch some TV? I'll come back when the police are here, OK? And I'm sure your parents will be here as soon as they can."

Emily checked her watch and sighed. She knew she should go home and get some sleep, but she wanted to be with Kara Kent when the police arrived to question her. Meanwhile, she could catch up on her paperwork; she sat in a corner at the nurse's station.

A phone rang, but phones were always ringing here. She paid it no attention until Maria Santarosa called out "Dr. Jordan?"

Emily didn't look up from her report. "Yes?"

"That was Administration. The phone number for Kara Kent's mother didn't work so they haven't been able to contact her. We need to get their full names and address."

Emily nodded and wearily got to her feet. "Maybe she remembered it wrong. Poor kid's probably stressed out."

Just then a short, middle-aged black man appeared at the nurse's station. He flashed a badge. "Detective Malcolm Spalding, Milford Police. I'm here to interview a kid you have. Possible kidnap victim, name's Kara Kent? She was brought in last night and we got a call she was conscious."

Emily smiled a tired smile. "Perfect timing, Detective. I'm Emily Jordan, Kara's doctor. I was just about to go see her; why don't you come with me? She's down in 112."

They walked down the hall together. "Have you contacted her parents?"

Emily shook her head. "The phone number she gave us doesn't work. I think she must have remembered it incorrectly."

"Do you have any more information since last night? The officer's report said you suspected she was drugged."

Emily nodded firmly, once. "Yes, the lab report came back positive. There were traces of chloroform in her blood."

“Very likely a kidnapping, then. I guess whoever it was got cold feet. Or maybe they got what they wanted. We haven’t heard back from the FBI yet; maybe they already know about this case.”

Emily knocked on the door of 112 and peeked inside. Kara was watching TV. “Hey Kara, it’s me again.”

Kara looked over. “Hi, Dr. Emily! You have weird TV here. It has shows I’ve never heard of before!”

Emily laughed. “That’s the first time I’ve ever had a patient say that!” She stepped inside, and gestured to her companion. “This is Detective Spalding. He’s from the police and wants to ask you some questions. Do you think you can turn the TV off for now?”

Kara nodded and complied. She smiled shyly at the man. “Hi.” Suddenly she looked to the open doorway. “Are my mom and dad here yet?” She bit her lip nervously. “What’s taking them so long?”

Emily shook her head. “They’re not here yet, sweetheart. That’s one of the things we need to talk to you about.” She sat down heavily in the one chair in the room. She looked up at the detective, feeling guilty, but his attention was on the girl.

“Hi Kara, I’m the detective who’s been assigned to your case...”

Kara tilted her head. “My case? What happened?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out. All we know so far is that someone used chloroform to put you to sleep, then left you by the side of a road. It looks like a kidnapping—”

“I was kidnapped?” interrupted Kara anxiously.

“It sure looks that way, but you’re safe now, OK? We won’t let anyone hurt you. Do you think you can answer a few questions for me, so we can figure out what happened last night?”

Kara nodded slowly. “I guess so...”

“First, what’s your full name?”

“Kara Zoe Kent.”

Detective Spalding scribbled in his notebook. “Uh-huh. What’s your date of birth?”

“Umm, June 29, 2000. I’m eleven and a quarter. I just started sixth grade.” She frowned slightly.

The detective nodded. “And what are your parents’ full names?”

“Lois Joanne Lane and Clark Jerome Kent.”

There was an awkward silence. The detective found his voice first. “Excuse me... what did you say their names were?”

“Lois Joanne Lane and Clark Jerome Kent. They’re reporters at the Daily Planet. Well, Mom’s an Assistant Editor now.” Kara looked between the two adults, confused. “Do you know them?”

Chapter 2: Comic Book Confidential

After a hurried aside to Kara to go back to watching TV “while we have a chat,” Detective Spalding hustled Emily out into the corridor.

“OK,” he said in a low voice. “What exactly is going on here? Why is she saying her parents are comic book characters?”

Emily held up her hands to pacify him. “This is a surprise to me too, Detective. I have no idea why she’s answering this way. She sounds sincere...”

“I noticed, or we’d be having a different conversation,” said the detective. “Is she mentally ill? Is this some kinda side effect from the chloroform?” His voice stayed quiet but grew angry. “Could the kidnappers have done this to her, driven her crazy?”

Emily bristled at his choice of words. “She may be under a delusion of some kind but we’d need to have a professional determine that.”

The detective rubbed his head. “She’s our only witness but I can’t use any of this!” He sighed. “Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Who’s next, Santa? Elvis?”

Emily blew out her breath and nodded. “I understand,

Detective.” She rubbed her eyes; they felt gritty. “Let me call in our pediatric psychiatrist, and we’ll see what she has to say.”

Kara looked over to the door when it opened, and noted that besides Dr. Emily and the grumpy policeman there was now a third adult: a middle-aged Asian woman with glasses, another doctor judging by her white coat. She figured she should turn off the TV again and did so.

“Hi...” she offered. “Aren’t my parents here *yet*?” The adults’ expressions were unreadable.

“Umm, about that, honey,” said Dr. Emily. “Are you sure that number you gave us was correct? We couldn’t get through.”

Kara nodded. “Yes, that’s my mom’s cell phone; 668-555-2049. I call her all the time. Sometimes she doesn’t answer if she doesn’t know the caller ID.” She thought a moment. “Is my phone here? I can call her.”

Dr. Emily said, “I’m sorry, sweetie, but you didn’t have anything except the clothes you were wearing.”

Kara’s eyes widened. “It’s all gone? Oh *no*... my new *phone!* And my backpack, and all my books and homework...” She looked close to tears.

Dr. Emily came over and sat next to her, taking her hand. “Don’t worry about that right now, sweetie. Things can be replaced; it’s *much* more important that you’re safe.” Kara nodded reluctantly.

“Now, we want to understand what happened to you.” She gestured at the new adult. “This is Dr. Penny. She’s going to help us figure things out. Can we ask you some more questions?”

Kara looked among the three adults. “I guess so... You really can’t reach my mom? I can give you my dad’s number. Or Uncle Perry, or Uncle Jimmy...”

The detective grimaced briefly. “We’ll get to that, Kara. Why don’t we start from the beginning?”

Detective Spalding rubbed his eyes again. He turned to the two women who sat at the table in the tiny conference room. “Let me see if I can summarize. Her name is Kara Kent. She lives with her parents, Lois Lane and Clark Kent, at 348 Hyperion Avenue in Metropolis, Delaware. She also has an older brother, Jordan, and a little sister, Laura.” The two women frowned at his slightly mocking tone.

“She gives us a whole series of phone numbers, for her parents and for her ‘uncle’ Jimmy Olsen and her ‘uncle’ Perry White. None of these numbers have a valid area code. She apologizes that she doesn’t remember the numbers for her grandparents, Jonathan and Martha Kent and Sam and Ellen Lane, or her Aunt Lucy and Uncle Ron in San Jose.

“She remembers being on her way home from school, ‘Larson Middle School,’ when she suddenly felt intense pain all through her body. She remembers a sweet smell, then nothing else till she woke up here.” He held his hands out. “Aside from the smell of chloroform, there isn’t a single thing about that story that isn’t straight out of a comic book!”

Dr. Penelope Tong cleared her throat. “Detective, we all know what she’s saying is some kind of fantasy. I can’t tell you much after just one session observing her, but like you and Dr. Jordan I’m reasonably sure she believes what she’s saying.”

“But *why* would she be saying it?”

“I don’t know that yet. Children her age engage in fantasy play frequently; the difference here is that she really seems to believe it. In such cases it’s often because the fabrication helps shield the patient from an unpleasant reality. It’s very elaborate, but children’s fantasies often are.”

Emily was nearly dead on her feet but chimed in, “So where do we go from here?”

Penny looked her over. “Well, *you* should go home and get some sleep. As for Kara—”

“Assuming that’s her real name.”

Penny raised an eyebrow at the detective. “As for Kara, does she still need to be hospitalized?”

Emily thought it over. “No... If this were a normal case we’d discharge her this morning. But...”

Penny continued, “But without knowing her real parents we’ll need to get Children’s Services involved. She’ll have to be placed in a foster home—”

Detective Spalding interrupted. “It has to be in this area or it’ll impede the investigation. If I know Children’s Services they’ll want to ship her off to Wilmington.”

Emily added, “I wouldn’t want her to leave the area either. She had a very high fever last night. Her temperature is still slightly elevated and we need to keep an eye on her for a few days at least.”

Penny nodded. “I’d like to keep her local, too, because I don’t think it would be in her best interests to start dealing with an entirely different set of people. I’d like to keep seeing her, to try to understand why she’s clinging to this fantasy and start helping her away from it. And hopefully while I’m doing that you and your colleagues can make some progress tracking down who she really is.”

The detective thought for a while. “We’ll just have to get her photo and fingerprints and work from those.” He shook his head. “Damn, but this case is turning out to be a lot stranger than I expected. And a lot harder.”

“Meanwhile,” said Penny, “we’re going to have to break it to her that Superman isn’t flying in for the rescue.”

Kara lay on her side, staring at the wall; the TV was off. She was worried and upset. After the last set of questions from the policeman she knew something was up. And she knew there was *absolutely no way* her mom would not be here by now if something *wasn’t* up.

The door opened again; she sat up in bed as Dr. Penny came in. “Where’s Dr. Emily? And the policeman?”

The adult smiled. “Dr. Emily is really tired, Kara. She’s been working for about fourteen hours straight and needed to go home and get some sleep. And Detective Spalding had other things he needed to do.”

Kara nodded slowly. “Can you tell me where my parents are? Did you try my dad, or Uncle Jimmy or Uncle Perry?” She read the expression on Penny’s face. “Can’t you find even *one* of them?”

Penny hesitated. “Kara, about that... do you really believe your father is Superman?”

Kara’s reaction took Penny by surprise: she giggled merrily. “My dad... *Superman*? That’s... wait... are you *serious*?”

Penny nodded.

Kara rolled her eyes. “Of *course* Dad isn’t *Superman*. He doesn’t fly around and rescue people. I mean, I love my dad, but *Superman*? He can’t even see without his glasses!”

Now it was Penny’s turn to be confused. “Wait... so your father isn’t Clark Kent?”

Kara frowned. “No, that’s his name. What does that have to do with Superman? My dad is from Kansas, and Superman’s an alien from Krypton.” She rolled her eyes again. “As if.”

“But... everyone knows Clark Kent is really Superman, Kara.”

Kara peered at the psychiatrist. “Why do you keep saying that? And if you know who he is, why won’t you call him?” She frowned in suspicion, even as her eyes grew shiny. “What is going on? Why won’t you let me see my parents?”

Penny sighed; there was no easy way to do this. “Kara, we haven’t called him, because... because Clark Kent is a fictional character. So is Lois Lane.”

Kara was incredulous. “*What*?” Her eyes started leaking

tears. “They are *not*! They’re my *parents*!” She hugged her knees and started to cry in earnest, “I want my mom and dad... I want to go home...”

Penny came over and sat on the bed; she reached out an arm. Kara cringed away at first, but slowly leaned over and accepted the embrace. “I don’t understand... This is so *stupid*! Why are you saying these things? It doesn’t make any sense!”

Penny slowly rubbed Kara’s back and let her cry, until she seemed to wind down. She then held her gently at arm’s length with one hand, and reached for some tissues from the bedside stand with the other. “Here honey...” She waited patiently while Kara wiped her face and blew her nose.

“Kara, I know you believe what you’re telling us about your family and where you’re from. But you need to understand that everyone else believes what I’ve just told you. As far as we know, everyone and everything you’ve mentioned are characters and places from stories. Superman is a character in a comic book, and so are Clark Kent and Lois Lane. Metropolis isn’t a real city—”

“I *live* in Metropolis! It is *too* a real city!”

“I hear you, Kara, but to me and everyone else, it’s not.”

“But...” Kara couldn’t finish and looked down, her brow furrowed. After a while, she looked back up. “How do I know you’re telling the truth about what everyone thinks? You’re the first person I’ve ever heard say stuff like this. Mom always says you have to be careful about believing what people say. I mean, you *seem* like a nice person...”

Penny smiled. “I’m glad you think so. And you’re right, you shouldn’t believe everything you hear from a stranger. How about I bring you some evidence later this afternoon, OK?”

Kara nodded. “But if what you’re saying is true, then... then *why*? And what’s going to happen to me?” Her eyes widened in fear. “Do you think I’m crazy? Are you going to lock me up?”

Penny shook her head. “No, Kara, no. I don’t think you need to be locked up. I don’t understand why you believe what you do, but I don’t think you’re a danger to yourself or to anyone else. As to why, I don’t know. I’m going to keep working with you to figure that out, OK? So is Detective Spalding.” She took Kara’s hand. “No matter what, myself, Dr. Emily, and Detective Spalding are on *your side*. Do you understand? I know you miss your parents, but we’re here for you in the meantime.”

Kara looked down again. “I understand, I guess.” Suddenly her head snapped up. “Wait... if we’re not in Metropolis then where *are* we?”

“Kara, are you OK?”

Penny looked on, concerned. Kara was staring at the comic book that lay open in front of her, but her eyes were unfocused. She’d been leafing through the collection of Superman comics Penny had borrowed from her nephew, as well as surfing the web on Penny’s laptop.

Penny had also lent Kara her cell phone and encouraged her to try calling all the numbers she remembered. After that had failed, her young patient had been nearly silent the entire time as she’d read the material, and then had coasted to a stop like a toy whose battery had run down.

Penny had had to wait until her nephew got home from school. She didn’t know where to buy a comic book or which she should buy, and her nephew had come to mind immediately. He devoured them, and her sister-in-law frequently complained about how many he had.

In the meantime Kara had been discharged. She’d had the opportunity to shower and clothes had been provided for her — the police had taken the clothing she’d been found in for lab tests. However, Children’s Services had yet to put in an appearance, which meant there was nowhere for her to go.

Penny had other patients to see so she’d installed Kara in the waiting room of her office, where one of the nurses kept an eye

on the girl. There was a variety of age-appropriate reading material on hand and she'd picked out a young adult novel. The nurse told Penny that Kara had alternated between reading and staring off into space.

Once Penny had had time to deal with Kara again she'd dashed to her nephew's house and conducted quick negotiations to borrow some of his comic collection. ("Take good care of them! They're classics!") His curiosity piqued, he'd tried to wheedle details about her patient out of her, but relented when she reminded him of her professional obligations. She'd dashed back to the hospital with the comics and some other materials, and set them in front of Kara.

Penny oscillated between concern at Kara's quiet demeanor and hope that she was starting to see some movement towards getting at the truth. She didn't want to push the girl much to start with, but she did want to do an initial trial to see how firm her attachment to her fantasy world was.

"It's all so *weird*. It's kind of right, but it's *not* right."

Penny came over and sat beside her, sparing a glance down at the comic that lay open. "What do you mean, Kara?"

"I mean, Metropolis doesn't look like this, all futuristic and shiny. None of the people I know look like these drawings and they don't really act like these characters... well, maybe some. My dad does wear glasses, but he doesn't have all these gigantic muscles. I think there was someone named Lex Luthor who died a long time ago, but I've never heard about weird monsters or aliens like this Darkseid guy. The only aliens who ever visited were the New Kryptonians. But... the names of the people are all the same, and the Daily Planet and everything... and... I never thought about it before..."

"Thought about what?" Penny was unsure where this was going.

The little blonde girl turned and looked up at Penny, the shimmer of tears in her eyes. "I never thought that Superman could be, like, a normal guy. Like my dad. That he could be Superman just *part* of the time. I mean, I know about secret identities from the *movies* and stuff, but *Superman*..." She took a deep breath. "So if that part is right too, then Dad... he... he... didn't want to tell me... and neither did Mom. And Superman is just a guy in a costume. My dad in a costume." Kara looked down, and a tear slowly made its way down her nose. She just sat there, silent.

Penny didn't understand why Kara was upset. In a fantasy like this the child should be thrilled at the idea of her parent being a superhero — that was the whole point. In fact, it didn't make sense that Kara would have denied it as she had earlier.

The tale was an obvious fabrication, but she still had to work with Kara's feelings: they were real. "Kara, looking at it from your perspective for a moment... do you trust your father?"

"Well I *did*..." the child said morosely.

"Do you think he would do something to hurt you on purpose?"

Kara frowned but didn't answer. After a while she closed the comic and pushed it away, a little roughly. She reached over to the laptop and brought up a map of Delaware Bay. "Metropolis isn't there. Neither is Gotham City."

"Where are they supposed to be?"

"I don't remember exactly where Gotham City is." Kara ran her finger along the New Jersey side of the bay. "Somewhere here, I think, in the middle. But Metropolis," she said, moving her finger across the bay, "is right here." She moved her finger in a broad oval incorporating a large swath of central Delaware, including Milford. Penny marveled at the girl's imagination.

"Dr. Penny?"

"Yes, Kara?"

"You said we were in Milford, Delaware, right? Right here?" She pointed.

"Yes, this is Milford Memorial Hospital. You were found over here." Penny pointed to the spot.

Kara frowned and stared at the map for a while. "I kind of believe you. But... I also know what I remember is true too. I don't know why all the people and places I know are gone, and now there's all these comics with stories about them. But I can't believe they're not real. I can't believe my *family* isn't real." She looked up at Penny, her eyes pleading. "I just *can't*."

Penny kept her face composed but sighed inwardly. This was not going to be a quick process; it would take weeks, at least. "Yes, Kara, I understand. I know they're real to you."

"So what do I do?" She looked so forlorn that Penny couldn't help putting an arm around her.

"Well, someone from the Office of Children's Services is coming, and we're going to talk about finding a foster home for you to stay in for a short time. Do you know what a foster home is?"

"Yes," replied Kara, subdued. A couple of the kids who'd attended Shayne Elementary with her had been in foster care.

"Detective Spalding and I are going to keep working on finding out what happened to you, and with any luck we'll be able to find your parents so you can go home soon." Penny watched closely to see how Kara reacted to the idea, but she merely looked thoughtful.

"And Kara?"

"Yes, Dr. Penny?"

"About your parents, and where you come from... remember what we talked about, what other people think?"

Kara's ears tinged red. "Yeah."

"I think it would be best to talk about that only with the people who already know, like me and Detective Spalding, and Dr. Emily. It will be easier for you. Can you keep it a secret?"

Kara thought that over. "OK."

"There are several situations available up north; I can take her back with me." Reba Morton, a slightly plump middle aged black woman in a business suit, folded her arms. She was from the Office of Children's Services in Wilmington and was not backing down.

Malcolm Spalding tried to control his temper. "Ms. Morton, we hope to reunite her with her parents within a few days. To help with that we need to have her available to our investigation. We can't do that if she's in Wilmington, and this is not a long-term placement. Can't you find anything local?"

Ms. Morton shook her head. "I'm sorry, Detective, but that's precisely the point. We simply don't have an emergency opening in this area right now. If you gave me a week I might be able to find something."

Penny Tong had been watching the two argue back and forth. It was late in the afternoon and they still hadn't figured out what to do with Kara for the evening. "I have to agree with Detective Spalding, Ms. Morton, for medical reasons. She's just been through a very harrowing experience for anyone, much less an eleven year old. Both her doctor, Emily Jordan, and myself feel she'd be better off staying here. I've already started a therapeutic relationship with her."

Ms. Morton opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. "Emily Jordan... why does that name sound familiar?" She furrowed her brow.

Penny smiled; Caitlin Jordan had been a patient for a while. "You're probably thinking of her stepsister, Caitlin. There was some disagreement when the father died about whether she was best off being raised by a single stepsister going through medical school in another state."

"Oh yes, I remember hearing about the case; I didn't handle it. How was it resolved?"

"With a great deal of negotiation, and a fair amount of stress

for the child involved. One of the conditions was that Emily had to take the course for foster parents..." Penny trailed off.

Ms. Morton raised an eyebrow. "So she's qualified?" Penny nodded slowly. "I take it she's not actively seeking to foster, which is why she's not on my list. If you're so keen to keep Kara local..." She tilted her head, and Detective Spalding also turned to look at Penny.

Penny frowned. "I guess neither of us realized Emily qualified, technically. She's pretty overloaded right now."

Ms. Morton folded her arms. "I told you, I don't have any immediate placements in this area. It's either Emily Jordan, or I take Kara back to Wilmington with me."

Chapter 3: All in the Family

"Caitlin?" Emily pounded on her little sister's door. "You need to clean up your room!"

The music blaring from inside lessened somewhat in intensity. "What?"

"You need to clean up your room!"

The door opened and thirteen-year-old Caitlin Jordan appeared, incredulous. "Why? What brought this on?" Caitlin had black hair and green eyes and, unsurprisingly, didn't look anything like her stepsister.

"A woman from Children's Services is coming. I don't know her and we don't want to give her any ideas..."

Caitlin looked uneasy. "Is this whole thing starting again? I don't want to go live with Mom's sister..."

"No, it's not about you this time, but she's going to be here so let's not put the idea in her head, OK?" Emily looked past Caitlin into the room and winced. "Maybe I'd better help?"

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "I don't want you touching my stuff. I'll do it." She moved to turn away, then turned back. "Why is Children's Services coming if it's not about me?"

Emily sighed. "You'd better get started; I'll explain as you go. This may take a while."

Thirty minutes later they sat side by side on the threadbare sofa in their "living room." They lived in a detached mother-in-law unit that had been converted to a rental. It had originally been a moderately spacious one-bedroom cottage, but walls had been moved and it was now a two bedroom with a combined living/dining/kitchen area. It was cramped, but was all Emily could afford while paying off her medical school debt. Fortunately that was nearly done: a modest inheritance from their father had paid for most of her education.

Caitlin was fuming, her arms folded. "I don't understand why she has to stay in *my* room."

"Because your room is bigger, Caitlin. Where would I put her in mine? You've had friends over before and we've got that air mattress."

"Why do you have to do this? Why can't she go somewhere else?"

Emily resisted the urge to roll *her* eyes. "We've been through this." She ticked the points off on her fingers. "It's only for a few days—"

"You *hope*."

"For a variety of reasons I can't discuss now, we don't want her to leave the area. One thing I *can* tell you is she's been through a lot and it would help to have a somewhat familiar face to stay with."

"Did you *volunteer* for this? You're already way too busy!"

Emily blushed slightly. "No. I did say no to start with, but they bribed me."

Caitlin's mood shifted. "Oh?" she inquired innocently. "Is it the kind of bribe you can share?"

"Kind of. They got me moved to an eight hour day shift while Kara is staying with us. I'll be working eight to four."

Caitlin sat up straight. "Really? You'll really be off that awful night shift? You'll be at work when I'm at school and here the rest of the time? No more zombie Emily falling asleep on me?"

"Well, I'll be home an hour or two after you're done with school, and still on call some nights and weekends, but other than that, yes. At least while she's with us."

Caitlin considered this. "OK, she can stay in my room."

Kara glanced back at the front of the hospital as she walked out with Dr. Penny and Ms. Morton. It did indeed read "Milford Memorial Hospital" across the facade. She didn't think Dr. Penny was lying, but Mom had taught her to be skeptical of fantastic claims. Kara couldn't think of a more fantastic claim than her family and hometown being fictions from a comic book.

The sun was just setting as they walked out to the parking lot, the last little bit peeking over the low buildings to the west. Kara scratched absently at her arms as a tiny itch plagued her, and followed the two adults. They stopped next to a red car.

"Kara, honey," said Dr. Penny, "Can you go with Ms. Morton? She'll take you to Dr. Emily's house, like we discussed."

Kara nodded, resigned. "Sure, Dr. Penny." The social worker opened the door and Kara climbed in the back, then buckled her seatbelt. She reached automatically to check that she had her phone with her, then remembered and sagged.

At least she was going to be staying with someone she sort of knew instead of complete strangers. She liked Dr. Emily, and tried to think of it as staying at a friend's house instead of foster care. She hoped she'd get along with Dr. Emily's sister.

She watched out the window as the car turned out onto the street. The trees and general vegetation were familiar. So were the cars with their "Delaware: The First State" plates, though without the usual "Metropolis: City of Tomorrow" specialty plates mixed in.

However, the streets they drove through were suburban, almost rural, not the city that should have been there. She'd accepted what Dr. Penny and the maps had told her, but now she was seeing it with her own eyes. Somehow, Metropolis and her family were now fictitious, or at least everyone thought they were. What had happened?

The gravity of her situation started to sink in. This was not like getting lost at the mall, or going to Girl Scout camp, where you knew you were going home when it was over. Suppose she never saw her family again?

She felt helpless, and utterly lost. She started to sniffle as tears ran down her cheeks.

They passed a school; Kara read "Milford Middle School" off the sign in the fading light. She tried to peer in the windows, wondering what it was like. Her curiosity helped to distract her.

They turned onto a residential street, and after another minute pulled up in front of a house. Kara tried to collect herself. Mom had always told her that if she found herself in a bad situation, the first rule was to keep calm, so you could think.

"We could have walked," she observed as she unbuckled herself. "It wasn't far."

Ms. Morton smiled. "I know, honey, but I need to head back to Wilmington right after this."

They both got out of the car. Kara started towards the front door, but Ms. Morton called after her. "It's around the back, honey. This way." She turned as directed, and Ms. Morton peered at her face. "Have you been crying?"

"I guess so," Kara admitted, looking down.

Ms. Morton squeezed her shoulder. "Everything will be fine, you'll see. I'm sure the police will find your parents in no time."

Kara nodded politely, but couldn't imagine how the police could help.

They walked down the driveway; off to one side was a small

cottage. Ms. Morton reached out and rang the bell. The door opened, rather too quickly, revealing Dr. Emily.

“Ms. Morton?” The social worker nodded. Dr. Emily noticed Kara and smiled. “Hi, Kara. It’s good to see you on your feet.”

Kara was suddenly glad to see a familiar face. “Hi, Dr. Emily.”

“Please come in.” Dr. Emily stood aside, and the two of them entered. Kara was struck by how tiny the cottage was.

Dr. Emily closed the door, and gestured to the girl sitting on the small sofa. “Kara, this is my sister Caitlin. She’s thirteen and in eighth grade.”

“Hi,” said Kara, waving shyly. Caitlin waved back, her smile a little forced.

“Why don’t you two get to know each other while Ms. Morton and I take care of some paperwork, OK?”

Kara nodded and went over to sit next to Caitlin while Dr. Emily and Ms. Morton sat at the tiny kitchen table. Ms. Morton pulled out a stack of papers and the two adults started conversing in low tones.

Kara turned her attention to Caitlin. “So... Dr. Emily is your sister?”

Caitlin shrugged. “Well, stepsister, but yeah.”

Kara thought for a moment, “So... your dad married her... mom?”

“Other way around. It’s a long story; I’ll tell you later.”

Kara nodded. “Do you go to that middle school we passed on the way here?”

Caitlin nodded. “Yeah. It worked out pretty well for us. Em can walk to work and I can walk to school, and the hospital is close by if she needs to duck out for an hour to do something parental.”

“Do you like the school?”

Caitlin rolled her eyes. “It’s school. I guess it’s OK. You’ll find out tomorrow.”

Kara could have sworn her heart stopped. “What?” she squeaked.

Caitlin frowned. “Didn’t they tell you?”

Kara shook her head. She looked to the adults and asked diffidently, “Dr. Emily?”

Emily looked up from the form she was signing. “Yes, sweetie? And you can just call me Emily, it’s OK.”

“Is it true that I’m going to school tomorrow?”

The adults exchanged glances. Ms. Morton replied, “Honey, no one is home here during the day and you can’t stay by yourself. You could go to the hospital with Dr. Jordan but I bet you’d be terribly bored. And you do have to go to school, even with everything that’s going on. We could delay it a few days if you’re still too upset, but not indefinitely. Would you rather sit in the hospital tomorrow?”

Kara sighed. “I guess not.”

“Don’t worry, sweetie,” said Emily. “I’ll go with you tomorrow morning, and the teachers and administration will know you’re probably only here for a few days. They won’t expect you to be on top of everything or to do homework. You’ll just be sitting in on classes.”

Kara’s stomach twisted; she wasn’t worried about academics. *I think starting sixth grade for the second time is worse than getting kidnapped.*

Caitlin and Kara managed to find a table while Emily followed with the tray. The two sisters sat down opposite one another, and Caitlin patted the seat next to her. “Here, come sit next to me.” Kara nodded and slid in next to the older girl.

Emily reached for her fish sandwich, then noticed Kara peering at her meal. “I’m sorry it’s McDonald’s, Kara; we usually try to eat better than this. But with the shopping...”

“That’s OK,” said Kara. “We have fast food or takeout

sometimes at home.”

As soon as Ms. Morton had left they’d rushed off shopping, since Kara had only the ill-fitting clothes she was wearing. Caitlin’s old clothes might have fit her, but given their limited storage space those had been given away to Goodwill ages ago. Fortunately Ms. Morton had promised Emily a stipend to cover the costs of fostering Kara, and it included a clothing allowance.

They’d piled into Emily’s slightly rusty 1997 Honda Civic and headed for Walmart, a store Kara had never heard of. It was enormous. A couple of hours in the girls’ department and she had enough clothes to last for a week or so.

Kara was further distressed to learn that unlike Larson, Milford Middle School had a uniform policy. She’d been outfitted with both casual clothes for home and a few sets of white polo shirts and tan skirts for school.

They’d also picked up a limited set of school supplies, including a new backpack. With all that in the trunk they’d headed in search of a quick dinner.

Caitlin munched on her burger, and in between bites asked, “Kara, do you mind talking about your family?”

Kara, flustered, looked to Emily, who looked back, nonplussed. Emily thought for a while, then said tentatively, “Why don’t we cover that when we get home, OK? I don’t think we want to have secrets at home, but let’s not talk about it here.”

“Oooo-kayyy,” drawled Caitlin, intensely curious. “Is there something she *can* talk about?”

Everyone looked at everyone else.

Caitlin rolled her eyes. “OK, I’ll start.” Her voice turned bright and cheery. “Hello, I’m Caitlin Jordan!” She waved like a beauty contestant. “I attend Milford Middle School and I like to play sports. I pitch for the girl’s fast pitch softball team and I also play soccer. I like making ceramics, too.” Caitlin dropped the act and told Kara with an encouraging smile, “See? It’s not that hard. Come on, I promise I won’t bite. As long as we get home in time for Game 2.”

Kara squinted. “Of what?”

“The World Series; I guess you’re not a baseball fan. So c’mon, tell me what you *do* like.”

Kara answered haltingly. “Well, umm, I... I like, umm, math and science, and... reading books, I guess.” She glanced anxiously at Caitlin, then continued, “Umm, I like to do gymnastics, too, and I’m in the Girl Scouts.” She thought for a while. “My dad’s parents have a farm in Kansas and we go there for a couple of weeks every summer. I like taking care of the animals and riding horses.” She looked at Caitlin again, and seeing a smile answered with a tentative one of her own.

“Are there any TV shows you like?”

“We mostly watch movies instead of TV, but my dad and mom and brother like watching sports, and I watch cartoons with my sister Saturday mornings. Mom and Dad like Doctor Who, and they let me watch sometimes if it’s not too scary. I like it.”

Caitlin grinned. *Maybe we have something in common after all.*

Emily jumped when the book she was reading in bed was snatched out of her hands.

“Ooooooh,” cooed Caitlin, “Let’s see...”

“Caitlin,” groaned Emily.

Caitlin read aloud in an atrocious English accent, one hand held to her chest: “‘Eleanor’s bosom heaved like a tempestuous sea as Lord Montgomery’s hand roughly—”

Emily snatched her book back and set it down on the bed. “Did you invade my bedroom for a reason?”

“Why do you read that trash anyway?”

“Because I haven’t had a date in eight years,” said Emily wearily. “Now, what is it? You have school tomorrow, and I ought to get to sleep soon too, now that I’m on day shift. I already let

you stay up late to watch the game.”

“It’s about my new roommate.”

Emily looked to her bedroom door. “Where is she?”

“Asleep.”

“So, what about her?”

Caitlin flopped down on the end of her sister’s bed. “When I agreed to let her stay in my room, you forgot to include the little detail that she’s *completely insane!*”

“She’s not ‘completely insane,’ honey. She just has... issues.”

Caitlin rolled her eyes. “‘Issues.’ She thinks her parents are Lois Lane and Clark Kent, and you call it ‘issues?’”

“Look, we don’t know why she’s saying that, but other than that she’s a normal eleven year old.”

“Saying your dad is Superman doesn’t seem very normal to me.”

Emily tilted her head. “I seem to recall a certain ‘Princess Nausicaa’...”

Caitlin waved her hands. “OK, OK, you’ve made your point.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “Was I really eleven when I went through that? I thought I was younger...”

“Fantasy can help kids over a bad time in their lives. Like being kidnapped.” She paused. “Or losing a parent.” She looked meaningfully at Caitlin.

“OK, OK, I *get* it. But if she says *anything* about this at school, the other kids will be merciless. She already had trouble at her last school.”

“Why? Did she say something?”

“She seemed so nervous when we were talking at dinner, I asked her about it. She’s been teased a lot, for liking science and math and not being a Barbie clone.” Caitlin frowned. “She’s had trouble making friends.”

Emily’s face fell. “Oh.” She hesitated. “Can you help her out?”

Caitlin blew out her breath. “I guess so. As much as I can with her being in a different grade. I can at least coach her on the middle school drama, after what I went through for being a jock.” She smiled. “It might be fun being the *big* sister for a change. She’s a sweet kid. Insane, but sweet.”

Emily let it slide. “Thank you. Now, it’s late, and I think we should both be getting to bed.” She held her arms open.

Caitlin went over and the two hugged; she went back to her own room, opening and closing the doors quietly. As she stepped past the air mattress she heard Kara shift and whimper a little, and saw her flex her fingers. Caitlin crept quietly into bed.

Kara hadn’t had this nightmare in months. She was in the dark again, freezing cold, unable to move, unable to see, unable to breathe. She was not suffocating or in pain, but she was trapped. She couldn’t even cry.

Then the dream changed in a way it never had before. She could see; she was inside some kind of opaque bubble not much bigger than she was. It seemed to be made of some kind of multicolored, iridescent light that swirled in intricate patterns. The portions of her skin exposed to the light began to itch.

She could move, and she reached out towards the bubble, curious. Tentatively she poked it; it stretched outward like rubber. She jerked her hand back when the bubble bulged inward momentarily, as if something on the other side had poked back.

Tens of thousands of years ago, for reasons known only to them, an ancient race had transplanted a small population of humans to a distant super-Earth circling a red dwarf star. The beings had enhanced the humans with subspace biotechnology, enabling them and their descendants to survive the planet’s crushing gravity, toxic atmosphere, and highly radioactive core.

As Kara dreamt, inside her cells tiny organelles reawakened — the legacy of that Kryptonian heritage. Deprived of their usual

solar energy source, they drew on their host’s chemical energy. They reached out to one another, forming a network that, while not a full, self-aware A.I., was more than a mindless machine.

The network’s purpose was to augment and protect its host, giving her powers and abilities far beyond those of ordinary humans. It did so by manipulating subspace, normal spacetime, and the boundary between the two, all perfectly synchronized with its host’s nervous system. If the network had been self-aware, it might have felt pride at the intricate dance it choreographed.

Or at that moment, frustration: nothing was working correctly. The boundary was not behaving as it should, and the network could not reach through it to subspace.

The network could feel neither pride nor frustration. It merely set about methodically investigating the anomalous situation in which its host found herself. It began by probing and analyzing the boundary.

Chapter 4: Lost

“Is that the car, Bill?” Clark Kent nodded towards the late-model blue Ford sitting abandoned in a junkyard.

Chief of Detectives William Henderson nodded. “We’re pretty sure based on the description from the witnesses. And there was a bottle of chloroform and a cloth in the back seat. They didn’t try very hard to cover their tracks.”

Clark glanced at his wife, who was staring at the car, her expression guarded. He turned back to Henderson. “Are your guys done? Mind if we take a look?”

Henderson waved his hand. “Help yourselves.” He turned to Lois. “Lane...” he began, his tone uncharacteristically gentle.

Lois shook her head. “Not now, Bill.” She grabbed Clark’s arm and tugged. “Come on.” She started marching across the slightly muddy junkyard, then stopped and turned back towards Henderson. “Bill?”

“Yeah?”

She sighed. “Thanks.” He nodded in acknowledgement; Lois started towards the car again.

When they were well away from Henderson she murmured, “Can you see anything? Footprints, maybe?”

Clark shook his head. “Too many people have been around the scene. I can’t tell any of them apart.”

“I hope the forensics guys had a look before it got trampled. We’ll have to wait for their report.”

The rear door of the car was fully open, and Lois stuck her head in and looked around. There wasn’t much to see except a large, slightly dirty blanket.

Kara had been on her way home from school when, according to witnesses, the car had pulled up alongside her. The driver had sprung out, run around the vehicle, slammed a door, run back, then hopped in and driven away, taking her with him. It had taken only moments, and there’d been no sound of a struggle.

Lois saw a tear fall and splash on the seat. “*Damn* it,” she muttered, and fished a tissue out of her purse. “I can’t afford to lose it.”

“Honey?” Clark inquired gently.

“Never mind me. See if you can find anything.”

She changed places with Clark, and watched while he looked around, his glasses lowered. Suddenly he pulled his head out, and shook it once.

“What?” asked Lois, excited. “Did you see something?”

“Not so much,” said Clark. “I just felt a tiny bit... dizzy for a second.”

“Why would you feel...” Lois trailed off as she felt adrenaline surge through her. “Let me look in there again!”

She leaned heavily on the door frame, carefully combing the floor, the seat, everything. She crawled slowly into the car as she examined every square inch. Suddenly she noticed a small bit of

something, no larger than a piece of gravel, under the driver's seat. It didn't look like much in the light, but she shaded it with her hand and the tiny sliver of rock gave off a faint green glow. She wasn't surprised Henderson's men had missed it: they didn't have their own personal Kryptonite detector.

Lois reached into her purse for another tissue to pick up the sliver. She whispered, knowing her husband would hear her, "Clark... there's a tiny little fragment of green Kryptonite in here. I'm going to take it to Henderson, but you need to keep away from us until it gets bagged, without *looking* like you're keeping away."

She waited until she heard him walk off, then backed out of the car, prize in hand. She looked around and saw Clark talking to one of the forensics people. She walked back over to Henderson.

"Bill... take a look at this." She held up the tissue.

Henderson peered at it. "What is it? A piece of glass?"

Lois shook her head. "Watch." Using her hand, she shielded the fragment from the fading daylight.

Henderson sucked his breath in through his teeth. "So, whoever it was wanted to be prepared for Superman. This probably came off a larger piece. I doubt this little thing would stop the big guy."

He looked up at Lois. "I know he's been keeping his distance from your family, but I guess they bet he'd be interested if one of your kids was abducted. They were prepared. Maybe even using her as bait." Not for the first time, Lois had a feeling that Henderson might know more about her family than he was letting on. "I'd say she was the target all along; it wasn't just a random snatch." He frowned. "That's both good and bad. It means she's probably OK, but your other kids..." He didn't need to finish.

Henderson turned and yelled, "Corwin!" A young man with a shaved head looked up from a clipboard he was studying. Henderson waved him over.

The young man trotted over and peered at the Kryptonite fragment. "Sea glass?" he asked.

Henderson leaned over and murmured something Lois couldn't make out. Corwin's eyes widened, and he nodded. He reached into a bag slung over his shoulder, searching around inside. He pulled out a small lead foil pouch, then used a pair of tweezers to pick up the Kryptonite and drop it in. He made another entry on the clipboard, peeled off a small sticker and stuck it on the pouch, then dropped the pouch into a different bag.

"I'm going to see if Clark's found anything." Henderson, his attention already elsewhere, waved her off casually. She went to join Clark, who was again standing near the car.

Clark smiled joylessly at Lois. "I didn't really need to stay away from a piece that small, honey."

"I know that, but I didn't want to take a chance on anyone noticing that it affected you." She shook her head. "Now we know why Kara didn't put up any kind of a struggle, or scream."

Clark nodded. "I still remember my first exposure." His jaw clenched. "She was probably already unconscious before they used the chloroform on her."

Lois balled her fists and whispered furiously, "If I *ever* get my hands on the bastards who used Kryptonite on our daughter..." She trailed off suddenly, pale. "Clark... whoever it was... they know about Kara now."

Clark nodded grimly.

Another idea struck Lois. "Clark... do you think they brought the Kryptonite for you... or was it for her all along?"

"So bad people took Kara, Daddy?" asked Laura, cuddled on her father's lap. The seven year old shivered slightly, and Clark squeezed her gently.

"I'm afraid so, pumpkin."

"Is she going to be OK?" She looked up into her father's eyes, her lip trembling.

He tried to project a confidence he didn't feel. "We think so, but we're not completely sure." He hugged her a little tighter, and the family sat in silence for a few moments, everyone thinking of the missing member.

Jordy, fourteen, was sitting on the sofa next to his mother.

"So why do we need to go somewhere else?" He absently stroked the family cat, who was curled up in his lap.

Lois looked around at her family. "We know whoever took Kara was looking for her specifically. That means they're trying to get at your father and me, probably for something we did in the past—"

Jordy snorted. "Like put them in jail..."

Lois nodded. "Very likely. Anyway, since we know they're targeting our family we want to move you two someplace safe."

Jordy shook his head. "But why can't we just go stay with Grandma and Grandpa in Smallville?"

Clark caught his son's gaze. "We think that the kidnapers... know more about our family than the average criminal. We think they might know where your grandparents live. Among other things."

Jordy looked back at him quizzically, and Clark nodded slightly. The boy's eyes widened. He'd been let in on the family secret when he was about Kara's age, as his powers had started to develop. Laura was still too young to be told, but Lois and Clark had been planning to tell Kara soon.

Clark continued, "With the number of enemies your mother and I have made over the years, we knew we might need a place for you kids to hide out someday. We found a place in Maryland we can use as a safe house. Your Grandma and Grandpa Lane are going to be there and take care of you while Mom and I try to find your sister and the people who've taken her."

Laura made a face.

"Laura!" scolded Lois.

"Sorry," Laura apologized. "I don't like how Grandma and Grandpa yell at each other."

"Dad, can't I stay here and help get Kara back?" Jordy already had his father's powers, though he was not as strong and wasn't flying yet. Like his father he wore glasses, which had helped him control his developing vision powers.

Clark shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jordy. I appreciate it, but this kind of thing requires experience, and..." He motioned with his eyes at Laura, and Jordy understood the message. *It's too dangerous, and you need to help take care of your sister.*

Jordy nodded reluctantly. "What about school?"

Lois answered, "You won't be going while you're at the safe house..."

"Yay!" cried Laura.

"...but your schools have given us some homework and study materials. Grandma and Grandpa will be home schooling you while you're there."

"Oh," pouted Laura.

Chapter 5: Little Secrets

Kara walked between the two Jordan sisters as they set off the next morning. She missed her family terribly, but Emily and her sister had tried hard to make her feel at home. She supposed that as kidnappings went this one could have been a lot worse. She could've been tied to a chair in a remote cabin, at the mercy of...

"You look a little tired, sweetie," said Emily, interrupting her daydream. "Did you not sleep well? Was the air mattress OK?"

Kara shook her head. "The air mattress was fine, but I had a nightmare that I have sometimes." Now that she was outside in the sun her exposed skin was starting to itch: her hands, her face. It wasn't severe but it was annoying. She scratched at it. Something about the situation echoed her nightmare last night but she couldn't remember enough to know why.

Emily stopped walking. “Are you itchy, sweetheart?”

“A little.”

“Let me see.” She pulled Kara’s sweater sleeve up, lifted her arm, and looked it over with a practiced eye. “Hmm. I don’t see any signs of eczema or psoriasis. I think you’re having a slight allergic reaction. Maybe I need to get a different laundry detergent while you’re staying with us? If it gets worse be sure to let me know, or the school nurse if it gets really bad during the day, OK? I’ll bring you home something from work to soothe it a bit.” Kara nodded, and they resumed walking.

Soon they turned onto the campus of Milford Middle School. Caitlin headed for her homeroom with a wave, while Emily took Kara towards the administrative offices. Before she got there, she stopped. “Now, you remember the cover story, right? You’re registered as my foster child, but in case anyone asks you about your own parents?”

“Yes,” Kara recited, “my parents are Charles and Lorraine Kent. We live in Minneapolis and they work at the Minneapolis Star Tribune.”

“I don’t think anyone will give you a hard time about your name, or your brother or sister. It’s just your parents’ names and where they work that people know.”

“I understand. I read the comics that Dr. Penny brought me.” She sighed.

Emily stroked her hair. “It’s OK, sweetie.” She leaned down to hug Kara. “I’m sure you’ll be fine.” She straightened up. “Now come on. You need to get to school and I need to get to work.”

“Hi Kara, I’m Rob Kroum.” Kara shook his hand timidly. “I’ll be your homeroom and science teacher while you’re here. Just stand there a moment, OK?”

For the second time in two months, Kara was introduced to a classroom full of strangers while squirming in embarrassment. She hoped no one would decide to pick on her the way that Paige McArthur had at Larson. Having all of Metropolis vanish was too high a price to get rid of Paige, but only just.

“Everyone, this is Kara Kent. She’ll be joining us temporarily as she’s just in town for a short while. I won’t embarrass her by making her recite her life history, so you’ll have to interrogate her later on. Please try to make her feel welcome, OK?”

Mumbled assent came from around the room.

Mr. Kroum motioned with his hand. “Please find an empty seat, Kara.” She nodded and headed towards the back of the room.

“Bailey, could you share your textbook with Kara? Thanks. Everyone turn to page 34, OK?”

The redheaded girl sitting next to Kara gave her the once-over, before they turned their attention to the textbook.

By lunchtime her classmates were full of curiosity about the new girl, even more so because she was temporary. The moment she sat down in the cafeteria she was surrounded by a crowd of kids, and spent most of lunchtime being grilled.

She answered honestly, substituting only a few details per the advice of her foster mother. Most of the kids were not interested in the details of her parents’ lives anyway, preferring to focus on her. They seemed friendly, but Kara still worried.

At Larson, she’d thought she was friends with Paige, only to find the girl badmouthing her clothing and her interest in math and science behind her back. Here, everyone was wearing a uniform, and no one told her she was a “geektard loser” because of her interests. Of course, Paige hadn’t either — at first.

One girl, a Eurasian brunette, commented, “That’s funny — you’re named Kent and your grandparents have a farm in Kansas? I don’t suppose they live in Smallville, do they?” A titter ran around the table, and Kara worried that the kids here would latch onto something else to tease her about.

“Um, their farm’s about a hundred miles from Wichita.” Kara guessed that Smallville was another name she should avoid. “You’re Megan, right?”

“That’s right, Megan Tong. You have a good memory for someone who’s just met a lot of people.”

Kara’s interest was piqued. “Are you related to Dr. Penny Tong?”

“She’s my dad’s sister. Where do you know her from?”

“She helped me out when I was in the hospital yesterday.”

This provoked another round of questions, and the discovery that she’d been found unconscious after an aborted kidnapping led to pronouncements of “Awesome!” around the table. Kara was cautiously optimistic.

As lunch was ending, Megan tapped her on the shoulder. “Hey, Bailey Harker says you’re in her homeroom. We were wondering if you wanted to hang out after school today? I mean, I know you’ll be going home to Minneapolis soon, but if you want to...”

Kara considered this. “That sounds like fun, but I’d better check with my foster mom first.”

“OK! Do you have a phone number?”

Kara shook her head. “I lost my phone with all my other stuff. I have my foster mom’s number but I probably shouldn’t bug her while she’s working.”

Megan was scribbling on a piece of paper. “Here,” she said as the first bell rang. “Here’s my number. Give me a call later.”

Kara headed for class, somewhat surprised. Could she make friends here? It hadn’t happened in two lonely months at Larson.

“Hey girls, I’m home!” Emily called out as she closed the door. Both girls greeted her in return.

They were on the sofa doing homework. Kara only had to do reading, since she was out of sync with the lesson plan her classes were following. If she stayed in town long enough to catch up they’d give her more work to do.

Emily came over and sat on the arm of the sofa next to Kara. “I could definitely get used to this shift. How did the first day go?”

“Thanks Em, my day was fine,” drawled Caitlin.

“Hush, you. Kara?”

“It was OK, Emily. The other kids were pretty nice, and I understood most of what the teachers talked about. I think the subjects are a little different here than at Larson. Oh, and I met a couple of girls who wanted to get together after school! I told them I had to talk to you first.”

Emily thought it over. Ordinarily she would be all for it, but there was the risk of Kara innocently blurting out something that would cause the other kids to start taunting her. On the other hand, she couldn’t keep the child from making friends — that wouldn’t be fair, especially given her prior problems in school. She shook her head.

“No?” Kara’s face fell.

Emily smiled. “I’m sorry, sweetie, that wasn’t a no. I’m just worried about you, since you’re kind of keeping a secret...”

“It’s her *secret identity*.”

“Caitlin!” Emily sighed. “Do you think you can stick to the story we talked about?”

Kara nodded. “One of the girls asked me at lunch if my grandparents’ farm was in Smallville. I didn’t say yes ’cause it sounds like another thing that people know from comic books.”

“That was a good call, sweetie. Yes, you probably shouldn’t mention Smallville.”

“I said it was about a hundred miles from Wichita. Which it is.” Caitlin rolled her eyes, unnoticed.

“Who are the girls?”

“Bailey Harker and Megan Tong? She’s Dr. Penny’s...”

“Niece, yes, I know. Why don’t you see if they can come

over here to start with?”

“OK, I’ll call Megan. Oh, I didn’t know the number here...”

“We don’t have a land line since we both have cell phones.

Huh. I’m sorry, honey, you’ll just have to borrow my cell for now. I’ll have to go to the Verizon store and see if I can get you something cheap for emergencies.”

Kara wondered, *What’s a verizon?*

Emily shook her head. “Oh, right, I almost forgot. I got you some antihistamine cream for that itch. Is it still bothering you?”

“Not right now. I really only noticed it when I was outside in the sun.”

Emily frowned. “Wait, are you saying you only itch when your skin is exposed to sunlight?”

Kara tilted her head and thought. “I think so. While I was walking to school with you, and walking home with Caitlin, and when I was outside at school.”

Emily stood up. “Come with me.” Caitlin looked up as Emily led Kara to the front door, then outside. She got up and went to the door to watch.

The sun was low in the sky, leaving the front door in shadow. “Do you feel anything now?” Kara shook her head.

Emily spotted a sunlit patch halfway up the driveway and motioned Kara to follow as she headed for it. “Kara, honey, come stand here.”

Kara obliged, and felt her skin start to itch the moment she stood in the sunlight. She started to scratch. “Let me see your arm again.”

Emily examined her arm closely but didn’t find anything. “Is the itching really bad? Does it burn?”

Kara shook her head. “No, it’s just kind of annoying. It feels... I dunno... yucky? I didn’t really notice it while I was outside running around playing soccer for PE ’cause I was busy thinking about what I was doing.”

Emily started walking back to the cottage, Kara trailing behind. Emily had her hand to her chin, her brow furrowed. Once they were back inside both girls sat down on the sofa again and waited.

Emily finally shook her head. “It must be some kind of phototoxicity, but... I’ve never heard of a kind like this. Were you taking any kind of medication before you were kidnapped?” Kara shook her head. “I hope the kidnappers didn’t give you anything while you were unconscious. Has it gotten worse, better, stayed the same?”

“It’s been the same all day.”

“Hmm. Well, if it’s like most photosensitive reactions it should fade over time; I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. Let me know right away if it gets any worse, though, *especially* if you see a blister. If that happens at school, go to the school nurse *immediately* and call my cell phone, OK?” Kara nodded. “I think I’ll go over your blood work again Monday in case I missed something.”

“Megan! Tell your brother dinner is in ten minutes!”

Megan spoke into her smartphone. “Just a minute.” She held it away from her face then called, “OK, Mom!” Her mother came from an Italian-American family and was somewhat obsessive about meals. Then again, so was her father’s Korean-American family.

She resumed her conversation. “OK, I’m back. I’m sorry I can’t make it tonight; we have to leave after dinner for my dad’s cousin’s wedding in New Jersey. We’ll be gone all weekend. I don’t know what Bailey’s doing...”

“Megan!”

“Oops, just a sec.” She walked into the den, where her brother sat pounding on the keyboard of a laptop, and tapped on the top of the display. “Kevin?” He didn’t answer.

“Kara, I’d better go. I’ll see you in school Monday, OK?...”

Yeah, bye.” She ended the call, then turned her full attention to her brother. She tapped on the display more insistently. “Kevin!”

Her brother, one year older, spoke into the headset he was wearing. “My sister wants something, guys. Yeah, I got it.” He didn’t look up. “What’s up, sis?”

“Mom says dinner in ten. Well, nine now, I guess.”

“Guys, dinner in nine. I think we can finish this game.” He looked up briefly. “Tell Mom I might be a minute late.”

Megan nodded, and headed off to the kitchen to help set the table.

Fifteen minutes later she sat with her hands in her lap as her mother glowered at the doorway, and her father sighed as he looked at the clock on the wall.

Kevin dashed through the doorway. “I’m really sorry, guys.” He grabbed a Vanilla Coke from the refrigerator, then took his seat at the table.

Their mother Alice folded her arms. “Kevin, I don’t like it when more games are more important than your family.”

Kevin popped open his Coke. “I’m sorry, Mom, but we were playing 3b3 in Starcraft. I can’t just quit in the middle of a game or I’ll be letting my friends down.”

“You should have thought of that before you started the game! You knew dinner was coming up, *and* we have a long drive this evening.” She sighed and started to pass dishes around the table. “Besides, you should spend more time with your friends and less time on the computer.”

“Mom, that’s *how* I spend time with my friends.”

Megan tried her best to hide her smirk.

Their father Martin asked, “How was everyone’s day?”

“OK,” said Kevin affably, then started eating. It became apparent there wasn’t going to be anything further, so both parents turned their attention to Megan.

“OK, I guess,” she said. “Oh, there was a new girl in the sixth grade today.”

“Really?” asked her mother, glad to have a topic of conversation with one of her children for a change. “Did a new family move into town?”

Megan shook her head, excited. “No, you’re not going to believe this! She was kidnapped, but the police found her out on Cedar Beach Road, unconscious. They’re saying the kidnappers got scared and dumped her. She was in the hospital yesterday but she’s OK now.” Even Kevin looked up, interested.

“Where is she from? Where are her parents?”

“They’re reporters and they live in Minneapolis, but the police are having trouble finding them for some reason. So she’s with a foster family in town until her parents come to get her. You know, Emily and Caitlin Jordan?”

Her mother nodded. “She’s a long way from home. It’s frightening to think what might have happened to her if the kidnappers hadn’t chickened out. Wow, that’s quite an adventure!”

“Anyway, Bailey and I are getting to be friends with her, and I was on the phone with her earlier. She wanted to get together tonight, but I told her about the wedding.”

“What’s her name?” asked her father.

“Kara Kent.”

Kevin, who had just taken a large swig of Vanilla Coke, started coughing violently, spewing soda all over his dinner.

“Kevin! Are you all right?” asked his mother anxiously. He nodded, even as he continued to cough in heaving spasms. She stood up and went to fetch paper towels. “How many times have I told you not to drink in such big gulps?”

Chapter 6: Life Imitates Art

Emily came into the girls’ bedroom while Caitlin was brushing her teeth. She stood next to the air mattress and smiled at Kara, who was already in bed. “Thank you for helping me with

dinner, sweetie.”

Kara smiled and shook her head. “I don’t mind. I like helping my dad when he cooks.”

“Does your dad need your help? Does he cook to give your mom a break?”

Kara rolled her eyes. “Mom can’t cook to save her life. Dad does all the cooking.” She lifted her right fist and flexed her index finger. “Mom says she cooks like this — dialing for takeout.” She grinned at first, but her smile faded.

Emily sat down on the floor next to her. “What’s wrong, sweetie?”

“I’m just thinking... about my family.” Her face screwed up. “I miss them all so much.”

“Oh, honey...” Emily took Kara in her arms. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Kara’s reply was muffled. “Maybe...”

“Would it help to tell me about them?”

Kara mulled that over. “I guess. Umm, well, my brother and sister and I get along really well. He’s fourteen and she’s seven, so we like different things, but we have stuff we like to do together too. Like ride horses when we visit Grandma and Grandpa’s farm.

“Jordy spends most of his time with his friends, but he’ll play video games with me, or even play dolls with Laura, which is pretty awesome for an older brother.” Kara was calming down, so Emily let her go while keeping a comforting arm around her. Caitlin had come back in and was sitting on her bed, listening.

“Mom is very... intense. She has so much energy; she’s amazing. Jordy is the same way. If my mom doesn’t like something she doesn’t hide it, either. She and Dad work really hard, so sometimes when they’re busy we don’t get to see them as much.

“Dad is more laid back, like Laura and me. He’s almost always cheerful and happy; I love that. He’s kind of forgetful, though. He’s always running out to take care of things he suddenly remembered...” She trailed off. “Oh... oh! If those comic books Dr. Penny showed me are right, then maybe... that’s when he runs off to be Superman?” She frowned, upset at her parents again.

Emily and Caitlin exchanged a glance, but Caitlin held her tongue.

“I guess that explains why he’s traveled all around the world, too, if he can fly. He... I told him I wanted to see all sorts of places around the world too, and he said someday we’d do it together...” She bit her lip and looked down.

Emily asked, “What kind of places do you want to go?”

“I always wanted to go to the Hebrides, in Scotland. I guess I just like the name. Dad promised we’d go there someday.” She half-laughed. “Maybe it won’t be as hard as I thought.” Her gaze drifted far away for a few moments.

“Kara?” inquired Emily gently.

Kara looked up at her. “Emily... if my Dad is really Superman like those comics say... do you think he’ll come rescue me? I mean, if he’s *Superman*...”

Emily composed her answer carefully; she didn’t want to encourage the girl’s fantasies. “Kara... remember, Superman is a character in a comic book, and no one could really do the things he does. But even so... I’ll bet your father loves you very much, and he’ll do anything he can to find you and bring you home again.”

Kara considered that, and her face slowly relaxed into a small smile. “Yeah... yeah... you’re right. Even if he’s not Superman... he and Mom... they won’t stop until they find me.” Some of her tension left her, and she leaned over and hugged Emily. “Thank you.”

Emily hugged her back tightly. “You’re welcome. And now... I think you two should get to sleep; it’s late.” She kissed Kara’s

forehead. “Good night, sweetheart.”

“Good night, Emily.”

Emily hugged and kissed Caitlin good night as well, then turned out the light as she left the room. Kara was tired, and fell asleep almost immediately.

Emily, troubled by Kara’s low mood, felt slightly guilty that they hadn’t had much time together during the week. Her foster daughter had been bored Friday night as they didn’t have a lot to read at home that was suitable for a sixth grader, and there was only the one ancient computer to share. Emily decided to dedicate her first weekend off in several weeks to some quality family time.

The fostering course she’d taken had emphasized how important it was for children to feel loved, safe, and part of a family. She didn’t want to take the place of Kara’s own family — whoever they really were behind the fantasy — but she was determined that Kara know that she had a caring family she could count on until her parents could be found.

She’d briefly considered taking the girls to Baltimore or Washington on a mini-vacation, but her limited budget wasn’t really up to it. Besides, she thought it might be good for Kara to become familiar with Milford and the surrounding area.

Caitlin grumbled somewhat but acquiesced, as long as she could be home in time to watch the World Series Saturday and Sunday nights. Kara had wanted to get together with her new friend Bailey, and Emily promised there would be time for that.

While Caitlin slept in on Saturday Emily took Kara to the Milford library, where she scoured the stacks like a swarm of locusts. Kara got her own library card and checked out eight titles. They stashed the books in the car, then walked around downtown as Emily pointed out the shops and landmarks. They visited the Milford museum.

There wasn’t a lot else to do in Milford, so once Caitlin texted that she was up and ready they collected her and headed for Dover.

They stopped at the mall and had pizza for lunch. They swung by the movie theaters but decided to pass on the films that were showing.

They went to one of the local bookstores and browsed, but didn’t buy. Kara noted some titles she wanted to find on her next visit to the library.

They found a miniature golf course and played a round. Emily was rewarded by seeing Kara start to unwind. Her foster daughter grinned, she ran from hole to hole, she laughed when she made shots and even when she missed them. The melancholy that had clung to the girl seemed to dissipate.

Kara wasn’t very good at mini-golf but didn’t seem to care much; she seemed happy just to be playing. Caitlin was much better, but was gracious about it and helped Kara all she could. They all had a blast.

Emily was a little worried about spending so much time in the sun with Kara’s photosensitive skin, but nothing bad seemed to come of it. Kara said she didn’t think about the itching while she was having fun, and that it hadn’t gotten any worse.

When they headed home for dinner, Kara was chattering a mile a minute about the fun she’d had, and Emily had a satisfied smile on her face.

While Caitlin watched Game 3 that night, Bailey came over for a couple of hours. It was a little cramped in their small home — especially with a baseball game going on the TV — but Emily was reluctant to let Kara go visiting on her own just yet.

The visit went well, however, and Kara beamed from having strengthened her new friendship. Emily decided she’d been overprotective and resolved to give Kara freer rein in the future.

Sunday they headed for the shore. They drove down to Cape Henlopen State Park and enjoyed the area around Lewes. Kara

grew excited, exclaiming that this part of Delaware looked familiar: she was sure she'd been there before. Emily took that as an encouraging sign.

It was a beautiful day, perfect for enjoying the scenery. They ate a picnic lunch they'd packed that morning. They watched the Cape May ferry come and go.

On the way home they turned off Route 1 onto Slaughter Beach Road and visited that stretch of the shore. They parked the car and walked along the beach for a while as the sun hung low over the western hills. Back in the car, they swung by the marinas and went to see the historic Mispillion Lighthouse.

They drove home on Cedar Beach Road. Emily didn't mention that this was where Kara had been found. She didn't want the girl to dwell on it.

It was getting too close to game time to go out to dinner or go grocery shopping, so Kara and Emily went to get burritos while Caitlin did her remaining homework for Monday.

After Emily checked that Kara had done her reading for school, the three of them watched Game 4 with the sound turned low. Caitlin gave a play-by-play that was far funnier than anything on television.

Around the sixth inning the day caught up with Kara and she fell asleep against Emily's side. Emily gently gathered her up and carried her to bed.

Emily counted the weekend a success. She and Caitlin had treated Kara as family, and judging by the number of smiles the little girl seemed happier.

In her dreams, Kara kept poking the inside of the bubble, and it kept bulging inward randomly, as if something outside was poking too. It was almost like a game.

Suddenly she poked it just so, and it cracked. Shocked, she watched as spidery fractures radiated from where her finger had touched, until the entire bubble was covered. It crumbled to fragments and blew away, like dust in a strong wind.

An enormous flurry of... *some things* was running around her, bouncing into her, bouncing into each other. It was like being in the middle of a ping pong ball machine except they weren't ping pong balls. Sometimes they were tiny winged snakes, sometimes they were little lightning bolts, sometimes they were the pet hamster, Snowpuff, that she'd had when she was Laura's age.

They flew every which way, bouncing into each other and into her, some of them hot, some of them cold, making her skin itch, running completely wild, all the while giving off noise like television static. They stretched off into infinity.

She tried to ward them off, but they were everywhere. As she batted at them, she yelled, "Stop it. Stop it! *Stop it!*"

Kara sat heavily in the seat she'd been assigned in English; now that she knew Megan, she recognized her a couple of seats over and waved. Megan waved back.

Kara was tired, despite having fallen asleep early. She knew she'd had weird dreams again last night but still couldn't remember them very clearly. She planted her elbows on her desk and used her hands to support her head. She shook herself to try to wake up, and forced herself to sit upright.

The bell rang and the English teacher, Ms. Maloney, said, "OK, everyone. Today we're going to do something a bit different. I'd like to ask each of you to think of a favorite fictional character." She noted the excitement in several faces and added, "In *written* fiction: a novel or short story, *not* a movie, TV show, or comic."

Most of the excitement disappeared.

"I'll call on some of you to name your favorites, and then we'll have a discussion about what makes them interesting. Take a minute to think of your character and then we'll get started."

Kara's mood brightened; this sounded like it could be fun.

She knew instantly whom she had in mind. It was one of her favorite books.

The discussion was halting at first, starting with the obvious candidates like Harry Potter or Percy Jackson. A few kids had read *Twilight* or *The Hunger Games*. Kara was happy when Sophie from *Howl's Moving Castle* and Meggie from *Inkheart* came up; she'd loved both books. Some kids were brave enough to mention characters in books for younger readers, and the discussion really opened up after that.

Ms. Maloney smiled at her. "You look like you have some ideas, Kara. Do you have a favorite?"

Kara nodded, though she felt shy when all the eyes in the room turned to her. "Well... I've always loved Amelia Earhart."

"Who?" asked one boy. Ms. Maloney looked perplexed.

Kara blushed, and ventured, "You know... Amelia Earhart? The woman pilot from *The Girl Who Flew*?" Everyone was silent. "By Annabeth Houghton?"

Ms. Maloney was squinting at her. "I'm sorry, Kara, did you say Amelia Earhart?"

Kara's blush deepened. "Yes... I know it's an old book but I really like it. She's such a great character..."

A girl said, "No, Amelia Earhart was a real person. I saw a special on her on the History Channel..."

Everyone was looking at her; she dropped her eyes to her desk, her face on fire and her mind swimming. How could Amelia Earhart be a real person? That was like saying Harry Potter was a real person!

After an awkward pause, the discussion moved on. Kara stopped paying attention. She felt like she'd fallen into a book herself: *Alice in Wonderland*.

Chapter 7: You're One of My Heroes

Kara shuffled towards the cafeteria in a fog. What exactly was going on here?

Ms. Maloney had stopped her on the way out the door and gently told her that Amelia Earhart was a real person, so she must have mistaken the book she read for fiction. Kara didn't try to contradict her.

She reviewed the facts. One: the city she lived in and everything in it, including her own parents, were now the subjects of a series of comic books. Two: Amelia Earhart, whom she *knew* was fictional, was a real person. She'd asked Megan to "refresh her memory" since she was "obviously confused." Megan didn't know anything about Amelia Earhart but had been happy to pull out her smartphone and look it up on Wikipedia.

Kara had learned that while this person matched up fairly well with the story in the book, there had not been a happy ending. This Amelia Earhart had vanished in the middle of the Pacific Ocean instead of getting a ticker-tape parade in New York City. She felt like crying for having one of her favorite books spoiled.

Feeling like Alice had given her an idea: could this be like *Inkheart*? Was she trapped in the book of *The Girl Who Flew*? If so, why was the story different? And how could Metropolis be in a book *here* if she was stuck in a book herself? And *why* would this happen? It didn't make sense!

It did spark some hope, though. Maybe her family hadn't vanished. Maybe she and they were just in different worlds, and there was a way home. The concept was familiar enough from books she'd read.

Or maybe that was a completely stupid idea.

Still, it was the only idea she had. If not *Inkheart*, was there another story that made sense? Wizard Howl had a door home to Wales, but this wasn't Wizard Howl's world — he was fictional here. So was the Doctor, though she supposed that wouldn't stop him from coming here if he was real *somewhere*. She was racking her brains for other stories with similar themes when she ran into

someone.

She blurted out “Sorry!” and found Bailey grinning at her. “Whoa, Earth to Kara! You sure seem to be out of it today.

Spacing out in English, not looking where you’re going... Actually, I couldn’t resist standing in your way, so it’s my fault.”

Kara gave her a wan smile. “Sorry, I guess I *am* spaced out.” She took a deep breath and decided to set aside her confusion for the time being. “I’m awake now. Want to get some lunch?”

“That *is* why we’re heading to the cafeteria.”

Kara smiled at her new friend and followed her in.

A short time later they’d found a table and saw Megan coming their way, along with an older boy who had to be related.

“Hi Kara — this is my brother Kevin. After I mentioned you Friday night he wanted to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Kevin.” Kara waved at him, but felt a little uneasy as he seemed to look her over thoroughly before he waved back. Then again, she’d noticed boys doing that before.

“Hey Kara, nice to meet you too.” He and his sister put their trays down and took seats. “Megan told me the whole story about how you were kidnapped and then they dumped you here in Milford. So your family lives in Minneapolis?”

Kara had wanted to ask Megan about the wedding, but it looked like that would have to wait. “Um, yes.”

“Are your parents coming to get you, or are the police going to take you there?”

Kara chose her words with care. “They’re having trouble finding my parents. I think when they find them we’ll figure out how I get home.” *Well, that’s mostly true...*

“Do you have any brothers or sisters, like Megan and me?”

This seemed a safe question to answer. “Yes, I have an older brother and a little sister.”

“Do you—”

Megan poked her brother. “Kevin! Stop giving her the third degree.”

“Sorry, I’m just curious. You gotta admit, you don’t meet someone who’s been kidnapped every day.” He took a bite of his lunch and continued with his mouth full, “Pluth there’th your nehm.”

Kara put down her spork. “What about my name?”

“You have the same name as Supergirl. One of her names, anyway.”

Kara looked around at her friends. “Who’s Supergirl?”

“Isn’t she like a girl version of Superman?” added Bailey.

Kevin, getting into it, waved his hands impatiently. “No, no. She has the same powers he does, but she’s his... well... they messed around a lot with who she is. First she was his cousin, also from Krypton. Then in one of the cartoon versions she was unrelated. There were even weirder versions of her too, where she was human and got superpowers, but now she’s back to being Superman’s cousin from Krypton—”

Megan rolled her eyes. “Slow down, Kevin. She’s not a comic and Superman geek like you are.”

“Anyway, her name is Kara. Kara Zor-El. She’s got blonde hair and blue eyes like you, and one of the human names she uses is Kara Kent.”

“Oh,” was all Kara could think of to say, in a very small voice.

“Kevin, look at her face! You’re creeping her out.”

“Kara, I don’t understand why you want to look at this stuff. I mean... eww.”

“What do you mean, ‘eww’? This is great artwork!”

Megan sighed. “Kevin, none of these women look anything like a real person. They’re all sex objects.”

Kara tuned out the bickering between the Tong siblings as she flipped through the pages of Kevin’s comic. She’d been burning

with curiosity to see what this “Kara Zor-El” looked like, though part of her didn’t want to. She was sure the similarity with her middle name was not a coincidence.

So Kevin had tagged along with his sister, irking her somewhat, and brought some comics with him. They all sat in the Jordans’ living area; Caitlin was in the bedroom and planned to head out to meet friends once Emily got home.

Kara Zor-El was nearly an adult. She also wore far too much eyeliner and had a body shape that made Barbie look like an anatomical model.

On the other hand, she had Kara’s blonde hair and blue eyes, and there was a vague resemblance if you squinted the right way.

Kara was thankful it was vague, but then again her dad didn’t look much like his comic counterpart either. This was a comic book, and she and her family were real people. Still, it seemed likely this character was somehow supposed to be her. That was *incredibly* creepy.

Did that mean she was from Krypton, like Superman? From her earliest memories she’d been part of the Kent family, on Earth. And she hadn’t noticed any powers like Superman’s: she’d certainly skinned her knees a few times when she was younger, and they’d stuck her with needles in the hospital not too long ago.

Was she... adopted?

Her mother tried to slink down behind her pancreas and sulk. Was this *another* thing Mom and Dad had hidden from her? Why wouldn’t they tell her about *that*?

Maybe the comic was wrong. It was wrong about lots of things: for one, Jordy and Laura were nowhere to be seen. Maybe this was one of those things. Maybe she was her parents’ natural-born daughter.

So why are you the only one in the family with blonde hair and blue eyes?

Kara sighed and closed the comic.

“So what do you think?” beamed Kevin.

“It’s... um... interesting.” She handed the comics back to Kevin. “Thanks for bringing them here to show me.”

“You gotta admit, it’s a freaky coincidence that you have the same name and kinda look like her.”

Not as freaky as you think. “Yeah.” An idea struck her. “Umm, is Superman only in comics?”

Everyone was staring at her. “What?” she asked, embarrassed.

Kevin was shaking his head. “Don’t you have a TV in your house? There were TV shows, and there’s been a bunch of movies; one of them came out just a few years ago. *Everyone* knows about the movies. You’ve never seen them?”

“Um... no?”

Kevin looked like he was ready to burst, but Megan put a hand on his arm. “Whoa, boy, down. I think that’s enough Superman for today. But yeah, we could watch one later this week.”

“I have a great idea!” blurted Kevin.

The three girls eyed him with suspicion.

“No, really! Halloween is next Monday, right? Kara, do you have a costume?”

“I do back home, but I don’t know if I’ll get home in time for Halloween.”

“You should be Supergirl! It would be epic! I’d even help make it!”

Megan propelled him gently towards the door. “Kevin, I think I hear Starcraft calling.”

“Think about it, OK?” he called over his shoulder as he left.

“Umm, yeah,” said Kara faintly, having no intention of the sort.

“Are you crying?” Caitlin’s voice drifted softly through the dark room.

“No,” lied Kara.

“Kara...”

“Yes.”

“Want to talk about it?”

Kara thought it over. “I guess.” Caitlin waited silently. “It looks like my parents have been hiding things from me. Big things. Secrets.”

“Secrets?”

“I mean, I’m not 100% convinced Dad is Superman, but... why would there be all these stories about Clark Kent and Superman here, if he wasn’t?” She thought about Amelia Earhart. “Even if the details aren’t exactly right.”

Caitlin cleared her throat. “Well, umm, if it’s true... it’s a big secret.”

“I know, and I guess I know *why* it’s a secret, but I thought they trusted me more than that. I’m not a little kid anymore; I wouldn’t have said anything to *anyone*. I mean, they shouldn’t tell *Laura* or all her friends would know in a week. But she’s only seven. And... I’m not sure, but I think there’s something else they’re not telling me.”

“What?”

Kara hesitated. “I’m really not sure, so I don’t want to say yet.”

“Do your parents love you?”

Kara replied without hesitation. “Of course.” She felt some of her sadness melt away. Despite the secrets, she *knew* her parents loved her. They didn’t treat her any differently than they did Laura. Even if she was adopted, she knew Laura wasn’t. “They love me, and I love them.”

There was a short pause. “See? You might have some things to work out with them, but that’s the most important thing.”

There was something in Caitlin’s tone. “Caitlin? I... you never told me about your parents. You don’t have to, but...”

Caitlin sighed. “It’s not a happy story, but I’m OK now.” She was silent for a while, and Kara wasn’t sure if she was going to continue. “Well, Em’s mom died when Em was fourteen and they were living in Seattle. She and Dad moved to Wilmington a year later; I guess he wanted a fresh start. He was a doctor, too; that’s why Em wanted to be one.

“They’d been there a year or so when he met Mom. She was pregnant with me, by her previous boyfriend.” She paused. “I don’t know what Dad saw in her, but they fell in love and got married. Or at least *he* fell in love. I’ve never figured out if she really loved him or just wanted someone to take care of her. Or take care of me.

“Anyway, I was born, and when I was only a year old Mom ran off; we never heard from her again. Em was seventeen, in the middle of high school, and she and Dad had to raise me on their own. Dad had money, so he could afford some childcare, but it was still hard.

“I don’t remember Mom and I never knew my birth dad. Em and Dad are the only family I’ve ever known or wanted, even though I’m not related to either of them.

“Then three years ago, Dad was caught in a big pileup on I-95 and k-killed. Children’s Services wanted me to go live with Mom’s sister, but she’s a self-centered b—” Caitlin censored herself, “jerk, like Mom. I wanted to stay with Em. It was a big, long, awful fight, but she managed to hold onto me.

“It’s been really hard on her. She was living in Philadelphia for medical school but had to start commuting from Wilmington because of the custody fight. Then we had to move here for her internship, even though she could have gotten a better position in another state. She’s so busy she has no life of her own.

“She’s managed to take care of me through medical school and her internship and everything. She’s my family, and I love her. And even though Mom used me to take advantage of Dad, Em loves me.” Caitlin was sniffing.

“Caitlin, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“It’s OK.” She half-laughed. “I think we could both use a hug, though, don’t you?”

Kara got out of her bed and padded over, and they did just that for a while. She went back to bed feeling much better.

Clark came into the living room of their townhouse only to find his wife sitting on the sofa, staring into the fireplace, and crying quietly.

“Oh honey,” he murmured, sliding onto the sofa next to her. He put an arm around her, and she turned her face into his shoulder. “We’ll find her, I swear. You’ve been so strong; what’s wrong?”

“I ran out of things to do instead of worrying about her,” cried Lois. “Investigate the scene, check. Get the kids to safety, check. Research creeps who’ve targeted us in the past, check.” She hiccuped. “Now all I can do is think about what might be *happening* to her. It’s been *days*, Clark! She’s only *eleven!* What can we *do*?”

Clark tightened his embrace and tried to be strong for her, though he felt like he’d aged ten years in the last couple of days. “I... I don’t know. I spent hours criss-crossing Metropolis. I checked every place I could think of. Either she’s not in the city, or she’s being held somewhere that’s shielded from my senses.

“I guess we have to wait. We have to give Henderson and his team time to process what they’ve found.”

“I almost wish Perry *hadn’t* told us to spend all our time on this, so I’d have something to distract me. I can’t stand just waiting. I need to be *doing* something! Have you heard *anything* from Henderson?”

Clark sighed. “Well, Superman did stop by Met Police headquarters earlier...”

Lois sat up straighter and grabbed some tissues from the end table to clean up. “What have they found?”

Clark shook his head. “Not much or I would have told you as soon as I got home. They traced the car back; it was stolen from near Ridgely, Maryland, the day before.”

Lois sighed, “You’re right, that isn’t much.” She jumped up, full of nervous energy. “We don’t even have a description of the kidnapper! None of the witnesses got a good look.” She started pacing back and forth.

“I wonder...” said Clark suddenly.

“What?” asked Lois, excited.

“The car was stolen the day *before* the kidnapping. Unless he pulled over to the side of the road and slept in it, which would be awfully risky in a stolen car...”

Lois nodded. “...he had to have stopped somewhere for the night! How many cheap motels do you think there are between Ridgely and Metropolis?”

“I don’t know, but I think we should find out.”

The network formed by Kara’s organelles concluded its analysis. Somehow, its host was now in a different reality. The organelles’ ancient creators had often traveled between realities, so this was not a problem. Neither were the somewhat different properties of this reality’s subspace.

However, this subspace was in a chaotic state. That *was* a problem, and a dangerous one. Only ordered subspaces could be safely controlled.

Fortunately, the solution was straightforward: induce a subspace phase transition to an ordered state.

Kara was dreaming about the buzzing... *some things* again. Just like her last dream they were everywhere, bouncing around, bumping against each other and her, and changing their appearance periodically, from the mundane to the bizarre.

At the moment they were little flying ice cream cones. She

was trying to keep them away with little success; she and her pajamas were getting splattered. It wasn't even a good flavor of ice cream: it tasted like cauliflower. Kara hated cauliflower.

But as she tried to bat them away the dream changed again. Something inside her, quite on its own and to her great surprise, started to *sing* to them. She couldn't make out the music or the words, but the little ice cream cones seemed to be listening: they reverted to little lightning bolts.

Slowly, then with gathering speed, they changed. First the lightning bolts lengthened into incandescent strings. Then, the paths they followed became less random; they started to dance with each other, weaving in and out as they passed, no longer bumping into everything.

The strings lengthened further into threads, and the threads started to weave a tapestry, a flickering, luminescent fabric that was plain at first, then became rich with detail of all sizes. It looked somehow like both a beautiful work of abstract art and an incomprehensible machine. The tapestry folded in impossible-looking ways to fill all of space as far as she could see.

Then the glow faded, and there was nothing but darkness and silence.

Chapter 8: Girl Power

It was bright and sunny the next day, and Kara assumed she'd be scratching all the way to school. It was a pleasant surprise, then, when she didn't itch at all.

"Hey!" she exclaimed.

"What, sweetie?" asked Emily.

"The itch is gone!"

Emily smiled. "That's good news. I was a little worried since I didn't know exactly what was causing it. How does your skin feel?"

Kara closed her eyes. There was a pleasant kind of warmth and tingling from the sun, not at all like the yucky feeling she'd had before. "It feels great. The sun feels great!"

"Maybe she'll start flying now," said Caitlin.

"Caitlin! Stop teasing her. Enough is enough."

Caitlin rolled her eyes, but gave Kara a lazy one-armed hug by way of apology. Kara grinned up at her.

Kara enjoyed the feel of the sun all the way to school. Somehow, she felt a lot better: more energetic and not at all tired. She felt ready to tackle the day. Several times she closed her eyes and basked in the sunlight.

She had a spring in her step as she waved goodbye to Emily and Caitlin and headed towards her homeroom. In fact, she started to skip.

Kara's good mood was dimmed by the topic of discussion in Social Studies. Apparently there was flooding in Thailand, and there had been a horrific earthquake in the eastern, rural part of Turkey. Hundreds of people had died, and more were dying.

The teacher was using these events to drive a discussion about what everyone could, or should, do about disasters happening on the other side of the world. One kid suggested donating to charity. Another asked if that would really make a difference.

All Kara could think about was Superman. Whether or not he was her father, he'd been part of her world since 1993. She'd learned in school what the world had been like before then, but now she was hearing about it firsthand. There was no superhero here to fly in and rescue these people.

But Superman wasn't just about superpowers: he spent nearly as much time promoting charities as he did doing rescues or fighting crime. He always said that while he could do a lot, he couldn't do everything, and that the most important part of being a hero was not having powers, but caring and doing what you could.

She was about to raise her hand to contribute that thought to the discussion when her ears were assaulted by a horrible squeal. It was like the soundtrack for an entire movie played back in the space of a second, fed through the world's biggest amplifier — with feedback. She jerked in surprise, even as she grimaced and clapped her hands over her ears; she squeezed her eyes shut and cried in pain.

She was in agony for only a second before the pain disappeared altogether. She opened her eyes to find everyone in the classroom staring at her, but something was wrong. Like a movie with the sound badly out of sync she was hearing voices and other sounds that didn't match what she was seeing. It was like being at a party where everyone was talking at once but none of their lips were moving.

She was starting to panic, her heart thumping in her chest. *What's wrong with me?!*

She noticed that her teacher's lips *were* moving; he had a concerned look on his face, but she couldn't pick his voice out of the cacophony at first. Kara stared at his lips, and his voice suddenly stood out.

"...ing if you're all right, Kara? Can you hear me?"

Kara swallowed and nodded. If she concentrated, she could pick out what he was saying. "I'm OK, Mr. Ordemann," she replied. "I just had a bad headache for a second, but it's gone."

He still looked worried. "I think you should go to the nurse."

Kara shook her head. "Really, I'm fine now. I'm sorry." She was finding it easier and easier to focus on his voice as time went on. The other sounds were still there, but like at a party, she could tune them out.

Mr. Ordemann frowned for a second, then nodded slowly. "If you feel bad again, I want you to go to the nurse, OK? And you definitely need to tell your foster mother when you get home."

Kara nodded. "Yes, Mr. Ordemann."

The discussion started up again and Kara kept her attention mostly on it, but tried listening a little to the other sounds. No one else seemed to hear them. What on Earth was going on? Was she crazy? Were they ghosts or something?

If so, they were very mundane ghosts. She heard a teacher discussing algebra. She heard another talking about chemistry. She heard kids laughing. She heard the secretaries in the administration offices typing on their computers and chatting. She heard an ambulance siren. She was sure she heard Emily talking with a patient at Milford Memorial two blocks away. She heard the noise of a jet passing by overhead, and caught some of the conversation of the pilot and copilot in the cockpit. She heard someone ask "Do you want fries with that?" She heard the surf of Delaware Bay and the cry of the gulls. It was all kind of just... waiting there for her to listen to.

It suddenly struck her what was going on, and her face paled.

"Kara, are you *sure* you're OK?" It was her teacher again, eyeing her skeptically.

She blushed. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Ordemann. I'm fine, honest. I just got distracted."

The discussion resumed but Kara didn't participate, still in shock at her epiphany. She now knew why her dad sometimes looked like he was distracted by something, just before he made one of his weird excuses and ran off. She also knew why Jordy seemed to have the same look on his face at those times.

Now it was happening to her, too. She had suddenly acquired super-hearing. She had at least one of Superman's abilities.

That meant her dad *was* Superman; she was certain of it. And that made her even more sure that somehow, he'd find her.

Despite her fear at what was happening to her, a tiny smile crept onto her face.

"Kara, what's the matter?" asked Bailey as they headed into the cafeteria.

“Huh?” asked Kara. “Oh, nothing.” In truth, she’d been wondering why she wasn’t hungry.

One of the things she’d learned about Superman in fourth grade was that he got his power from the sun and didn’t need to eat, but liked to. Apparently, this was another thing she now had in common with him.

It was unsettling to realize she’d spent a unit of fourth grade Social Studies studying her own father.

Another epiphany landed on her like a cartoon anvil: *Oh my God, I’m an alien*. She shivered. When Dr. Penny had told her about Superman, when she’d read Kevin’s comics, she’d been thinking about her dad. Somehow the implications for *her* hadn’t sunk in.

“Wow, are you sure you’re OK? I heard about what happened in Social Studies...”

Kara shook her head and pasted on a smile. “I’m fine, Bailey. Today is just kind of... um, a weird day.”

She and Bailey got their trays and headed for their usual table. She noticed Kevin had joined them again.

“Aren’t you going to get sassed for eating lunch with sixth grade girls, Kevin?” teased Bailey.

Kevin shrugged. “None of the guys I hang with would care. And I don’t care about the ones who do care.”

Bailey smiled. “That’s pretty cool, Kevin. I’m impressed.”

Kara smiled too, and looked down at her lunch. She frowned. Was that a... bug? *Ewww!* She peered at the plate.

Suddenly the small blob on her plate expanded at high speed; Kara experienced vertigo, as if she were shrinking like Alice in Wonderland. Now that it filled her field of vision she could see that the thing on her plate was just an oddly shaped fleck of parsley, not a bug. However, when she turned her gaze elsewhere she was still seeing everything zoomed up. Things sped through her magnified field of view as she turned her head, disorienting her.

She heard “I think we might be having a little trouble in number three engine,” and swung her head in the direction of the sound. All she saw was a blur. She blinked and suddenly could see again; she realized she was looking out the window. She could make out the tiny speck of an airplane in the distance.

Again her vision changed: her viewpoint rushed forward, as if she were hurtling towards the jet at high speed. She found herself focused on the cockpit, *through* the fuselage, as the copilot started flipping some switches. She kept watching, concerned, until he said, “No... false alarm. It was one bad reading. Everything looks normal now. Better get this looked at by Maintenance, though; I’ll log it.”

“Kara, what on *Earth* are you doing?”

Suddenly, her vision changed again and she was staring at the wall of the cafeteria. She realized that she’d been watching the scene in the cockpit *through the wall* as the plane had continued on its course. She looked around; her friends were all staring at her.

Panic was jumping up and down in her insides, raising its hand for attention. “S-Sorry...”

Megan put a hand on her arm. “Are you *sure* you’re OK? You keep staring off into space. And you look like you’re freaking out.”

“I’m feeling a little... uhh... funny today, but it’s nothing serious. Sorry.”

“Maybe you should go to the nurse?”

“*No!*” The last thing she wanted was to talk to the nurse about this. “Um, really, I’m perfectly OK.” She offered up a cheesy grin.

“If you’re sure...” said Megan, doubtfully.

“Hey,” interjected Kevin. “So do you want to come over and see a Superman movie this afternoon after school?”

“Kevin,” said Megan, slightly exasperated. She sighed. “I

guess it would be OK...”

Kara looked between Megan and Bailey. They seemed OK with the idea, so she ventured, “That might be fun. I have to check with my foster mom, though.”

“Which movie were you thinking of?” asked Bailey.

“Well, usually I’d start at the beginning with a series, but the special effects are so much better in *Superman Returns* that I want to show her that. The special effects back in the 70’s were really lame.”

There was the kind of everyone-looking-at-everyone-else that passed for acquiescence, so Kara nodded her head. “*Superman Returns*”? *Where did he go?*

“If everyone could turn to page 57...”

Kara reached for her math textbook to flip the page and accidentally ran her finger along the edge of the paper. She frowned; she must have gotten a paper cut from the feel of it. She looked at her finger, expecting to see a small cut starting to ooze blood.

There was nothing. Kara stared, then rubbed her finger. It was fine.

Since she had her own books now, she wasn’t sharing her math text with anyone. Surreptitiously, she lifted the paper, hesitated, then ran her finger back and forth along the edge.

Nothing. Then she noticed that the back of her right hand was unblemished. The mark from the IV at the hospital had still been there that morning.

She took her compass, put her hands under the desk, squeezed her eyes shut, and lightly jabbed the point into the palm of her hand. She felt the jab, but no pain. She opened her eyes, and pulled both hands out from under the desk.

Her hand was fine, but the shaft of the compass was bent at a sharp angle.

Hastily she hid it back under the desk. Working by feel, she tried to bend the compass straight again; it bent far more easily than it should have. She pulled it back out, and it looked mostly OK, so she laid it back on the desk and tried to catch up with what Ms. Noether was saying.

She was moderately freaked out, so that was somewhat difficult.

Kara shrank from the oncoming projectile and closed her eyes.

“Strike two!”

Kara had never liked playing ball. She was afraid of the ball and couldn’t seem to shake that, though her father and brother had tried to help. Even now, knowing that bullets would likely bounce off her, she flinched every time.

Ms. Gomez, the P.E. teacher, came over and knelt down next to her. “Kara, it’s slow pitch. The ball can’t really injure you. Try to look at it and think about hitting it, OK? Keep your eye on it and focus.”

Kara nodded and resumed her stance. Enough things had happened today that getting hit by the ball was the least of her worries. Right now, she needed to make sure she didn’t do *anything* to expose her newly emerging powers.

The pitcher looked to see if she was ready, then wound up and released. Kara focused on the ball, concentrating hard. She readied herself to swing, but the ball was coming so *quickly* and it could *hit* her and it *stopped* and... wait, what?

Kara stared; the ball hung motionless in mid-air. Well, no: it was moving slowly, very slowly. She almost stood up straight in surprise, but realized just in time that the ball had not slowed down; she had sped up. If she moved at a “normal” pace everyone would see her moving at super-speed, just like Superman. Just like her dad.

She tried to calm herself, to will herself to believe she was

ready. The ball sped up again and everything returned to normal. She started to swing...

...only to realize that although she was moving in normal time, she was applying far too much force: she could feel it. Oddly enough, though her hands were applying enough force to reduce the bat to sawdust, it didn't disintegrate; somehow, *she* was holding it together, but she could see it start to deform.

She focused on slowing the bat down, but the result was a shock wave traveling up its length. The ball forgotten, she tried desperately to keep the bat from exploding in a shower of splinters. It didn't, but it did snap in half as she completed her swing. The end slid along the field between first and second base.

"Huh," said Ms. Gomez. "I've never seen someone break a bat without hitting the ball." She walked to the batter's box, and Kara meekly handed over the remains. Ms. Gomez turned it over in her hands as Kara held her breath.

"I guess that one was just ready to go." She smiled at Kara. "Why don't you get another bat and try again?"

The next pitch, Kara gave up on hitting. She cringed away from the ball and safely struck out.

Kara stood at the school entrance, waiting for her friends. She'd received permission to go with them for the movie. Emily would pick her up on the way home from work.

Kara's mind wasn't much on the movie.

She had not had a moment all day to process the meaning or implications of the superpowers that had been erupting one after another like a bad case of Kryptonian acne. Between trying to avoid exposure and trying to pay some attention to school, there hadn't been a shred of her attention left. Now, she was stunned. A week ago she'd thought she was a normal, if socially awkward kid; now, she knew she was Superman's daughter.

"Kara?"

"Ahh!" shrieked Kara, starting. Other students turned to look, then ignored her as they streamed out of the school on their way home.

"Whoa, whoa!" said Megan. "Are you OK?" She lay a gentle hand on Kara's arm and peered into her eyes. "You're all freaked out. What's wrong?"

Kara hugged herself and shivered. "I think this was the worst day of my entire life."

Megan looked confused, then questioning. "Is it...?" she whispered.

Kara looked blank for a moment, then shook her head. "No... I... um, not yet." She blushed furiously and averted her eyes.

"Then what...?"

"I... I..."

Megan folded her arms around Kara in a hug. Kara returned it tentatively.

"Hey, I won't break, you know."

Kara barked a short laugh, which turned quickly to crying.

"Wow. Are you sure...?" Kara nodded. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Kara tried to calm herself. "No... not really. I... uh, I... I'll be OK. I think."

"Are you sure you want to come for Kevin's geek-fest? Maybe you should go home and rest?"

Kara managed a tepid smile. "I'm sure. I'd rather hang out with you guys." She took a deep breath and blew it out. Slowly.

In an office somewhere in Washington, D.C., Kara's photograph, fingerprints, and case report were scanned into a computer database. From that point automated systems took over.

The information was cross-indexed; no matches were found among birth or other records. This person seemed not to exist.

That caused the file to be flagged. The information was transferred to other computer systems, including those used by

the national intelligence agencies.

Chapter 9: Today I Learned Something

"His nose was longer."

Lois and Clark watched as the police artist interviewed the owner of the E-Z Rest Motel, which was just over the state line from Maryland, off Interstate 395. They'd hit pay dirt on their third try: she'd recognized the description of the car and remembered the man driving it.

They'd called Henderson. It was out of his jurisdiction, but he'd worked with the County Sheriff's office to send an artist. A copy of the police sketch would be transmitted to the Met Police.

"No, his eyebrows were a little different..."

While waiting for the police to arrive, Lois and Clark had asked the owner if they could look around the room the man had stayed in. She was agreeable, but pointed out that it had been cleaned and occupied since that night.

Using his special vision, Clark had spotted a small scrap of paper fallen down behind the desk in the room. With long practice from working together, he'd signaled Lois to distract the woman while he retrieved the paper and pocketed it.

He hadn't had much time to look it over, except to note it seemed to contain only some cryptic numbers. They'd check it out later before handing it over to Henderson, who'd no doubt lecture them — again — on disturbing a crime scene.

"That's him. That's what he looked like."

The police artist looked up and called to the state officer. "Detective Cibilich? We're done here. Oh, and Ms. Lane, Mr. Kent, if you want a look you can come over."

Lois, Clark, and Detective Cibilich crowded around the sketch. Lois clamped down on the gasp that threatened to escape. They hadn't seen this particular vermin in many years. He looked older, but there was no mistaking who he was. She turned away, along with Clark, and they looked at each other.

"Tempus," whispered Lois, and Clark nodded.

They'd examined the paper the moment they were alone. It contained only two lines.

Lois frowned. "This makes no sense. Fishhook equals this, smiley equals that? What kind of equation has a smiley in it?"

"Actually they're letters." Clark pointed. "This one is the Greek letter *tau*, and that one is the Arabic letter *teh*. *Tau* equals +1098, *teh* equals -773." Clark frowned. "They're like coordinates of some kind. And they'd be *time* coordinates: *tau* and *teh* are versions of the letter t in other alphabets. But I don't understand; there should be only one time coordinate."

They both reached the same conclusion: they needed help. Which led to Clark watching his wife stalk back and forth in the living room of their brownstone.

"Where *is* that man? What's taking him so long?" Lois fumed as she paced.

Clark, despite the seriousness of the situation, couldn't help being somewhat amused. "Honey, I think this is the first time you've *wanted* a visit from Mr. Wells."

Lois ignored him. "Tempus is pretty predictable. He either wants to destroy Utopia, take over the world, or both. So this time, he's done it by kidnapping Kara. Since Utopia is supposed to be founded by our descendants that makes sense, kind of." She frowned. "So where is he? If Utopia is in danger, shouldn't H. G. Wells be here?"

"He should, but he's not."

"So what are we supposed to do? Go find *him*? We don't have a time machine!" She stopped and regarded her husband. "I don't suppose you remember how to build one?"

Clark frowned. He'd duplicated Wells's machine during their first adventure with the time-traveling author, but those memories had been suppressed. Even though they'd partly returned, the

detailed knowledge of how to build a time machine had not. He shook his head. “Fraid not, honey.”

“He always struck me as a belt-and-suspenders kind of guy. You’d think he would have left us *some* way to contact him in an emergency. Did he ever...?”

Clark shook his head.

Lois stalked over to the bookcase and leaned her head on it as she tried to think. “There must be a way...”

Clark stood and came to put a hand on his wife’s shoulder. She lifted her head, and blew her breath out. Suddenly her eyes focused on the item on the bookshelf in front of her: a DVD box set.

“Clark, that’s it!”

He followed her gaze. “We need to find the Doctor? He certainly has a time machine.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, England! If Wells left us a way to find him, I bet he would have left it in his house. In... London?”

“Well, that’s a problem. He lived in several houses in England during his lifetime, not all in London. Which one?”

Lois waved her hands. “We’ll check them all if we have to!” Clark looked skeptical. “Do you have a better idea?”

He thought a moment, then shrugged. “Not really, no.”

“So what are you waiting for?” She made a spinning motion with her finger. “You get changed, and I’ll grab a bag.” She dashed up the stairs.

Clark smiled after his wife, shook his head, and started to spin.

Watching *Superman Returns* was a very strange experience for Kara.

Her parents had decided to let her start watching selected PG-13 movies only that year, so she hadn’t seen many yet. Having a seven year old in the family meant they seldom got to watch them at home, so her chances were limited.

Still, she’d seen a few superhero movies. Since it was PG, they’d all seen *The Incredibles* on video, and last spring she’d gone with Mom and Jordy to see *Thor* while Dad took Laura to Brownies. She and Jordy also got to watch most of *Warrior Angel* at Uncle Jimmy’s apartment one night after Laura had fallen asleep early.

However, she’d never seen such a movie about her parents, the people they worked with, and the city she lived in.

Though she knew it was fiction, it disturbed her to see her Grandpa Jonathan dead and her mother engaged to a man who was not her father. Even though none of the actors bore any resemblance to the people she knew, these depictions bothered her.

Even Metropolis looked wrong. Everyone knew the Brooklyn Bridge and the Empire State Building were in New York!

She tried to see it purely as a film but that was impossible: Clark Kent was Dad and Lois Lane was Mom, and that was that. They and the other people she knew were constantly in her mind when their counterparts were on screen, and that made everything weird.

She liked the music, though. And the parts in Smallville. And Jason, who reminded her a little of Laura when she was that age, though Laura wasn’t quite as shy.

She learned that Superman’s Kryptonian name was Kal-El, and his Kryptonian father was Jor-El. Jordy’s full name was Jordan Ellis Kent. That couldn’t be a coincidence either. Laura was Laura Vanessa Kent; Kara wondered if she was named for someone, too.

She wondered if her dad had an awesome crystal palace in the Arctic. She sure hoped so!

Watching Superman in action was weird, because she now knew that Superman was her dad. His uniform, which had seemed iconic before, was looking kind of sketchy. Really,

underwear on the outside? And was her dad’s outfit that... tight? Eww.

Also, given the developments of the day, for the first time she was seeing the things he did as *things she was able to do herself*. She followed along, trying to imagine what it would be like to use her powers to help people. It began to sink in that she could be a superhero, like her dad. She could be Supergirl. That was a little exciting, but mostly it was terrifying.

She found herself leaning forward every time Superman went into action, wanting to reach out and help. She got so into the scene where Superman was rescuing the airplane that when he used his heat vision to free the trapped space shuttle, she felt an abrupt warmth in her own eyes. She had to shut them tight and cover them with her hands for a few seconds to avoid burning a large hole in the middle of the Tong family’s large-screen television.

“This part isn’t even scary!” chided Kevin, cheerfully unaware that Kara’s closed eyelids were glowing a dull orange.

At the scene where Lois Lane told Richard White she didn’t love Superman, Kara couldn’t help crying. Superman looked so forlorn it broke her heart; she wanted to reach out and hug him, and tell him he wasn’t alone. To her, the movie felt like it should be titled *Mom and Dad Got Divorced*.

If the real Lex Luthor had been anything like the character in the movie, Kara was glad he was dead. She felt guilty having feelings like that, but she couldn’t help it.

Emily arrived towards the end of the second act, and joined them on the sectional to watch the last forty-five minutes or so. She put an arm around Kara, which the girl gladly accepted. Emily was not her mom, but she was really nice and was taking good care of her.

She was very glad Emily was there when Superman was beaten and stabbed with Kryptonite.

Kara stared at the screen, horrified, tears dribbling down her face. Emily, realizing what she was feeling, enveloped the girl in her arms. Kara mostly kept her eyes closed until it was over, but even just the audio was awful.

Emily burned with guilt. She should have known a Superman movie might have scenes that would distress a girl who believed her father was Superman. She felt like the world’s worst mother, even though Kara claimed to be OK once the bad parts were past.

Finally the movie was over. Kara watched the credits roll in a kind of daze.

“So what did you think?” crowed Kevin. “The CGI was pretty amazing, huh? It’s like it was all real!”

Kara was deep in thought on the way home. The last rays of the setting sun made her skin tingle, and her mind went to the scene where Superman had flown above the clouds to recharge.

When she’d first learned that Superman was her dad, she’d been disillusioned. Superman was just an ordinary guy in a costume, not the noble alien everyone believed in.

But after watching the movie she was starting to reconsider. The Clark Kent in the movie wasn’t much like her dad but she understood the idea: Superman was who he was *because* he was Clark Kent. Maybe her dad wasn’t ordinary, after all.

This led to another thought: what about herself and her new powers? Should she tell Emily about them? On the one hand, Emily was the closest thing she had to a parent at the moment. On the other hand, Emily and Dr. Penny thought she only *believed* that her dad was Superman. As long as she didn’t do anything super, no one would know. But would she *need* to do something super while she was here? She didn’t think so, but wasn’t sure.

She didn’t feel ready to be a superhero. She didn’t know if she’d *ever* feel ready.

She wished her parents were here to advise her, but if her

parents were here she'd be going home and it wouldn't matter. Would it be a problem if her foster family knew she wasn't crazy? Questions were buzzing around in her head like angry bees.

"Hey," said Emily, stroking her hair then putting an arm around her. "I'm so sorry you had to see that scene." She didn't need to specify which one.

Kara shivered. "That's OK. I know it's just a movie."

Kara's eyes snapped open.

She'd had terrible trouble falling asleep. Lying in the dark, the full weight of what she'd learned about herself had settled on her like a heavy, smothering blanket. The thought *I'm an alien with superpowers* had echoed through her head over and over, like rumbles from a summer thunderstorm, accompanied each time by a small lightning strike of adrenaline.

She hadn't thought she could feel like more of an outsider than she already did, but you couldn't get much more outside than being an alien.

Even if her family managed to keep their secret, she would always know how incredibly different she was. She was Kryptonian, or half-Kryptonian; either way, she was not fully human. She hated that. At least she had her family. She couldn't imagine how her dad must have felt growing up.

She wasn't the person she'd thought she was; she felt as if she were a stranger to herself. It left her feeling adrift, confused, disconnected. If you didn't even know who you were what could you count on?

She was too young to know what she'd be when she grew up, but she was old enough to start wondering about it. She'd daydreamed about how she might like her life to go, though the teasing she'd gotten at school had made her doubt some of it. Now all of it was out the window.

Those thoughts and more had raced through her head for what had seemed hours before she'd finally fallen asleep; now she was awake again. It was the middle of the night, though she felt rested and not at all sleepy. She turned over to look at the clock on Caitlin's desk and stifled a shriek.

She was hovering in midair, three feet above her air mattress. The blanket had slithered off her and was piled on the bedding below.

The clock read 3:18 AM; she'd slept maybe five and a half hours. Caitlin stirred restlessly in her sleep and Kara held her breath. If Caitlin woke now...

Desperately she thought, *Down! Down!* Nothing happened. She tried to swim through the air but stayed firmly in place, her arms and legs flailing uselessly. "... *Wingardium Leviosa?*" she whispered tentatively, but that didn't do anything either. She rolled her eyes.

She still felt gravity, just as she'd felt the jab when she stabbed herself with her compass. In both cases it just... wasn't having any effect on her.

She must have floated up in her sleep. Could it have been something in a dream? She tried to remember if she'd been dreaming before she woke, but couldn't recall anything.

Caitlin mumbled something incoherent and turned over.

If only this were like gymnastics, where she knew how to control her body. She thought about doing handsprings, how that felt...

She rotated upside down, her feet pointed at the ceiling and her blonde hair hanging straight down. She huffed in frustration, then glanced quickly at Caitlin. Still asleep.

Kara realized that despite the unwanted result, she'd managed to move. She'd kind of felt what she wanted her body to do. She tried to capture that feeling again.

She rotated end over end so her feet were pointing at her bed. After a moment's more thought she drifted slowly sideways, then

descended gradually until her feet touched the floor. Her gymnastics training led her to a graceful landing without even thinking about it.

Her face was lit up with a slightly manic expression of glee.

Kara lifted up again, then landed. Up again, then landed. Up again, then onto her side, then spinning around in a full circle, then upright again and... down. Each time, it was easier. It was like learning to ride a bike: it seemed impossible to start with, but once you got it, it quickly became second nature.

She couldn't resist. She lifted ever so slightly off the floor, glided silently over to the bedroom door, and closed it gently behind her. She drifted to the front door, unlocked it, floated outside, and quietly pulled it shut.

Kara could tell it was quite cold outside, but she felt fine. There was no moon out but she could see everything. Without a moment's further thought she lifted effortlessly into the sky.

The ground fell away from her, the trees and houses easily visible by starlight, the streets bathed in the glow of the street lamps. The higher she went the larger the world grew; it spread out like a tapestry being unrolled. A short distance away she could see the bright lights of Milford Memorial Hospital. Around the horizon the lights of distant towns and cities glowed. Everything was quiet and peaceful.

She could see a lone car driving along the Route 1 bypass a mile away, hear the radio station the driver was listening to. Milford was laid out below her like a picture from a storybook.

She hung there, poised a couple of thousand feet in the air in her pajamas, and marveled. She felt like Wendy in *Peter Pan*.

Thinking of flying in a movie brought to mind the scene from *Superman Returns* where Superman and Lois Lane had flown together. Taking a moment to note the location of the hospital, a well-lit landmark in the darkness, she darted off towards Delaware Bay, her arms at her sides; it was a few moments' travel to reach it. She swooped down, racing along just above the waves, reaching down occasionally to trail her fingers in the water as her mother's counterpart had. She laughed with delight.

She curved back up into the sky in a lazy loop, her arms held out like wings, the world rotating majestically around her. She smiled as she spotted a boat anchored off in the distance, its cabin lights off.

She looked up and gasped: the sky was so different it was unrecognizable. It was filled with vastly more stars than she'd ever seen before, even in Smallville. Galaxies and nebulae she'd only ever seen in pictures were everywhere. There was a sense of enormous depth and scale that took her breath away. It didn't look flat at all; she was peering out into the cosmos. It made her feel tiny.

A bright red star caught her eye. Her vision zoomed in on it and it was Mars, looking larger in the sky than the moon normally did. She could pick out one of the polar caps.

She looked down and watched the surf breaking two thousand feet below, illuminated by starlight; her hearing picked up its stately, soothing sound. She could see the sea creatures beneath the waves, many of them asleep.

She looked all around her one more time. The world felt brand new, wondrous and infused with magic. If she had to be an alien, *this* made it worthwhile. There was no other feeling that could match flying. She would *have* to find a way to do this again.

Right now, though, she needed to get back in bed before anyone noticed. She easily found the hospital's lights and flew towards home, awash in the most amazing euphoria she'd ever experienced.

Once back over Milford she dove down towards the cottage, stopped fifty feet up, and started to descend feet-first. Her hearing then picked up a panicked, "Oh my *God*, she's not in the house!" She froze. The lights were on inside.

“The door’s unlocked!”

The front door swung open and Emily and Caitlin emerged in their robes and slippers. Emily shone a flashlight around, whispering urgently, “Kara? Kara, honey, are you out there?”

“Em, what could’ve happened to her? Maybe she ran away?”

“It doesn’t look like she took anything... I hope the kidnappers didn’t come back for her!”

Kara tried frantically to think of what she should do. She considered darting behind the cottage and coming around, but couldn’t think of an explanation for going outside in the middle of the night. The Jordans were blocking the only door, so she couldn’t sneak into the house and pretend she’d been there all along. Her thoughts were still tripping over their own feet when Emily moaned, distraught, “Oh God, we’d better call 911!”

Kara couldn’t help herself: she squeaked, “No!”

“Kara? Was that you?”

Kara winced. “Y-yes...?”

Emily blurted out, “Oh thank God!” then whispered angrily, “Kara Zoe Kent, what are you doing *outside* at this hour? And *where* are you? You’d better come here *this instant!*”

Kara hesitated a moment more, then resigned herself to the inevitable. “I’m up here.” She started to descend.

“Up’?” echoed Emily. They looked puzzled for a moment; then both sisters looked up. Kara must have been silhouetted against the stars: the flashlight found her quickly. The sisters gasped.

The flashlight followed her all the way down, like a spotlight; barefoot, she hovered just above the ground. She and the Jordans regarded each other silently.

Chapter 10: My Sixth Grader Is an Alien

“There’s no one coming; let’s go.”

Lois and Clark stepped out from behind a tree onto Radnor Cliff Crescent in Sandgate, Kent. They’d tried Wells’s home in London first. While the address was still there, it appeared to be an all-new building. The home the author had lived in had been razed.

“This has got to be it, Lois. This home was custom-built for him; it would be the easiest place to hide something.”

“Maybe the location is a hint too, Farmboy — Kent.” They strolled down the road towards the coast, moving to the side to let a car pass.

As they turned the bend, Spade House, Wells’s home for a decade, came into view. They walked up to a sign that stood in front.

“‘Wells House Nursing Home,’” read Lois. “I wonder what he’d make of that?”

“So what do you think?” teased Clark. “Knock on the front door?”

Lois rolled her eyes and dragged her husband off to the side of the building. “It’s not going to be in a filing cabinet. If he wanted it to survive this long he’d put it in the building itself.”

Clark lowered his glasses and peered at the walls and foundation. Slowly he walked around towards the back, Lois trailing a couple of steps behind him. Fortunately, that side had no ground floor windows, being close to the cliff face.

Suddenly, Clark stopped. Visible only to his eyes, the back of a large foundation stone was inlaid with Superman’s shield.

He walked over and examined the foundation around the stone. There was something that looked like a locking mechanism. It was quite elaborate.

“What do you see?” asked Lois, excited.

“Superman’s shield. And nearby... some kind of... lock?” He studied the mechanism, and saw that it was interconnected in such a way that four different stones had to be pressed in a certain sequence.

He crouched down and pushed the stones in the proper order;

it required a force no ordinary human could apply. As he pushed in the last block, another block slid outwards and fell to the ground, revealing a small compartment. Inside was a highly lacquered wooden box set on small blocks. Clark reached inside, removed the box, and opened it. Lois looked eagerly over his arm.

There were two items inside: a letter sheet, and several large folded papers.

“They’re blank!” said Lois, frustrated.

“No, they’re not,” said Clark. “I can see the writing. He must have wanted to make sure no one else could read it.” He read the letter aloud:

To my friend, Superman:

If you are reading this letter, a situation has arisen where you have urgent need of my assistance, yet I have not contacted you as I normally would. To this end, I have included instructions to empower you to reach me.

While I have endeavoured to keep the secret of time travel from you, this springs merely from my cautious nature and not from any distrust of your motives. Therefore, you will find the plans for my time machine accompanying this letter.

There remains the matter of a destination, and this requires some subtlety due to the intricacies of temporal mechanics. So as to avoid any paradoxes, I have placed these items during the construction of my new home, Spade House. This has allowed me to select four dates in my own future when I may plan to be at home to receive you. Dates in my past would not suit, for I recall no such meeting.

Similarly, it is by no means assured that the first time you use these instructions will be the last. Therefore, please select one of the four dates below that is not yet struck out, strike it out, and make that your destination. Please be so kind as to replace the items in the building’s foundation.

“Why does he always manage to make my head hurt?” asked Lois.

The letter continued, *Please plan to arrive at eleven o’clock in the evening. Any children should be asleep; we have no servants, and the darkness will cover your anachronistic clothing. My wife is aware of my travels and will aid us. Knock three times on the kitchen door precisely at eleven.*

Your faithful servant,

Herbert George Wells

Below that was a series of four dates between 1902 and 1908, roughly two years apart, which Clark read off. None were crossed out.

“The last one,” said Lois immediately.

“The last one?”

“He’ll have the most experience.”

“Lois...” said Clark, “The sequences of our lives are already jumbled. We first met him when he was from 1899, then when he was from 1916, then 1899, then 1916 again. We’re about to meet him in between those two dates. This is clearly the first time we’re doing this, so if we do *this* out of order, it’s going to be that much harder to keep track of.”

“But Clark!”

“Who was just complaining about getting a headache from all this?”

Lois opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. She tapped her foot a few times, then sighed. “The first one?”

“The first one.”

The Jordans stared at her, floating a couple of inches above the front walk, for nearly a minute before Kara said, “Umm... maybe we should go inside?” She blushed. “I don’t want anyone else to see me.”

They moved aside wordlessly and Kara floated over the threshold, finally touching down on the carpet of the living room.

Emily closed the front door. Neither she nor Caitlin made a move other than that.

Kara couldn't bear the silence, nor the stares. "I'm really sorry... are... are you mad at me?"

"Mad?" echoed Emily. "No... I feel like I'm *going* mad. Can this be real? Are we dreaming?"

Kara was tempted to say yes, this is a dream, and why don't we all go back to bed? but didn't think it would really work. "No. No, I can fly. Like... my dad."

"Have... were you able to do this all along?"

Kara shook her head. "No, just since tonight. I woke up and I was floating." She shrugged contritely. "I wanted to go try it out. I'm sorry I went outside at night."

The two sisters looked to the door, then back at her.

Emily shook her head. "I'm sorry... I still can't believe it... I..."

They were both still staring at her. "Do you want me to do it again?" There was no response, so she floated up and lay on her side in mid-air. Caitlin jumped with a little shriek and clung to Emily. Kara sheepishly returned to the floor.

"Can you... is there anything else...?"

Kara walked over and with one hand picked up the sofa, holding it at arm's length. She waited a beat then carefully replaced it, making sure the legs went back in the little holes in the carpet.

She turned back to her foster family, who were still speechless. "I think I can do most everything my dad can. Umm, like..." She blurred into the bedroom and back out again; she was now wearing her robe and fluffy slippers, which she lifted up to show off. "See? And I wasn't cold outside at all, even way high up."

She plopped onto the sofa. "It all just... happened, yesterday. I think it was the sun. Once it stopped itching, I think it kinda charged me up. That's the way it works with my dad. I mean, with Superman. I mean, I didn't even *think* my dad was Superman till I woke up here and Dr. Penny told me. And I wasn't *sure* till," she motioned at herself with her hands, "all this happened to me."

The Jordans were still staring silently at her, and Kara had to avert her gaze. "Please don't look at me like that," she pleaded, mortified. "I know I'm an... an alien, but..."

That seemed to break the spell, somewhat. Emily came over to sit next to her; Caitlin followed a few seconds later and sat on the other side.

Kara looked up at Emily, forlorn. "You guys must think I'm a f-freak. Do... do you want me to leave?" Her eyes shone.

"Oh no, sweetie, of course not! Don't say that!" Emily hesitated just a moment, then put an arm around Kara and kissed the top of her head. "We're just shocked, is all." She shook her head slightly. *That* was an understatement. "You can understand, can't you?"

Kara nodded, still subdued. "Yeah... I guess. I was really surprised when I found out that here, Amelia Earhart was a real person."

The Jordan sisters exchanged wide-eyed stares. "Are you saying that back home in," Emily paused, "M-Metropolis, she isn't?"

Kara shook her head. "She's a character in a book, *The Girl Who Flew*." A slight pout crept onto her face. "In the book she has a happy ending."

Emily tried to process this, to reconcile these revelations with her understanding of reality. Her brain refused, threatening to go on strike for more humane working conditions. She decided it could wait till morning. Possibly a morning in the distant future.

"Honey, you'll have to give us some time to figure this all out, but don't worry — you can stay with us. In fact," she said, her voice growing stronger, "I don't think it would be wise for

you to leave here until..." she trailed off, comprehension dawning on her face. "Until your parents come here to get you."

She looked down at Kara again. "Your parents... they're *really* Clark Kent and Lois Lane?"

Kara nodded. "Uh-huh."

"And your father is also... Superman?"

"They never told me, but I'm pretty sure now that he is." She decided not to mention that she thought her brother had superpowers too.

Caitlin finally blurted out, "Who are you?"

Emily frowned at her, but Caitlin clarified, "No, I mean if your dad is Superman... are you a character from the comics, too?"

Kara fiddled with her robe. "Kevin Tong showed me some of his comics, and I think I might be, um, Supergirl."

Emily sat bleary-eyed, her second morning coffee in front of her, and puzzled over last night's revelations. After the adrenaline had worn off she'd hustled both girls off to bed, though Kara had protested she wasn't tired. Emily believed her but told her to try sleeping anyway, something she'd failed at herself. Work was going to be rough today on four hours' sleep, but she'd worked under worse conditions as an intern.

Every now and then she snuck a furtive glance at the little blonde girl who sat on the other side of the kitchen table, contentedly working on a bowl of oatmeal. The little blonde girl who could fly and lift couches with one petite hand. Who apparently was the daughter of Clark Kent a.k.a. Superman, a person whom no sane individual would think for even a moment could really exist. *Welcome to the nuthouse, Emily! Here's your straitjacket.*

Assuming she *wasn't* having a psychotic break, there was no escaping the Holmesian conclusion: however improbable it seemed, a fictional character had come to life and was now sitting at her kitchen table wearing turquoise pajamas. It also seemed likely that said child was telling the truth about her family and friends: they, too, existed... somehow.

But Kara was *not* a fictional character, however she defied the laws of physics. She was a *person*, a real girl, flesh and blood. She cried, laughed, moped, hugged, played, read, whined, got excited or shy, just like other kids her age. She wasn't some kind of comic book golem, a two-dimensional sketch brought to life but not truly alive. She was a person. She was just a person who happened to mirror a comic book character.

Emily imagined that her parents would be the same: real people who happened to be named Lois Lane and Clark Kent, who worked for a newspaper that happened to be named the Daily Planet, and one of whom happened to fly around in tights. She wondered if the Daily Planet was suffering the way all newspapers seemed to be in the Internet age, and whether Mr. Kent liked pepperoni on his pizza.

In mirror fashion Amelia Earhart, someone Emily knew was real and had seen newsreel footage of, was a fictional character to Kara. She'd questioned Kara further and discovered she was very familiar with (the fictional) Harry Potter, written by (the real) J. K. Rowling; she'd read the same books and even seen the same movies *with the same actors* as Emily and Caitlin. Other fictional and real people were common to both of them.

Emily didn't understand how any of this could be possible. She also suspected she would never understand; she couldn't imagine what form an explanation could take.

It didn't really matter. Any explanation wouldn't change the fact that she had a real foster daughter to care for, or that watching over her had suddenly become a deadly serious affair.

She noted the time; revelations aside, mundane life had to go on. She looked over at Kara, who was staring, fascinated, into her empty bowl. "Kara, we're going to be late. You need to get

moving.”

Kara looked up at the clock, startled, then blurred into the bedroom. She emerged two seconds later fully dressed and with her backpack. Emily found herself far less surprised than she would have expected.

She couldn't deny what she was seeing with her own eyes. It still felt unreal, but she was starting to get used to it. Caitlin, who had been sitting on the sofa reviewing for a test, stared briefly, then shrugged and went back to packing her books.

The human mind can adapt to almost anything, Emily reminded herself. “Come on, you two, let's go.”

She paused at the front door. “Kara, honey, remember how we told you to keep things to yourself?” Kara nodded. “I think that *especially* applies to what we learned last night. If some people found out you could do these things...” Emily felt a chill as ghastly scenarios started playing out in her mind. “If they found out, some *really* bad things could happen. I don't want you telling *anybody*... not your friends, not even Dr. Penny or Detective Spalding, at least not till I've had a chance to think about it.”

“I won't,” Kara promised.

Kara found that she liked the morning walk with her foster family. Her parents usually drove to work, dropping Laura on the way, despite Dad's periodic suggestions that they really ought to take MARTA instead. Mom was adamant that wouldn't happen until Laura was older.

Kara herself had only started walking to school for sixth grade. Jordy walked too, but Larson Middle School and Hamilton High were in nearly opposite directions, so he couldn't walk with her. She wished he could; it was nice to walk with someone.

Again she enjoyed the feeling of the sun on her skin. Every so often she'd close her eyes and smile. Caitlin watched her, half amused and half awed.

Feeling so full of energy was great, and since she wasn't freaking out like the day before she felt cheery. School seemed easier.

Her friends noticed. “Feeling better?” asked Bailey in her room. Kara nodded and smiled.

At lunch, Kevin asked her what she thought of the movie. Kara allowed that it had been “interesting,” and that Richard seemed like a nice guy, but she hoped Lois and Clark got together again since they were Jason's parents. At least, that's what she *said*.

She wondered aloud where Jason had come from, and Kevin was voluble in filling in the back story from the earlier movies and the comics.

She learned about the destruction of Krypton, and that Kal-El's mother was Lara Lor-Van, and how she and Jor-El had sent baby Kal-El to Earth in a spaceship, to be found by the Kents in Smallville. Kara realized her siblings were named for her father's birth parents, and guessed the rest of the story might be right, too. She still didn't understand how she fit in.

She couldn't resist. “Kevin, this Supergirl you showed me — do you know what *her* parents' names were? On Krypton, that is?”

“Well, in the stories where she's Superman's cousin, her parents are Zor-El and Alura In-Ze. Zor-El is Jor-El's brother.”

Kara had hoped the names would evoke something in her, but they were just meaningless sounds. She looked down, disappointed. “Um, thanks.”

“Why'd you want to know?”

“I'm just curious, is all.”

“It's kind of funny if you think about it,” added Bailey. “I mean, you have a name like Kara Kent, but you seem to know less about Superman and Supergirl than most people.” She noticed Kara's embarrassed blush and put a hand on her arm.

“I'm sorry, I'm not trying to make you feel bad, honest.”

“It's OK,” said Kara, frowning. “I guess I *have* been kind of in the dark.”

Chapter 11: They Didn't Cover This in the Course

Kara found that on her second day with super-hearing, she was much better at keeping focused on what she needed to do at school, while also being able to listen in on everything her hearing brought to her.

That was her undoing.

There was a bad car accident on Route 1 in the early afternoon. She heard the screech of tires, the shattering glass, the shriek of rending metal. She heard the weak cries of an injured driver calling for help. She heard the sirens of the first responders, and their urgent conversation as they spent precious minutes extricating the driver from the wreck. She heard the siren of the ambulance transporting him to Milford Memorial. She heard the clipped voices of the EMTs trying to save his life. And she heard Emily's voice in the E.R., with forced calm, saying, “I'm sorry... the bleeding was too severe, and they weren't able to stabilize him.” A woman's voice wailed in anguish.

Kara's heart lurched as she realized the man had died.

She heard the radio playing in the administration offices, with updates on the earthquake in Turkey and its aftermath. They were still finding survivors trapped in the rubble, but it was slow going and most of the people they were finding were dead. The live ones were in bad shape.

Severe flooding in parts of Ireland and the U.K. had killed two people.

Flooding in Thailand was threatening to force thousands of people from their homes.

Kara sat hunched over her desk, barely aware of the classroom. How did her dad deal with this? How could he sit and eat dinner with the family, or take them to a movie, or camping, or try to teach her not to be afraid of the ball, or come watch her at gymnastics? Why wasn't he running off even more than he usually did?

She wondered why her brother hadn't already made his debut, but knew: Dad was there to be Superman, to deal with the worst so Jordy didn't have to. He could wait till he was older. But Dad wasn't *here*.

She didn't feel at all ready to be a superhero, and still it took every bit of her self-control to keep from running out of class and rocketing to the rescue when she heard the man in the car accident. And then he *died*. *He died!*

Was it her fault? Would he still be alive if she'd tried to save him? *Should* she have tried? She had no idea what to do. She needed to talk it over with Emily.

She knew Emily would say it was a terrible idea, and she knew Emily would be right. Why was she even thinking about it?

“I'm home,” called Emily from the door. She found Kara and Caitlin sitting on the sofa; Kara, arms folded, had her back turned on her foster sister. “What's going on?”

Caitlin turned to Emily and rolled her eyes. “Oh, you are not going to *believe* this.” She gestured at a collection of items that lay on the sofa between the two girls.

Emily closed the door behind her and came over. She looked over the items and frowned. A Superman T-shirt, some blue cropped leggings, a red cheerleader skirt...

Suddenly she put two and two together. “Absolutely. *No Way.*”

Kara turned to face Emily, her eyes pleading. “But what if I have to rescue someone? What about all those people in Turkey who are dying from the earthquake? I could be helping them find survivors!”

“Kara, you're too young to be a superhero!” Emily sighed.

“Where did you get all this?”

“I went to Walmart.” Kara folded her arms again and pouted. “I spent an hour finding all this stuff!”

“Walmart? How did you get to Walmart...” Emily trailed off. “Don’t tell me...”

“No one saw me! I can move really fast, and I was very careful.”

Emily closed her eyes and tried a calming breath. “And how did you pay for it?”

“I used the money you gave me for lunches and allowance, and for emergencies. I don’t need emergency money, now, and I don’t need to eat lunch.”

Emily rubbed her eyes. “Kara, do you want everyone to *know* you don’t need to eat lunch?”

“Oh. I didn’t think of that.”

“Why do you *need* a costume?”

“You said I should make sure no one knew it was me.”

“I *meant*, we should make sure no one knows *anyone* can do what you can do, not just that it’s *you*. You shouldn’t be doing anything that *requires* a costume.”

“But...”

“Kara, how old was your father when he started being Superman?” *Oh my God, did I really just ask that as a serious question?*

“Superman first appeared in 1993 when he saved the space shuttle,” recited Kara. “So... my dad’s birthday is in 1966, so, umm... I guess he was around... twenty-seven?”

“Right. He was an adult. He had the experience to know what he was getting himself into. *You* are eleven.”

Kara put her hands on her hips. “My dad says the most important thing about being a hero is not how much you can do. He says it’s doing whatever you can.”

Emily blew out her breath, exasperated. “What brought this on?”

Kara lowered her head and hesitated. “...I heard him die.”

“*What? Who?*”

“That man... in the car crash today. I heard the whole thing while I was in school. And I heard what you said... to his family. At the hospital.” She sniffled. “And all I could think for the rest of the day was, could I have saved him? Did he die because I just sat there and didn’t do anything?”

Caitlin and Emily looked at each other, horrified.

Emily sat down next to Kara. “Oh, sweetheart...” She put her arms around the girl and pulled her close.

“Kara... in the E.R., I see a lot of badly hurt people. If you went to that crash today... I don’t think a kid your age should be exposed to things like that. It could give you nightmares.”

Kara nodded, but didn’t look up.

“If you did this, not only could it be disturbing for you, but the instant you appear in public it will be all over the news all over the world. People will try desperately to figure out who you are. And you’re *too young*.”

“I know all that, Emily. I know there’s tons of reasons not to do it. But people are *dying*.” Tears trickled down Kara’s cheeks; Emily hugged her tightly and began to understand.

Yes, her foster daughter was only eleven, and Emily’s job was to keep her safe. But Kara had the power to save lives. Possibly many lives.

Saving those lives would put Kara at risk, but the alternative was awful: to just let people die. Was there a way for her to help without putting herself in danger?

It was like one of those impossible moral dilemmas philosophers liked to think up: *If you have five people standing on one railroad track and one person on another...* In real life, most people never had to face decisions like that. Now, Kara did. It seemed horribly unfair that such a burden rested on the shoulders of a child.

How do you foster an eleven-year-old superhero? They didn’t cover this in the course...

“I guess... maybe...” Emily frowned. “If... if... you were going to help... I wouldn’t want anyone to know it was you. I don’t know what they’d do if they found out. But how could we keep you from being exposed?” She felt like she was navigating a minefield.

Kara sniffled. “They wouldn’t know it’s me. I’d be Supergirl.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I think you should be someone else,” said Caitlin. “Maybe wear a mask, or a... whatchamacallit. A cowl? Then no one could see your face.”

“What’s a cowl?”

“It covers your head and face, like Batman.”

Kara wrinkled her nose. “Everyone says Batman is scary. I don’t want to scare people. Anyway, I *am* Supergirl. Or I’m supposed to be. Or something.”

“You can be someone else here and Supergirl when you go home,” argued Caitlin.

Emily sighed, “That’s the problem.”

“What is?” asked Caitlin.

“She *is* Supergirl. Even if she calls herself... I don’t know... Mystery Girl? No matter what she looks like, Mystery Girl has the same powers as Supergirl. But pay no attention to the girl behind the curtain: Kara Kent, who has the same name, eyes, and hair as Supergirl, is the same age and build as Mystery Girl, and has a pretty thin cover story.” Emily’s eyes widened. “And Dr. Tong and Detective Spalding heard her whole story. She could fly around inside a sack and call herself Potato Girl, and they’d still know it’s her.”

“Oh,” said Kara.

Caitlin was frowning. “Huh. Yeah. It’s not a neon sign, but the clues are there if people look.”

Emily continued, “What I really want is to keep the *government* from finding out. I have no idea what they’d do.” She ran her hand through her hair. “Wearing a different costume and using a different name might slow some people down, but it won’t fool the government, not with the resources they have. And if they find out, nothing else matters.

“So you might as well be Supergirl; at least people would have an idea who you are and what you stand for. You’d have less explaining to do.”

She hugged Kara a little tighter. “Do you understand, sweetie? If you do this, I don’t think we’ll be able to keep it a secret no matter what costume you use. I think you’ll be found out. The only question is how long it’ll take.”

“You really think so?”

Emily nodded. “I do. I’m sure your parents are looking for you, and I hope you can go home soon — wherever that is. But there’s a chance you might be here a long time. What would life be like for you if everyone finds out? They might take you away from me. What would you do if something happens and you’re in school? You can’t leave during the day. What would you do if people have issues with a child doing this? And they *will*.”

Kara didn’t have any answers. She just looked unhappy.

Emily shook her head. “I really have to think this through. I shouldn’t even consider it, but,” she stroked Kara’s hair, “for your sake, I will.”

“You mean you might say yes?” asked Kara, brightening.

“There is a teeny, microscopic, infinitesimal chance I might figure out *some* way for you to help that I think is sane. And I’ll probably say no. My first priority is to keep you safe. I could never forgive myself if something happened to you — and what would I say to your parents?” *Sorry about your daughter, Superman; it seemed like a good idea at the time...*

Emily looked down at the small girl bundled in her arms, who, she realized, could probably lift a car. She looked over the

items Kara had bought. “Isn’t there supposed to be a cape? And boots, or something?”

“I ran out of money,” admitted Kara in a small voice.

Emily looked up at Caitlin, who was trying desperately not to smile. She reached down and lifted Kara’s chin. “Come on. I’ll probably regret this, but I think we can at least finish your outfit.” She helped Kara to her feet. “Want to go back to Walmart? In the car this time?”

“Yeah!”

Lois whispered to Clark, “It looks much... newer.”

“It *is* much newer. It was built just last year.”

They’d hidden the time machine Clark had built far from human habitation, and flown back to Wells’s home. They stood by the kitchen door, the quiet sounds of an English country evening all around them. The area didn’t look that different from their era, save for the lack of automobiles and the unpaved road. The air smelled different, too.

“Clark,” whispered Lois, “How do we know our clocks are synchronized? He said precisely at 11.”

“They don’t have to be. I can see *their* clock from here.”

“Show-off.”

Even Lois could hear the soft chimes of a clock striking inside. Clark knocked gently on the door, three times.

The door opened almost immediately and there stood Wells, slightly older than the first time they’d met him. His face was a mixture of elation and sadness.

“My dear friends! I would say how very happy I am to see you again, if it were not evident that you must be in great need of my assistance.” He stepped aside and gestured. “Do come in. I must say at least that I am pleased to see the two of you together this time.”

They entered Wells’s home. The kitchen was empty, save for a younger woman standing expectantly with her hands clasped before her. Behind her, a kettle was bubbling quietly on a gas stove.

The kitchen was an interesting mix of historical and relatively modern amenities, being outfitted at the turn of the twentieth century. There was an old-fashioned icebox; Lois wondered if the home refrigerator had even been invented yet. The room was lit by a single, bare electric bulb.

“Lois, Clark, this is my dear wife, Jane. Dearest, this is Mr. Clark Kent and his wife, Mrs. Lois Lane Kent, of whom I have told you.”

Mrs. Wells curtsied lightly. “Mr. and Mrs. Kent, it is an honor to meet you both; Herbert has told me so much.” She noticed their attempts to return the courtesies, and waved her hands. “Please, do not trouble yourselves. I am aware that in the future customs must of course differ; you will not offend if you do not mimic us.” She gestured towards the table. “I am preparing tea. I hope that is satisfactory?”

“Yes, of course,” said Lois, as they seated themselves at the table, along with Wells himself.

Clark said, “Mr. Wells, I hope you won’t mind if I begin—”

Wells held up a hand, interrupting him. “Pardon me, but before you continue, how many times have we met?”

“Excuse me?” said Lois.

“It is important that I understand the sequence of our meetings. How many times have you and I met, from your perspective? Oh, and what year have you come from?”

Lois said, “Four times” at the same time as Clark said, “Three times.” Clark corrected himself: “Four times, she’s right. And we’re from 2011.”

Wells nodded and steepled his fingers. “I recall having met you twice.”

Lois nodded. “Two times, it was an older you. The second time we met, and the fourth. This makes the fifth time.”

“Yes, I recall your mentioning my older self during our last encounter.” He sighed. “I hope you will not mind, but please do not mention any details of my future adventures with you. Is that agreeable?”

“Yes, of course,” said Clark.

Mrs. Wells served them each a cup of tea. She seated herself at the table as her husband said, “Now, please tell us what brings you here.”

Chapter 12: Measure Twice, Fly Once

Kara slipped into her seat in homeroom. Bailey started to greet her, “Hi Kara— Whoa... you got glasses?”

They’d been on their way out of Walmart, passing the Optical department, when Emily had paused. She’d leaned down and asked in a whisper whether her father did anything besides wearing glasses. Kara had thought a moment, then whispered that Superman wore his hair slicked back.

Emily had nodded, and frowned in thought for a minute.

Then she’d taken Kara by the hand and told her to pick out a set of frames she liked. Kara had no objection, since her father and brother were doing the same thing.

Kara’s first choice had been wire-rimmed, but after checking those in the mirror she’d realized they didn’t change her face that much. After trying several more pairs she’d found one she liked that also made her look different. Caitlin had approved her choice.

They’d bought the frames without lenses; Emily had “explained” that Kara’s ophthalmologist needed to have them specially made. The frames had been expensive, unfortunately, since they weren’t covered by insurance. Emily had told Kara on the way home that she’d get a set of non-prescription lenses made through connections at the hospital.

Two days later, on Friday, Kara was wearing glasses to school, and recited the story they’d concocted. “I told Emily I was having problems seeing things. She said I had to get glasses.”

“Huh. I guess that’s why you’ve been staring off into space?”

Kara made a noise that could be interpreted as agreement.

“Well they’re definitely cute, but couldn’t you get contacts?”

Kara shook her head. “Those wouldn’t work for me.” She tried to look properly disappointed.

“That’s too bad, but they *are* pretty, so it’s OK. You look good.” Bailey smiled in commiseration.

Kara smiled back. “Thanks, Bailey.”

She repeated the story for Megan later on. Kevin, for some reason, was still eating lunch with them. He nodded when she told her story, but seemed to look her over carefully. It made Kara uncomfortable.

Fortunately, there had been no life-threatening developments in Milford recently — the week had turned quiet. None of the things she could hear on radio or TV seemed like something she should be helping with.

There was flooding around the world, but she didn’t have any idea what she could do, other than rescue people caught in the floods, and she’d have to spend all her time hovering there looking for victims to do that. There were no survivors being found in Turkey at this point. She still felt bad about that, but understood and shared Emily’s concerns. She had to wait.

Kara stood in the middle of the living room while Emily fiddled with her uniform. The shades were all down, but that wasn’t unusual for them as it helped keep the house warm.

They’d bought as much as they could at Walmart, but Emily hadn’t been able to find a cape — hardly a surprise. She’d had to drive to Jo-Ann’s in Dover to get the fabric, and order the shield for the cape online. She’d also ordered a shield for the front; the printed Superman T looked kind of cheesy. She’d been able to

return it in exchange for a nicer top, to which she'd sew the shield when it arrived. Sewing was a skill she'd had to pick up given her limited budget.

She'd decided to go with red ballet flats instead of boots; they were elastic and had a rubber sole. She thought the short sleeves and bare shins, and the shoes, made Kara look more like a kid, more vulnerable, less threatening. Emily thought that was a good thing.

She did worry that the flats might fall off, but she'd bought them snug, and some super-speed tests showed that they stayed on.

Though the outfit was put together from odds and ends and didn't have the shields yet, Emily and Caitlin felt a little in awe. The uniform looked homemade, but this was not a little girl dressed up as Supergirl; this *was* Supergirl.

"Take your glasses off," suggested Emily. Kara put them on the coffee table. "That's good... that helps already. The more people get used to you with glasses, the fuzzier they'll be on what you looked like without them, as long as you don't take them off in public. Hmm..." She walked around Kara. "Your dad slicks back his hair. Maybe you could do something different with it when you're Supergirl?"

Kara wrinkled her nose. "Like what? What if I wore it that way when I *wasn't* Supergirl?"

"You may have to reserve a hairstyle just for Supergirl. Preferably one that looks really different from what you normally do. Do you ever wear it back?"

"When I'm doing gymnastics I put it in a bun. I wear a headband sometimes, too."

Emily reached out and gathered Kara's hair, pulling it back. "Yeah. Caitlin, what do you think?"

Caitlin nodded. "She looks really different with her hair back like that."

"But..." objected Kara.

"Think of it like the glasses. Believe me, the more you change your appearance, the more likely you can pull this off." Kara started to object again, and Emily held up a hand. "*Think* about it, OK?"

Kara nodded, dejected. "Maybe a headband?" she conceded.

"I'll loan you one of mine till you can get your own," said Caitlin, and went to fetch it.

"One more thing. Does your dad act differently when he's Superman? Does he try to project a different personality?"

"I never really saw Superman up close."

Caitlin returned with a black Alice band, and Kara pulled her hair back with it. "I forgot I still had that," said Caitlin. "It's not a good color for me. You can keep it."

"Well, your dad probably didn't want you to recognize him," continued Emily. "Have you seen Superman on TV?"

Kara thought it over. "Yes... he seems very... serious all the time, though he does smile. My dad is very relaxed and smiles and laughs a lot."

Kara assumed a stiff posture, her arms folded. "Superman stands like this." She put a stern expression on her face.

Caitlin broke out into a goofy smile. "What?" asked Kara.

"You look *so adorable* when you do that!"

Kara looked to Emily, who shrugged. "That look doesn't really work on someone your age, honey." She put a hand to her jaw; Kara's hairstyle gave her an idea. "Hmm... OK, let's try this. Pretend you're a princess."

Kara thought for a moment, then tried to assume a regal expression.

Caitlin struggled to keep a straight face, which was probably worse than smiling. Emily admitted, "Maybe not that either..."

Kara's ears burned and she looked down.

Emily gave her a hug. "Don't feel bad, sweetie. We're just trying out different ideas. OK?" Kara nodded as Emily released

her. Emily shot Caitlin a look, and she looked away sheepishly.

Emily turned back to Kara. "How about... Hmm... Have you ever been to a wedding?"

"I was the flower girl for my Aunt Lucy and Uncle Ron when I was six," replied Kara, brightening. She smiled happily at the memory.

"Try to remember what that was like. Be formal and polite." Kara complied, clasping her hands in front of her and taking on a solemn expression.

Emily and Caitlin walked around her. Emily nodded. "Yes... That's good. That helps." She leaned down to face Kara and put her hands on the girl's shoulders. "I want you to understand, I still think going public is dangerous. We're making this costume so we'll be ready: so that if you absolutely *have* to do something 'super,' people won't associate Supergirl with Kara Kent. Given your name that may be too much to hope for. I'd be much happier if you'd wait until your parents can help you with this."

She stood up. "OK, do you think you can change your clothes really fast? I want to compare how you look."

Kara cheeks colored. "Yeah, but..."

"Caitlin and I can turn our backs, but I don't think we'd be able to see anyway if you do it fast enough."

Kara considered that, but said, "Could you please turn around?" They complied, and there was a whooshing sound. "OK."

They turned back, and Kara was standing there in her own clothes, wearing her glasses. Her hair hung in its usual loose style, framing her face.

"OK, now your costume," said Emily. The sisters turned their backs, then turned again to face Kara.

Supergirl floated in the air, her hair pulled back, looking... superheroic, at least as much as a child her age could. "Wow," mouthed Caitlin.

Emily nodded. "Everyone always jokes about Clark Kent and Superman and how anyone could tell they were the same person, but people aren't nearly as observant as they think they are. There are a lot of blonde, blue-eyed eleven-year-old girls in the world, and as long as you don't do anything to connect Supergirl to Milford, this might actually work. For a while."

Kara's resolve was tested Saturday, when the mid-Atlantic and Northeast were socked with a vicious, unseasonal snowstorm.

Kara was at Megan's house; they'd planned to hang out all day with Bailey. But in mid-afternoon the first flakes started coming down. A short while later, to everyone's astonishment, it started to snow in earnest. Mrs. Tong thought Kara and Bailey should go home and insisted on driving them.

By the time Kara was dropped off it was snowing heavily. By evening it was a full-fledged blizzard. The Jordans couldn't see anything out the window of the cottage.

Kara could, but there wasn't much to report: people were staying in their houses. Kara winced as she heard a minor car accident, but most people seemed to have the sense to stay off the roads.

Later that evening the power went out, and Kara followed Emily's directions to find the flashlight. She turned it on but the light was dim: the batteries needed replacing.

Emily sighed. "I think I have some candles somewhere. Let me look." She rummaged in a drawer. "Where *are* they?..." The flashlight was nearly out when she found a couple of candles and candlesticks.

She found the matches, too, and tried lighting one; it fizzled. She tried another and it fizzled too. "Augh! These matches must be damp!" At that point the flashlight failed, and they sat in darkness.

Kara offered, "I could try..."

Emily hesitated. “Can you really light a candle without setting fire to anything else?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Kara.

Emily tried a couple more matches by feel, then sighed. “Please try to be careful.”

Kara considered the problem. She wanted the heat to only hit the wick, but wasn’t sure how to do that. Maybe...

She lowered her glasses and looked at the wick closely; her vision zoomed in until it filled her field of view. While she was staring at it that way, she turned on her heat vision.

The Jordans stared as the room was briefly illuminated by red hairline beams emanating from Kara’s eyes; the candle lit immediately. Emily used it to light the other candle and placed them in the candlesticks. Their flickering light danced on the walls.

Emily had a hand-cranked emergency radio that Kara kept powered easily; they listened to the news. Apparently the power was out in many areas due to downed lines. There had already been a fatal traffic accident in Connecticut.

Kara looked to Emily beseechingly. Emily sighed, and gently pulled her foster daughter over to sit next to her. “Kara, this isn’t the kind of thing you should be helping with. It’s a huge inconvenience for a lot of people, but people’s lives are not hanging in the balance.”

“But someone died in an accident...”

“What could you have done about that?”

Kara thought, then wilted. “Nothing. I couldn’t have been there to keep them from having the accident.”

“You see?”

“But Superman — Dad — helps out with weather disasters all the time!”

“Kara, your father can afford to help out even when it’s not a life-or-death situation. You can’t.” She paused. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot. Sweetheart, there are people dying and having accidents all the time, all over the world. Most of the time you won’t even hear about it until it’s too late to do anything. Even if you do, you can’t prevent all of them; you can’t be everywhere.”

Kara started to object, but Emily held up a hand. “Let me finish. There’s also the fact that you’re eleven, Kryptonian or not, and you really shouldn’t be visiting disaster sites. Could you help someone who had burns all over their body? I threw up the first time I had to do that. Could you deal with dead bodies?”

Kara paled and closed her eyes. Emily hugged her close. “I know you want to help, and I admire you *so* much for that. I think you are going to grow up to be a great superhero like your dad. But I think you need to wait till you *do* grow up. I don’t want you to do anything unless it would make a big, big difference: unless it would save many lives. If possible, I want you to stay hidden while you do it. And you’re to help only if it’s not going to hurt you or risk your safety. Your parents will be angry with me otherwise. Do you understand?” Emily felt queasy at the thought of making Superman angry with her.

Kara sighed and nodded. She pitied *anyone* who made her mom angry.

H. G. Wells had pored over the little scrap of paper for a long time. He fiddled with his glasses as he examined it; Lois and Clark looked on anxiously.

Lois couldn’t wait any longer. “Do you know what it means, Mr. Wells?”

Wells frowned. “I can’t be sure... three time coordinates...” He looked up. “It would seem to have something to do with alternate realities... but I’ve only heard that discussed in theory on my visits to Utopia.”

Lois blurted out, “But you and I have been...” She trailed off. “Oh wait...”

Wells raised an eyebrow. “So you and my older self have been to such a reality. Interesting.” He leaned forward. “Did I seem knowledgeable about such travel when we had that adventure?”

Lois thought. “No... you didn’t know how to build the machine to get us home.”

Wells sighed and sat back. “Then I’m afraid I cannot help you.”

Lois started to bristle, and Wells held up placating hands. “Now, now, Lois, please calm yourself. *I* cannot help you. My older self, however, can.”

“Wait... what?”

“If my older self did not understand travel between alternate realities when you met him, *I* cannot study that now without causing a paradox.”

“Does that mean we have to wait *years* to get Kara back?!”

Clark put a hand on his wife’s shoulder. “I don’t think so, honey.”

Wells nodded. “Correct. *I* will have to wait years, but you won’t. I will keep a copy of this information; once I reach the age where we’ve had our adventure and it’s safe, I will research the matter and come to find you. *Adventures*, actually, since you say you’ve met my older self twice. What date did you depart from?”

“October 27, 2011,” said Clark.

“What time? And where from?”

“Early evening, here in England. Um, maybe seven o’clock? I could go look at the time machine; it’ll have the precise time we left.”

“That’s close enough.” Wells wrote it into his notebook, along with the coordinates from the paper. “Then I shall meet you in your home in Metropolis on October 27, 2011, at eleven o’clock, if that is satisfactory? That should give you time to put your other children to bed.”

Clark said, “Earlier would be fine, Mr. Wells. Jordan and Laura are staying in a safe place. Once we found out Kara had been targeted we sent them into hiding.”

“Then, eight o’clock? Given the time difference between England and America that should still be well after you left, and should give you ample time to return home.” Clark nodded, and Wells wrote the details in his notebook.

“Couldn’t you come immediately after Kara was kidnapped and save us some time?”

Wells shook his head again. “I’m sorry, Lois, but that too would cause a paradox. I did not know of this crisis until you visited me tonight, and you did not leave to visit me until the date Clark mentioned. I cannot appear before that date.”

Lois massaged her temples. “If you say so...” She paused. “Wait a minute, that’s another question I have. Why didn’t you show up right after she was kidnapped anyway, if Tempus is trying to destroy Utopia?”

Wells frowned. “That *is* a concern. The only possible reason is that, as the sequence of events now stands, Utopia is not yet destroyed. The kidnapping itself is not the cause. Something else must happen first, and from your point of view it has not yet happened. That is why *you* had to seek *me* out.”

They all looked at one another. Clark said firmly, “In that case, we’ll just have to get Kara back before it *does* happen.”

Wells closed his notebook, tucked it into his vest pocket, and rose; they all followed suit. “To that end I shall see you in a few hours... and in many years.”

Chapter 13: What Did You Do in School Today?

“I can’t believe we couldn’t go out trick-or-treating!” fumed Bailey.

“They said it was too dark with the power out everywhere,” replied Kevin. “They canceled school yesterday, too. I guess that’s a fair trade.”

Bailey wasn't placated. "Halloween is my favorite holiday!" Kara tried to make peace. "We can go tonight now that the power is mostly back."

Kevin grinned. "I still think you should go as Supergirl."

"Uh, I thought about it, but... umm... I'd rather not."

"But really... a pirate?" he teased.

Kara shrugged. "It was the best we could do on short notice."

"That's OK. I'm sure you'll look great that way too. I mean —" Kevin stammered, "um, I'm sure it'll be a great costume."

Bailey and Megan exchanged quick glances out of the corners of their eyes.

Kara blushed slightly. "Uh, thanks."

As she wondered what exactly Kevin was trying to say, she heard, "What the... I'm taking on water?!" followed by a stream of words she wasn't supposed to know, even though she did. Her blush deepened.

"Where's that life jacket?"

Kara frowned slightly. As a Girl Scout, she knew never to get into a boat unless you were *already* wearing your life jacket. This man wasn't being very careful, but it sounded like he wasn't in danger.

She looked around at her friends; by unspoken mutual agreement the conversation had moved from Halloween costumes back to the recent snowstorm. Suddenly she heard, "What the... Oh my God! Help!" followed by frantic splashing noises. "Help! Help!"

Kara felt a tendril of anxiety creep up her spine. It sounded like he wasn't very good at treading water either. And he was by himself. Was he close to shore?

Suddenly the sounds of struggle ceased, only to resume a second later with a splash, coughing, and spluttering. "Oh God! First day out in a boat and—" There was more spluttering.

Kara hesitated only a moment. Emily was worried she'd get into trouble if she helped people, but she knew if she did nothing and let this man drown, she would never forgive herself. "Excuse me guys... my stomach is a little... uh..."

"T.M.I." said Megan.

"Right. Sorry," said Kara. She looked at the clock; she had fifteen minutes left until lunch period was over. "I'll be right back."

She walked quickly out of the cafeteria and down the hall. Unbidden, the music from Kevin's movie came to mind and she winced nervously. Her stomach felt fluttery.

The moment she was out of sight of anyone she blurred into action. A second later she was letting herself into the cottage; two seconds after that the door closed behind her, and Supergirl was rocketing towards Delaware Bay.

A faint sonic boom echoed in Milford. People looked up briefly, then went about their business, figuring it must have something to do with Dover Air Force Base.

Kara heard another splash and pinpointed the location; the man had just gone under again. With her vision she could see him sinking, and below him a one-man fishing boat settling on the bottom.

She dove into the water, sending up a small plume, and came up next to the man. He looked to be in his sixties and was unconscious.

The Girl Scouts had taught Kara how to do a fireman's carry, so she put herself underneath him and pulled him across her back and shoulders. She was much smaller than the man but was able to lift him easily, and they rose out of the water.

The man coughed up some water but remained unconscious. Kara could hear his breathing and heartbeat; they sounded steady. He was going to live. Kara suddenly had tears in her eyes.

I saved his life! Oh, my, God, Emily is going to kill me...

She noticed they were a couple of miles from shore. She recalled the marinas they'd visited on their road trip, and thought

one of them must have been the man's point of departure. Her vision found them.

Skimming just over the surface of the water, she followed a zigzag course to shore, avoiding a couple of boats. She hovered, hidden behind the breakwater, and waited for a few seconds, looking for a place she could leave the man without being seen, but where he'd be found quickly.

She zipped over behind an office and gently laid the man down. She stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled loudly, then took off. Below her she heard, "What in the world was that?"

She waited long enough to see a couple of men come out of the office and find the man she'd saved; then she darted back to the cottage.

One of the men saw a flash of blue and red out of the corner of his eye, but when he looked up there was nothing there.

Three seconds later she was back home. The rapid flight had dried her suit and hair, but she was still covered in dried Delaware Bay water. For the first time she noticed the smell, which to her enhanced senses was acute. "Ewwwwww..."

It took her an extra seventeen seconds to shower with her uniform on, then dry off and put it away. Less than a minute after leaving the marina she was in school, walking back towards the cafeteria. Elapsed time: six minutes, twenty-four seconds.

A goofy grin crept onto her face. It wasn't lifting a space shuttle into orbit, but Supergirl had just made her first rescue.

She slid back into her seat; she just had time to finish her lunch.

"You look like you're feeling better," observed Kevin.

"Much better," said Kara. "Thanks."

"Are you mad?" asked Kara, worried. Caitlin held her breath too.

Kara had told Emily and Caitlin what had happened the moment Emily had gotten home from work. Emily had already been suspicious, since the man had been brought to her E.R. and no one knew how he'd gotten from where his boat sank to the marina.

Emily had her hand over her eyes. She'd told Kara not to leave school during the day. She'd told her to act only when many lives were at stake. She'd *especially* told her it was important to avoid doing things around Milford.

It hadn't occurred to her that Milford was precisely the area where Kara's hearing was effective, where she was going to notice people in trouble. And she tried to imagine listening to a man drown, knowing you could save him, and doing nothing. It was unthinkable.

Emily let out a long sigh. "No. No, I'm not. You did the right thing. You saved his life." She looked up. "You're *sure* no one saw you?"

"I'm pretty sure. I watched carefully the whole time to make sure no one was watching before I did anything. And the man was unconscious the whole time."

"Oh Kara," sighed Emily. Her carefully considered plan to keep her young charge safe and hidden was already coming unraveled, and for the very noblest of reasons. "What are we going to do? I hope your parents find us soon, because one of these days you're going to be seen and all... heck is going to break loose."

"Well, I'll be damned. Play it again," said Charlie Yates.

Rick Osterlund rewound the tape from the black and white security camera that covered the rear of the marina office. The frame was empty at first. Then suddenly there was a blur, and a young girl with her back to the camera was carefully laying a man on the ground. A large man whom no child that age could possibly lift.

The girl had light-colored hair held back by a dark headband. She was dressed in a costume somewhat like Superman's, except with short sleeves and a skirt. The famous S shield was clearly visible on the back of her cape.

She put a hand to her mouth, then vanished between one frame and the next. The unconscious man remained. Seconds later they saw themselves enter the scene.

Rick hit pause again, and the two men stared at the screen. Rick looked up at Charlie. "What should we do, boss? Show it to the police?"

Charlie thought for a minute; then his eyes narrowed. "What do you think anyone who sees this tape'll say? They'll say we faked it! No one'll ever believe it could be real. We'll just get in trouble, and maybe Scott Reid will too. They'll say he faked his boat sinking so we could all pull a prank, get on TV." He sighed. "No, we'll stick that tape in a drawer and forget it, that's what we'll do. If the police ask for footage, we'll say we forgot to change tapes. It'll just have to stay a mystery how Scott got back to shore."

"Who do you think she was?"

"I dunno, Rick, but I bet this ain't the last time she'll show up." He shook his head. "I'll be damned. Play it one more time."

"Oh Emily..."

Emily froze, then turned around. "Oh... Hi, Penny."

Penny hurried over, avoiding an orderly pushing a gurney. "Did you get my voicemail?"

"Um, yes, I just haven't had time to call you back..."

"I need to catch up with what's going on with Kara, see if she's said anything different."

"I don't think she's saying anything different."

"That's too bad. Detective Spalding wanted to know if there'd been any developments. I really ought to have some time with her soon; I need to keep seeing her to help her. She should be seeing me every week, and we missed last week."

"Well, she's been kind of busy. You know... settling in at school... making friends..." *Leaping tall buildings with a single bound...*

Penny frowned. "Emily, you know this is important." She pulled out her smartphone and fiddled with it. "I have an hour Friday afternoon, at four; she should be out of school by then. Please call Lisa so she knows to block the time out, then bring Kara by." It wasn't a request.

Emily sighed. "Of course."

Clark had his arm around his wife as they sat in the living room of their townhouse. Lois stared wordlessly at the clock on the mantel. The ticking seemed to echo throughout the room.

They'd had a long wait since their return from 1902 England. They'd taken a couple of hours to visit their other children, who seemed to be getting on OK with Lois's parents, though as always Lois's parents weren't fully getting on with each other. Clark had run out to be Superman a couple of times, but otherwise time had seemed to crawl while they waited for eight o'clock to arrive.

The clock struck and there was a knock at the front door. "Finally!" exclaimed Lois as she raced to open it.

The older H. G. Wells was waiting on the other side. "Mr. Wells! Please come in," said Lois.

Wells entered, smiling sadly. "Lois, Clark; how very good to see you again. I came as soon as I could without causing a paradox. I only took a short time in my own era to recuperate from our recent adventure, when Tempus staged a coup against your government."

"That was around fifteen years ago for us..." observed Clark.

"Quite," agreed Wells. "As always, time travel is confusing." He glanced over at the sofa.

"I'm sorry, won't you please sit down?" offered Clark.

"Thank you, I *am* still somewhat tired." Wells sat carefully on the sofa, removing his hat.

Lois didn't waste time on niceties. "Have you made any progress with the clue we left you?"

Wells looked thoughtful. "Yes and no. While I haven't deciphered it completely, my recent experiences with and study of travel between realities leaves me convinced that these coordinates do indeed designate another reality." He sagged slightly. "Unfortunately, my understanding of such travel is still limited. I had thought that there was only a very limited number of different realities, but these coordinates tend to speak of a vastly larger number, with the travel between them rather more involved. My own machine can visit only a handful of them.

"My best guess is that Tempus has visited the far future and procured technology I am not yet familiar with. Consequently, I shall have to go seek the same knowledge."

Lois looked between Clark and Wells. "Does that mean more waiting?"

"Not for long, my dear. It may take me some time to discover the answer, but I shall return tomorrow morning at ten o'clock no matter how long it takes me. You will have an opportunity to rest and prepare for the adventures ahead."

Lois nodded slowly. "I keep forgetting how handy it is to have a time machine."

Wells smiled. "Indeed."

"Kara, sweetie?" called Emily.

Kara was sitting on her air mattress doing some reading for school. "Yes?"

"Can you come out here in the living room for a second?"

She got up and walked out; Caitlin followed, curious.

Emily was sitting on the sofa, and patted the cushion next to her. "I want to talk to you about Supergirl."

"OK," said Kara and sat down, tucking her hair behind her ear. Caitlin sat on Emily's other side.

"I've thought about it some more and I have some ideas. But first, I sewed a waterproof pouch into your cape, for your phone. *Don't* let people see you using it as Supergirl or they might try to trace it back to us. Find a private place to call. Do you understand?"

Kara nodded. "Yes, Emily."

"Now this next part is *really* important, OK? Try your best *not* to get your picture taken. *Especially* by a reporter or news photographer or TV camera, but really by anyone, even people who you've saved." Emily smiled. "If someone wants to take your picture tell them your mother said it's not allowed."

Kara giggled, and Caitlin grinned.

Emily sighed and shook her head. "I know it's impossible and there'll be pictures of you, but the longer we can go before someone gets a really good image of your face, the longer we can keep Supergirl and Kara Kent separate.

"Given that you're only going to be helping out when it's a matter of life or death, I'm hoping we can keep this from blowing up for a few weeks, maybe even a couple of months. I sure hope that's enough time for your parents to get here." She put an arm around Kara. "If it's not, we'll deal with it... somehow. I know you can't sit idle while people die.

"If something happens while you're at school I don't want you leaving on your own. You wait till you can call me, and I'll decide whether it's important enough. If it is I'll come check you out myself and say you're sick, or you have a doctor's appointment, or something. Obviously we can't use that excuse too often.

"If it's something quick you can take care of during a fake trip to the girls' room then that's OK. But I don't want anyone noticing you absent from school without my permission. Is that

clear, young lady?"

"Yes, Emily," said Kara.

"Now, about tomorrow with Dr. Penny. You can answer any questions about your family, or Metropolis, or Superman. You can even say you think your dad might be Superman. Whatever you do, though, don't breathe a word about your powers. To her you're just an ordinary kid with a vivid imagination, and that's the way we want to keep it. OK?" Kara nodded.

"Once people start to believe that Supergirl is real she's going to figure it out, and so is Detective Spalding. They're going to know it's you. I only hope they come talk to us before they do anything about it."

Chapter 14: Out of the Blue

"What does this one look like?"

Kara studied the ink blot. "Um... a butterfly?"

Dr. Penny nodded and swapped cards. "And this one?"

"Hmmm... a volcano? There's lava shooting out of the top."

Kara illustrated by flinging her arms in the air.

"And this?"

Kara squinted and tilted her head from side to side.

"Maybe... no... well... a seahorse?"

"OK," said Dr. Penny; she collected the cards and put them away, then wrote briefly on her notepad. "We're almost done for today, but I have some homework for you for next week."

"Homework?" asked Kara, incredulous.

"Not that kind of homework." Dr. Penny smiled. "I want you to draw some pictures for me. Do you draw?"

"I'm not that good at it..."

"Well, it doesn't have to be good, honey. Sometimes feelings can show in our art that are hard to put into words, and that will help me to understand you. So I want you to draw me three pictures: one of you when you're happy, one of you when you're sad, and one of you and your family — I mean your family back home. Does that sound like something you can do by next week?"

"Sure!" said Kara, knowing she could do it in about ten seconds.

"Good!" said Dr. Penny. "I'm looking forward to seeing them." She got up and walked over to her desk. "I'll call Emily now and let her know you're done, OK?" Kara nodded.

A few minutes later Emily was escorting Kara through the hospital corridors. "How did it go?"

"It was OK. Some of it was fun."

"Was it a problem...?" asked Emily quietly.

Kara shook her head. "She's totally sure I'm making it all up. I just told her the truth about everything she asked about, except my glasses. She never even mentioned, umm, any of the stuff we talked about last night."

"Good." Emily put an arm around Kara. "I'll be off in a half hour. Do you want to wait, or just head home?"

Kara smiled. "I can wait." They arrived in the E.R. together.

Kara went over to the waiting area, which was about half full. She was just picking up a magazine when her hearing caught a radio broadcast: "Turning to overseas news, there has been a cave-in in a coal mine in Huozhou, China, about three hundred miles southwest of Beijing. Eighty-three miners are believed trapped; it's unknown how many survived the accident. Rescuers are on site and attempting to reach the miners, but time is running out as the trapped men exhaust their air supply. We'll have more details as they come in. Meanwhile, in sports..." Kara tuned the rest out.

The magazine fell back on the table, unread; Kara searched frantically for Emily. Her foster mother was busy listening to an older man, who was loudly describing his symptoms. She scurried over.

Emily recognized the desperation in Kara's eyes immediately. She turned to her patient. "Excuse me, sir, my daughter needs me for just a moment. Is that OK?"

The man frowned. "Can't she wait till we're done talking? I waited two hours to see a doctor!" Kara was bouncing up and down on her toes.

Emily tried to placate him. "It'll really be just a moment, sir." He harrumphed and folded his arms.

Emily sighed and led Kara a few steps away. "What is it?" she whispered.

Kara whispered back urgently, "A mine cave-in in China somewhere. There's eighty-three miners trapped... their air is running out..." Her eyes were wide, pleading, and frightened.

Emily paled slightly and Kara heard her heart speed up. "Are you sure you want to do this, sweetheart?"

Kara hesitated, then nodded slowly. "If I don't..."

Emily frowned in thought. "Do you know where it is?" Kara shook her head. "Go on the computer at home and Google it." Emily closed her eyes tightly and took a deep breath. "Go save them."

More loudly she said, "I think I'm going to be a while longer, honey. Do you want to just walk home?"

Kara responded in kind, "I guess. Thanks, Emily." She started walking out the door.

"Be careful," called Emily after her.

"I will," Kara called back.

Airman First Class Tyler Lennox frowned at his radar screen. The signal couldn't be right. It was probably just noise, but... "Sir?"

"What is it, Airman?" His superior officer came to look over his shoulder.

He pointed. "This signal — it keeps coming and going, extremely faint... way too small to be an aircraft. It's moving kind of like a missile launch, but the signal is too weak for that; if it's real, it's tiny. And it's moving in a very strange way. Missiles don't make sharp turns."

As they watched, the blip became larger, accelerated rapidly to Mach 17, then faded entirely.

"Some kind of antenna noise or ground reflection, Airman. Nothing that small could possibly travel at that speed or altitude. Log it as noise."

"Yes, sir."

Racing northwards, Kara leveled off sixty miles above Reading, Pennsylvania. She knew she had to follow a great circle, and travel high to avoid air resistance.

Oddly enough, she'd learned that from her fifth grade science textbook, which had illustrated Earth Science by describing how Superman traveled around the world. Anything involving Superman tended to grab kids' attention, including hers.

The air was very thin, but so far she didn't seem to need to breathe. This seemed like a good altitude, though the air was still glowing slightly as she plowed through it. She could have gone faster higher up, but worried about running into satellites or something.

The view was incredible. The sky above was velvet black and full of stars. The sun was to her left, and she basked in its unfiltered radiance. The Earth far below her was drifting rapidly to the rear, its curvature unmistakable.

Everything looked just like the IMAX film she'd seen about Space Station Prometheus, except she was *there*, not watching a movie.

She hurtled through the sky on the edge of space; gravity had no hold on her. She'd never felt so free.

She did a few lazy barrel rolls, laughing, her arms held out and spinning around like a propeller. The thin air didn't stop her

from shrieking, “This... is... so... *awesome!*!”

Ten minutes later she was over Mongolia, approaching China from the north. Earth was *really big!* She’d had no idea.

Fortunately, she now seemed to have a photographic memory; she recognized the mountains and rivers she’d seen online and followed their guidance. She passed over sections of the Great Wall, gawking like any tourist.

She recognized the area around Huozhou and slowed rapidly. She began a steep descent into the lower atmosphere, a tiny figure diving headfirst through the vast sky.

The news report hadn’t said where the mine was, but the bright lights and large crowd of rescue vehicles marked the spot. She halted abruptly at a couple of thousand feet and hovered, low enough to see what was going on without being seen. It was still dark, though the first faint hints of light were tinting the eastern horizon.

The mine entrance was easy enough to find thanks to the collection of news crews there. She looked through the rock and followed a shaft to a lower level, where there was a large coal face.

The passage leading to it had collapsed. Men were operating some kind of digging machine to clear the rubble of the cave-in, but Kara could see they had a long, long way to go. Beyond the collapsed section, she could see a group of men huddled together in the darkness, their lantern batteries long since exhausted.

She squinted; there were some spots that were harder to see. She wondered if there was something in the rock that interfered with her vision.

She glanced at the caved-in section, then jerked her gaze away with a whimper, her eyes squeezed shut and her exuberant mood gone in an instant.

There had been a handful of men in the collapsed area. They were... they were... oh...

Tears leaked from the corners of her closed eyes, and her stomach threatened rebellion. She now understood exactly what Emily had meant about seeing things she shouldn’t. She felt an overwhelming urge to flee. She rapidly drifted higher, unconsciously putting distance between herself and the awfulness.

She couldn’t do this. Why was she even thinking about it? She wasn’t a superhero, she was a kid!

She wanted to go home. Emily would understand, would give her hugs and hot cocoa and make her feel better. She badly wanted a hug right now.

But the other miners... they were still alive, still trapped, facing suffocation. If she left, they would probably die.

She curled up in a ball, her arms wrapped around her drawn-up knees, floating high in the predawn sky. A minute passed.

She sniffled and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. She wasn’t a real superhero but she could help, and these miners really, really needed help. She couldn’t turn her back on them. She slowly uncurled, and took a deep breath. She had to do this.

She *had* to do this.

But do *what?* On the way here she’d planned on just drilling through the rock, opening a tunnel straight to the miners. Now she was unsure. Would it lead to another collapse, kill the people she was trying to save? She had no idea, and she was petrified of doing the wrong thing.

She tuned her hearing to the activity below her and abruptly recognized another problem: she couldn’t understand a word anyone was saying. *Well, duh! China?*

She frowned; she had to admit, she didn’t know how to do this safely. She needed to talk to someone who knew what they were doing. Emily had said to avoid being seen, but surely she’d understand?

She searched the crowd of workers, and spotted a small group of men with a set of plans spread out on a table. They looked like plans for the mine, and the men were pointing at them as they talked. She looked over to the side; the group was well away from the media. A small smile stole onto her face.

She flashed down, unseen; a moment later she was standing a few feet away from the men, her hands clasped in front of her. They were speaking rapidly amongst themselves and didn’t notice her at all.

Her heart was pounding. She tried to school herself, remembering how Superman behaved, and the coaching she’d gotten from Emily. *Keep it formal and polite. Be confident.*

She waved her hand. “Hello? Excuse me?”

They still didn’t notice, so she tried a little louder. “Hello?”

They stopped talking and swung around to look at her, startled.

After a moment, they all started shouting at her angrily. She flinched, but held up her hands. “I’m sorry, I don’t speak Chinese. Does anyone speak English?”

They fell silent. One of the men — the leader, maybe? — replied in broken English. “Girl! Why here? This dangerous place!”

“I came to help.”

One of the men threw his hands up in frustration and said something she was glad she couldn’t understand. The others were muttering.

The English speaker shook his head emphatically. “How get here? Leave now!” He reached to grab her arm.

Kara blurred to the side to escape his grasp. The man fell back and gasped. All of them were staring at her now, mouths open.

She looked around nervously, but no one else was paying attention, and the news cameras were still at the mine entrance. “I’d like to help.”

There was still no response. She looked around again; being a mining area, there was no shortage of rubble of assorted sizes. She spotted a rock close by nearly as big as she was. She walked over, easily picked it up, and carried it back. She put it down as the men continued to stare.

She floated up, raised her fist, and smashed it into the stone. It felt fragile to her, like eggshell, and her fist made a nice hole with a small shower of chips. A fracture developed and part of the rock slid off, landing on the ground with a small *crunch*. She floated back down. “Please let me help?” She dusted her hands off.

The men just stared, for what felt like hours but was only a minute. Then, one of them pointed at the shield on her chest and said something. The others started conversing again.

Slowly, the English speaker approached her. “You... girl... Superman?”

Kara nodded. “Supergirl. I want to help. But I need someone to tell me how.” She shrugged and smiled. “I don’t know anything about mining.”

The men all looked at each other.

The English speaker nodded thoughtfully. “Supergirl.”

Kara wondered if this was how Dad’s rescues went. She’d expected a lot more heroics, like she saw in Kevin’s movie, or like they showed on the news back home. *They probably don’t put the boring stuff on TV.* Things had started off on the wrong foot when she’d snuck past the news cameras at super-speed.

That didn’t feel very heroic.

She’d explained that her mother wanted her to avoid being photographed. It had taken them a minute to process that, but they’d understood in the end: she was a child, after all. Some of the men had children her age.

She’d met them inside, and they’d taken her down in an

elevator. A man had insisted she wear a hard hat; she'd tried to decline, but he'd been intransigent. The English speaker had finally intervened.

She'd been led to the site of the cave-in, where she'd expected to be asked to start hurling rocks aside, or spinning like a human drill, or something. That hadn't happened.

Instead, the English speaker pointed at his eyes, then at the top of the debris pile, where it met the ceiling. "You... see?" Meanwhile, the rescue workers were all staring at her, wondering why a little girl in a strange costume was there without protective gear.

Kara frowned, and glanced at the pile. "I don't understand."

The man shook his head. "Inside." He pointed at the top again. "You see... inside?"

"Oh," said Kara. "Yes, I can see inside. Where?"

He led her forward to the debris slope and pointed up, at the top. "Up... there. Inside. Tell me."

"Tell you what I see?" He nodded.

She peered inside the section of rock above the cave-in, and saw a cavity; she started describing it, and he started asking further questions. Was there any water? Did the rock look solid, or like loose stones? Were there any cracks in the rocks? Where around the top was the shortest distance to the other side, where the trapped men were? Could she smell any odd smells? She answered his questions, and mentioned the bodies she'd noticed earlier. She didn't look at them again.

After ten minutes of this kind of questioning, with time taken for consultation with the other engineers, he thought for a while. Then he started barking orders at the men with the equipment, and they resumed clearing the debris. It was slow going, and everyone looked grim. Kara didn't know how long the trapped miners had left, but this was going to take forever.

"I can dig faster than that," suggested Kara, shouting to be heard over the noise of the machinery.

He said something else to the men and they stopped. He turned back to Kara. "You must watch. If rocks move."

"I can do that too. The rocks can't hurt me if they fall, but they can hurt those men."

He pondered that for a while, looking doubtful. While he was thinking, she picked up a sizable stone, tossed it in the air, and let it land on her head. It shattered. She folded her arms and looked up at the man with a disarming smile.

Everyone stared.

The man sighed. "OK." He pointed. "There."

Kara nodded. Rather than scramble up the loose debris, she lifted into the air and floated up. There was a loud gasp from the workers behind her.

She was face to face with the pile where it met the ceiling. She tried to figure out a good way to dig, but the only thing she could think of was her cat digging in his litter box. She made a face, then sighed and started swiping at the pile with her hands.

She heard a shout from behind and stopped. She turned around and one of the workers was glaring at her; she'd just missed hitting him. She blushed and yelled back, "Sorry!"

She resumed digging with less force, so the ejected material was sliding down the slope instead of shooting out into the passageway, and gradually sped up. The men watched silently as the clatter of ejected debris increased in pitch, becoming a roaring whine. Kara's hands were a blur and she started to move forward.

She kept an eye on the ceiling above her; it seemed to be staying in place. She looked behind her at the tunnel she'd dug, but she wasn't sure it was big enough for an adult to pass through easily. She might have to make it bigger.

Several minutes of this brought her to the cavity she'd seen earlier; it was quite large. She stood up and inspected it, checking that the details she'd relayed earlier to the mine engineers were correct. She floated to the other side and started to dig again.

After about ten minutes more she broke through to the trapped men. The light filtering through her tunnel was very faint and she doubted they could see her, but they'd heard the sounds of her digging and smelled the fresher air; they were speaking excitedly to each other. She noted, worried, that some of the men were unconscious or injured.

She turned around and headed back. When she got to the cavity she made a frustrated noise: the ejecta from her digging had blocked her first tunnel. She had to spend a minute clearing it.

Moments later she floated out of the tunnel to face the rescue crews. "I'm through to the other side." Her interpreter smiled broadly, and turned to repeat her words in Chinese. A cheer went up.

After that things moved along. They handed her a light on the end of a long cable; she took it through, and was rewarded by the gawking faces of dozens of men as they saw their savior was an eleven-year-old girl covered in rock dust.

She had to make the tunnel bigger, but now that the men had fresh air and light they had time. She brought some water through for them, too.

Once the tunnel was approved by the engineers, they started evacuating the trapped men, the injured ones being dragged on stretchers. She helped as much as she could, all the while keeping an eye on the ceiling for signs of movement or fractures. It seemed to be holding.

When the last of the men was out she emerged behind them to another cheer. She couldn't help it: her eyes grew wet. The man she'd been working with came up to her and held out a hand. "Thank you, Supergirl."

They shook hands, and all the rescue workers applauded and cheered. Kara blushed, not that you could tell with the dirt on her face.

The man gestured. "Mother waiting worried, yes? Go home."

She nodded, and he led her to the elevator, where they had to wait their turn behind the last of the rescued miners. Finally, they rode up together in silence. She tried hard to suppress the enormous grin that was threatening to break out on her face.

They reached the top and followed the miners outside, into the morning twilight. The chief engineer turned to shake her hand again, and again said earnestly, "Thank you, Supergirl. Thank you."

That's when all the flashes started going off. Kara's head whipped around to face dozens of cameras. She'd been so caught up in the drama of the rescue that she'd forgotten about the media assembled at the entrance. So had her companion, apparently: dismayed, he moved to step in front of her, but the damage had been done.

Kara bolted like a frightened doe. To human eyes she simply vanished, a column of dust tracing a straight line upward, a sonic boom her farewell. She never heard the crowd gasp.

Chapter 15: The Wrong Kind of Attention

Kara hovered thirty miles above Huozhou, her heart hammering in her chest. She'd been seen by the press! She'd been *photographed!* She needed to talk to Emily!

She whipped her cape around and grabbed her phone out of the sealed pouch. She was so anxious she fumbled it and had to dart downwards to retrieve it. She flipped it open but the display read No Service. She'd have to wait till she got home.

Her phone showed it was almost seven o'clock back in Milford. Luckily it wasn't a school night. *I missed dinner. Oh well, I don't have to eat.*

She started home, again accelerating out of the lower atmosphere. She tried to enjoy the view, but worries about being photographed weighed on her.

Fourteen minutes later she was descending towards Milford.

She looked carefully around the cottage; no one was watching. She looked inside and saw Emily and Caitlin sitting on the sofa, looking worried. She fished her key out of her cape pocket, flashed down, and let herself in.

As the door closed behind her, Emily and Caitlin shot to their feet; Emily started to ask, “Are you all... right...” then trailed off. They stared at her.

“I’m OK; I’m sorry I’m late.” They were still staring at her. Suddenly Caitlin burst into giggles and Emily smiled. “What?”

“You’re covered in dust, honey. I guess you’ve been digging?”

Kara nodded, then suddenly remembered. “Oh Emily, they took my picture! I forgot about the reporters and everything by the time I was done!”

Caitlin laughed out loud and Emily smiled again. “I think you got a free pass this time. Come with me.” She led Kara into the bathroom, then turned her to face the mirror. “Look.”

She was covered head to toe with gray dust; she looked like she’d fallen down a chimney. You couldn’t tell what color her hair was, or her skin, or her uniform. The bold red and yellow of her S shield were barely visible. Her face was hidden by dust; she looked kind of comical with her blue eyes peeping out. For the first time since leaving Huozhou, Kara smiled.

“Now get in the shower and wash that crud off, OK? Then get into your P.J.’s. I’ll go heat up your dinner; I saved you some mac and cheese. You can tell us how it went while you eat.”

Kara grinned as she climbed into the shower.

After talking to Kara, Emily felt pleased about the rescue, except for the gruesome sight the girl had glimpsed. Getting Kara to talk about her feelings and giving her some hugs helped.

That distress was eclipsed by the joy and satisfaction Kara felt from saving so many lives. She couldn’t stop smiling.

Emily was cautiously optimistic about their approach. “You said they recognized the shield?” Kara nodded. “I think that’s good even though it exposes you more. As Supergirl, people already have an idea of who you are and why you’re there. If you were someone else, they might be more suspicious.”

They’d expected the news about Supergirl to spread worldwide, but that didn’t seem to be happening.

Emily preferred to spend her limited budget on Internet access rather than cable TV, reasoning that you could watch TV on the Internet but not *vice versa*. They did get two Dover stations over the air but hardly ever bothered watching the news. That night they did, but there was no mention of mine cave-ins in China, much less any rescues.

Even Saturday morning there was almost nothing on the Web about it. Only one Reuters article covered the cave-in; it had one paragraph discussing reports in the Chinese media about Supergirl rescuing the miners. Those reports were dismissed as a mistranslation or a hoax. The reporter questioned the taste of people who would base a prank on such a tragic event.

“I want to look some more,” said Kara. Emily handed over the keyboard and mouse, and Kara began rapidly navigating web sites.

She did a search for “Supergirl.” All the top hits were for the comic character. She paged forward through several pages, but there was nothing about her.

Kara clicked on the image tab, but all the images were of various versions of her fictional counterpart, or people cosplaying her. Some of the depictions made Kara uncomfortable.

She tried an advanced search for the last twenty-four hours, but the results weren’t substantially different.

“You’re pretty handy with a computer,” observed Caitlin.

“Uncle Jimmy taught me.”

“Uncle Jimmy — Jimmy *Olsen*?” asked Emily.

“Yeah. He knows a ton about computers. He’s in charge of

the Planet’s web site and apps. He’s a lot of fun, and he babysits us sometimes. More since—” She cut herself off.

“Since what?” asked Caitlin.

Kara frowned. “Since he got divorced.”

“I’m sorry, Kara,” said Emily. “We didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s OK; I don’t mind. But it still makes him sad.” Emily squeezed her shoulder.

Kara turned back to the computer and tried Youtube next. There was nothing but film and cartoon references, so she went to the next page.

Caitlin pointed. “Is that it?”

There was a video that looked like it was set at the mine entrance Kara remembered. The title and the description were all in Chinese except for the word “Supergirl.” It had over 230,000 views, and 378 comments.

Kara started it playing; it was only about fifteen seconds long. It began with her walking out of the mine, and ended after her abrupt departure. “That’s it. That’s what happened.”

They scrolled through the comments. There were exactly two in English: “Fake!” and “fx sucked lol”

“And that is the end of that,” said Emily. “Anyone want to come grocery shopping with me?”

“I will!” said Kara.

“Supergirl to the rescue again,” teased Caitlin.

“Ha ha.”

Emily glanced over at Kara, who was sitting in the passenger seat. They were on their way home from Save-A-Lot, their groceries in the back.

Kara was leaning against the window, her head propped up on her hand, staring out as the scenery went by. Caitlin had elected to stay home, teasing that if a superhero was on the job she was hardly needed.

“Hey you — is something bugging you?”

Kara didn’t reply for a while. “It was the store.”

“Was there something you didn’t like about it?” Emily frowned. “Did someone bother you while I wasn’t watching?”

Kara shook her head, still staring out the window. “No... I... It’s just... I like to go grocery shopping with Dad, and help him plan our meals while we’re doing it. So...” she started sniffing, “it reminded me of home. I miss them.” She turned to look at Emily, tears spilling from her eyes. “You’ve been so nice to me, Emily, you and Caitlin. You’ve been a great foster mom. And you helped me be Supergirl, which is awesome. But...” She was crying freely now.

Emily pulled over to the side of the road, unbuckled her seatbelt, and gathered Kara into her arms. She heard a muffled, “I miss home so much! I miss my family, I miss my cat. I even miss my stinky school.” Emily stifled a laugh. “I want to go home!”

Emily squeezed a little harder. “I know, sweetheart, I know. It’s hard, because we don’t know how you got here, and we don’t know how long it’ll take your parents to find you. We’ll just have to hang on and trust them.” She smiled. “If anyone can save the day it’s Superman, right?” She felt Kara nod.

She held on to her foster daughter for a few minutes until the tears stopped, then removed her glasses and helped her clean up and blow her nose. Kara laughed a little.

Emily put Kara’s glasses back on, then stroked her hair. “There. Feeling better?” Kara nodded.

Emily had an idea. “Do you know who Rosie the Riveter was?”

Kara offered a wan smile and lifted her right hand in a fist, clapping her bicep with her left hand. “We can do it!”

Emily smiled. “That’s the spirit!”

“That’s it?” Lois peered at the device, which looked somewhat like a portable sewing machine.

“Indeed,” said Wells, nodding. He’d shown up right on time, stating that he’d had to spend a couple of months on the effort but had found the technology in the Twenty-eighth Century. “This device contains the mechanisms necessary to access the full range of alternate realities. Or at least the ones known to Twenty-eighth Century science. Really, I’d no idea! The number is enormous, and may well be uncountable. To think we only knew of the handful!”

“So there really are two extra time dimensions?” asked Clark.

“Yes,” said Wells. “The reality identified by Tempus experiences time parallel to our own, but displaced by those amounts. But it is even possible to *rotate* one’s time axis using this mechanism, accessing even more realities that experience time at various angles to our own. It’s quite astonishing!” he enthused.

“I’m sure it’s fascinating, Mr. Wells,” said Lois, “but we just want to get our daughter back. What do we need to do?”

“First, we must install this mechanism in your time machine and calibrate it properly. It supplements the original mechanism of my own design. Once that is done we should discuss the points you must keep in mind on your mission, a ‘briefing’ as you call it.”

“‘Our’ mission?” echoed Clark. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

Wells shook his head. “It will be better for me to stay here. It will make it easier to find your way home to the proper point in time in this reality. While that can be done without help, it is much easier with a beacon here, which I shall guard. Due to the relative distance between our own reality and the one Tempus chose, returning without the beacon would require much more careful navigation. Even so you would risk arriving at the wrong time or wrong place, displaced by as much as eight weeks or hundreds of miles.

“Because of that, someone should stay with the beacon, as well as keep watch for Tempus. He may have returned from that reality, with or without young Miss Kara.” Wells coughed. “I have taken the liberty of procuring a firearm to defend myself and the beacon should Tempus appear here.”

Lois frowned. “Is there a beacon where we’re going?”

Wells shook his head. “You’re quite perceptive, my dear. No, there isn’t, and so the time and location of your appearance there is quite uncertain. It is important that you arrive after Tempus, so we shall target a time sufficiently far in the future to make that highly likely. I’m afraid I can’t do anything about the uncertainty in space, but provided you navigate carefully you should be able to find Metropolis, or at the very least the location that corresponds to it.” He sighed. “Though there is no guarantee that he is at that location.”

“The time machine is still a time machine, right? If we arrive there long after Kara, why can’t we just go back and get her right after she and Tempus arrive?”

Wells frowned. “That *is* a possibility. However, doing so will change the course of events in that reality, and the longer after them you arrive, the more it will change. You will undo every effect of her being there, and she will lose all memory of anything that has happened after you remove her. You should take care to understand the impact before making such a decision.”

Lois shook her head dismissively. “There’s no way I’m going to leave her there a moment longer than necessary.”

Kara had expected Supergirl to be relatively busy given her father’s example. However, over the next few days there wasn’t anything “super” for her to do.

Milford was a much smaller and quieter place than Metropolis even though it was in nearly the same location. While Milford had its share of crime there was little of the life-threatening variety, and Emily had made it clear she was not to

intervene unless people were at risk for death or serious injury. By contrast, over ten million people lived and worked within range of her father’s hearing so he had a lot more to do.

Farther afield, by the time she heard about a situation it was usually too late to do anything. An oil rig had capsized off the coast of Russia, but the news hadn’t reached her until a day later. The survivors had already been rescued and the rig was a total loss.

She was filled with a kind of nervous energy, eager to help out again but starting to get back into the rhythm of daily life. She wondered how her dad managed the balance between being Superman and being Clark Kent.

The everyday normality she was falling into was both comforting and disturbing. Comforting, because her foster family was great and she enjoyed her friends at school. Disturbing, because she did not want to have a normal life *here*. She wanted to have a normal life at home in Metropolis with her own family. Still, there wasn’t anything she could do about it except trust in her parents and wait.

Kevin was still eating lunch with the three of them. He hadn’t given off any overt signs following his comment on her Halloween costume, but Megan and Bailey thought he had some kind of crush on her and Kara tended to agree. He spent an awful lot of time with them for a seventh grade boy.

Not that she was ready to respond. She was just becoming aware of what would happen as she entered her teens. She’d watched the older kids at Larson, and now Milford, and tried to figure out how she felt about what she saw. Though she was starting to notice boys she was in no hurry to rush into things, unlike some of the other sixth graders. That was one source of the teasing she’d received at Larson.

Still, she’d become a fixture at the Tong home, as a friend to both children. There had been talk of a sleepover soon, though Emily was concerned about Kara floating in her sleep. Caitlin had found her doing just that one night.

Tonight she was having dinner with the Tongs; Bailey had been invited but was busy with her own family.

She’d tried playing Starcraft along with Kevin and Megan, but between the complexity of the game and the concentration needed to keep her reflexes within human norms she’d done poorly. Kevin had been generous and told her she’d done “great for a beginner.” Megan had shaken her head and winked while Kevin’s back was turned.

Now that they were seated at the dinner table, the conversation was firmly guided away from video games, anime, and comics to more general topics.

“This is really good lasagna, Mrs. Tong,” said Kara politely. “Thank you for inviting me to dinner.”

“You’re very welcome, Kara,” she replied with a smile.

“I’m sorry it’s taking so long to find your family, Kara,” said Mr. Tong. “I have to say I don’t really understand it. I hope they’re not in trouble themselves.”

“I hope so too, sir. Thank you.” Her smile faded.

Mrs. Tong intervened. “Megan tells me you ride horses?”

Kara brightened. “Yes, when we visit my grandparents’ farm in Kansas.”

“I’d love to hear more about it.”

“We spend a couple of weeks there every summer, one with the whole family, and one with just my brother and sister and me. We don’t just ride horses, we help out at the farm, do chores, help with the animals. Well, Jordy and I do; Laura is still too little, but she helps Grandma in the house.”

Kevin looked at her strangely for a moment. Kara wondered why, not realizing she’d never mentioned her siblings’ names before.

“Do you like animals? Do you have pets at home?”

Kara nodded, beaming. “I love the animals at the farm!”

Grandma and Grandpa don't have too many, 'cause they grow mostly corn and soybeans, but they do have chickens and a goat, and a farm cat. We brought one of her kittens home with us a couple of years ago. I guess he's mostly my cat now, 'cause I'm the one who takes care of him."

"What kind of cat is he?"

"Just a tabby. He looks kind of tie-dyed, so we named him 'Streaky.'"

Kevin bobbed his fork; it clattered on the plate, then bounced onto the floor.

"Kevin..." chided his mother.

"Sorry!" said Kevin, "My bad. I got distracted." He went to pick up the dropped fork and get a clean replacement.

"So how many horses do your grandparents have?"

"Oh, they don't keep any at the farm, ma'am. Grandpa says a horse takes more care than he has time for, and since they're getting too old to ride themselves it wouldn't be fair to a horse to keep one there so we kids can ride it for two weeks a year. There's a horse ranch on the other side of town where we rent horses to ride."

"How many horses do they have?"

"They have lots, but there are eight for customers to rent. They're named after Santa's reindeer." She grinned.

Everyone laughed except Kevin, who seemed very quiet.

Mrs. Tong said, "That's adorable! Have you ridden them all?"

"Not all of them, no."

"Do you have a favorite?"

Kara nodded. "Comet. He's really gentle, and very pretty. He's all white."

Kevin dropped his fork again. Everyone stared.

"Kevin!" scolded his mother. "Would you please control yourself?"

"Yes, Mom. Sorry," he replied faintly.

Her tone softened. "Are you OK, honey? You look like you've seen a ghost."

While Kara and the Tongs ate dinner, another group of people were missing theirs.

"OK," said the President. "Amanda, can you recap?"

The Secretary of State nodded. "The Chinese ambassador passed on a letter addressed to you, Mr. President, expressing their sincere thanks for the help by," she hesitated a moment, "'Supergirl' at the recent coal mine disaster in Huozhou. They particularly appreciate her assistance, quote, 'in light of her youth.' They also sent another message, asking for a briefing on her, her capabilities, and our intentions at our earliest convenience, quote, 'in the interests of international stability,' unquote, but assuring us they do not, at present, view her as any kind of threat."

The President looked around at the members of the National Security Council. "And we're agreed that this person — assuming she exists — is not someone we know about, or who is the outgrowth of some black program?"

There were murmurs of assent all around.

He turned back to the Secretary of State. "Can you summarize our response for those who haven't seen it?"

She nodded. "We expressed our pleasure that she was able to help, and at the successful outcome, and said that we would contact them soon to discuss her in further detail." She smiled faintly. "Naturally, we did not give any indication that we had no idea what they were talking about."

The President nodded. "Thoughts?"

The Director of National Intelligence said, "Mr. President, I'm afraid we don't have many options. We need more data, plain and simple. It's possible this is some kind of ploy by the Chinese. It would be very odd for them, not at all their usual approach, but we can't rule it out. Another possibility is that it's misinformation

resulting from an internal struggle, one faction trying to embarrass another."

The President frowned. "Is there any chance that it's genuine? That there really is a little girl flying around wearing an outfit like Superman's?"

They all looked at one another. "Mr. President," said the Secretary of Energy, "That's not compatible with the laws of physics as we understand them. Of course, it's likely we don't know all the laws of physics, and science doesn't deal in certainties, but that doesn't mean we should take it seriously. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. This is a *very* extraordinary claim."

The President nodded again. "Recommendations?"

"We wait, sir," said the Director of National Intelligence. "This doesn't seem to presage any kind of imminent threat, so... we wait."

The President looked around the group again; they each nodded in turn. "OK," he said. "We wait."

Chapter 16: Look, Up in the Sky

"Emily... Emily!"

"Huh?" Groggy, Emily turned over and blinked. Kara was standing next to the bed in her Supergirl outfit, looking agitated. "Whuh... What time is it?"

"It's almost four. Emily, there's a plane... they can't get their landing gear down and they're going to crash!"

Emily sat up and glanced at the clock. "How do you know? And what were you doing up?"

"Someone was watching TV at the hospital and that story woke me up and, and, Emily, I have to go! I have to get to London in time!"

Emily briefly considered what it would be like trying to sleep with super-hearing, then shook her head. "Are you going to be too sleepy for school when you get back?"

"I don't think I need to sleep as much since I got my powers and I'm only sleeping about five hours a night anyway and I'm not tired at all honest! *Em-i-hyyy...*" Kara was bouncing up and down on her toes, pleading.

"Kara, please don't whine." Emily sighed. "Of course you should go, but try not to let your face get photographed, and you need to be back in time for school. OK?"

Kara vanished, leaving the words "Thank you I will!" hanging in the air, simultaneous with the sound of the front door closing gently. Moments later, Emily heard a faint sonic boom.

She sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes. She wanted desperately to go back to sleep, but trudged out to the family computer and brought up the CNN web site.

Flight 137 from Dallas to London Heathrow had been circling for over an hour. The flight crew had tried repeatedly to get the landing gear to deploy fully, without success. Both the hydraulic and the backup systems had failed; the cause was unknown.

Only the right wing gear had deployed properly. This was a dangerous configuration. As the plane landed and slowed, it would tip onto its nose and left wing, possibly rupturing the fuel tanks or flipping over. It would be safer to attempt a belly landing; unfortunately, the right gear now refused to retract.

Captain Sandra Kiernan had no choice: she would have to try to control the plane as it tipped over on its side while landing, and hope they survived the attempt.

They'd circled out to sea and dumped excess fuel to minimize the risk of fire. The left wing engine was shut down since it would impact the runway.

They were on their approach to Heathrow. All other air traffic was diverted or stopped, and all runways were clear.

The passengers had been briefed. With some weeping but

mostly silence, they were waiting to see what card Fate dealt them. At the moment they were flying up the Thames, over London itself, approaching from the east.

Despite the danger, or perhaps to distract themselves, many of the passengers were looking out the windows, somberly watching the sights of London flow past as they approached the airport a few miles farther on.

Suddenly, bedlam erupted from the left side window seats, startling the other passengers. There were shouts and pointing: “Look! Over there!” Those not seated at the windows strained to see.

Flying in tandem with the jet, somewhat past the tip of the left wing, was a young girl in a red and blue outfit, a red cape fluttering from her shoulders.

The passengers were not the only witnesses. It was midmorning in London and all along the Thames, people who’d heard the news had gone outside to look up at the stricken aircraft as it passed overhead. It was low enough to see the tiny human figure flying alongside. Heads craned and turned, following the two; mouths hung open and fingers pointed. People scrambled for their phones.

Kara bit her lip. She’d been focused on getting here quickly. Now that she was here she was going to have to figure out what to *do*. There wasn’t time to consult with an adult.

She thought first to try to deploy the landing gear by hand, but the doors covering the two recalcitrant gear were closed. She’d have to . . . rip them off or something. Then, she’d have to force the gear down while *not* ripping *them* off, or breaking them so they wouldn’t support the plane.

She didn’t have the faintest idea how to do that, being a sixth grader and not a mechanical engineer. She’d taken one look at the mechanism and blanched at its complexity. She wondered if her dad knew how.

The only idea she had any confidence in was simply to hold the plane up as it landed, so it stayed level. She knew she had a power, some . . . thingy or whatever that let her reinforce the structure of ordinary objects. She’d used it to keep the bat from disintegrating in softball, and when she’d picked up the sofa for Emily and Caitlin. She’d been practicing it on the sly with other large objects. If she didn’t use it, things she picked up tended to fall apart under their own weight if they were large enough. She wasn’t sure what it was; another question for her dad.

She wondered where she should position herself — she didn’t want to break the plane like Superman did in Kevin’s movie. She looked into its interior to see if that was any help. It was: she found the location of the aircraft’s main beams and struts. It looked like the best place to lift would be underneath, where the wings met the fuselage.

She looked up and saw a hundred faces on the left side of the plane, noses pressed to the windows. She looked down and saw a sprinkling of faces on the ground, turned up at her. She turned her gaze back to the passengers, waved and smiled, and made the Rosie the Riveter pose; she then dove out of sight underneath the plane. Only the observers below could see her positioned in the center of the wings, her arms outstretched.

The passengers wondered if what they’d seen was a reason to hope, or a sign they were already dead.

Minutes later, Heathrow loomed ahead. Emergency vehicles were clustered on either side of the runway. The jetliner flared out, and the right wheel touched ground. Captain Kiernan cut the engines back, lowering the nose, and prepared to fight for control as it and the left wing hit the runway.

They never did.

The captain’s mind raced frantically — were the gear down somehow? Should she apply the thrust reverser or the brakes? If

the gear weren’t down, either would be disastrous. If they were down, without braking she’d sail off the end of the runway in moments.

She was about to apply the brakes when, all on its own, the plane decelerated rapidly and came to a stop, still level. There was no sound of abused metal, just the whine of the jet turbines spinning down. From the passenger compartment, a cheer went up.

She looked at her copilot, who shrugged. They had no idea what had just happened, but they sure weren’t going to complain about it.

Outside, emergency vehicles pulled up alongside the airliner and crash crew started pouring out. They stopped at the sight before them.

Underneath the center of the aircraft, which clearly only had one gear down, a young girl was floating, her skinny arms holding up the enormous weight above her. She wore a red and blue outfit, and on her chest was the unmistakable emblem of Superman.

“Hello!” she shouted in an American accent. “Is there something you can do so I can put it down? I don’t want to break it.”

It took about fifteen minutes for workers with the proper tools to open the wheel wells, manually deploy the gear, and lock it. Meanwhile, Kara continued to hold the plane above her head. Other workers were checking the aircraft over, and in the distance she could see a tractor coming to tow the plane in to a gate.

Since there hadn’t been a crash, the unneeded emergency crew had their phones out to take photos. However, the workers close to her were too busy, and the ones who weren’t busy had moved out of the way and were too distant to capture her face well.

In the short interval while the gear were lowered and locked, the story, photos, and videos were exploding all over the Internet, from the emergency crew, from the passengers, and from the observers on the ground.

Once the wheels were down the crew signaled to her, and she let go and floated down to the runway. The body of the aircraft made a brief creaking noise as its weight settled onto the gear.

She walked over to the crew who had just deployed the left wing gear and said, “I have to go now.”

“Wait!” called one man. “Who *are* you?”

Kara stopped short; she hadn’t expected the question, obvious as it was. She just smiled and replied, “I’m Supergirl.” Then she remembered something from her history textbook. “And I’m a friend.”

With that she floated up from under the wing, and another cheer went up from the left side of the passenger cabin. She waved at the joyful faces in the windows, then darted up into the sky.

A second later a visible shock wave rippled through the clouds, soon followed by a sonic boom.

Katherine Mackinnon liked to take a hike midmorning while her children were at school — it made a break from being cooped up with the housework all day. Today she was hiking from the village out to the ruins of Dun Ringill and back. The walk was invigorating and the view from the ruined fort spectacular.

As she neared the top of the hill and the ruins, she spotted a girl sitting on the very edge of the scarp. Her breath caught. The child was dressed in typical tween clothing, though far too lightweight for the chilly Scottish weather and in oddly bold colors. She wore a cape over her shoulders bearing the Superman emblem.

Recovering her wits, Katherine crept forward cautiously. “Hen, what are you doing? You shouldn’t be sitting there; it’s

dangerous!”

The girl didn't act surprised at Katherine's voice, even though she couldn't have seen her approach. She looked over her shoulder and smiled, replying with an American accent. "I'll be OK, ma'am." She turned back to look out over Loch Slapin. She sighed. "I just wish my dad was here. We wanted to come here together someday."

Katherine's heart softened. "I'm sorry, child. Is your mum nearby then?"

The girl didn't turn around, but her voice was sad. "She's not here, either."

Katherine felt a small sting in her eyes and wanted to comfort the girl, but she was perched right out on the edge where the footing was uncertain. "You really ought to come back here, child. It's not safe there. You could fall. And is there another adult who's caring for you? Are you here on Skye on holiday, then?"

The girl swung her feet around from the edge and stood up, facing Katherine. She had the Superman crest on her front as well, and looked like a preteen female version of the famous comic book hero. "I'm really OK, but I need to get going or I'll be late. I just wanted to stop here and look since it was kind of on the way, but it's not the same without Dad." She smiled. "I'm sorry I worried you."

She floated up into the air, stopped, and waved. "Bye!" The girl streaked skyward at high speed; shortly thereafter there was a sonic boom.

Katherine stood there looking up for many minutes, the view forgotten.

The President turned over and looked blearily at the clock as his bedside phone rang: 4:47 AM. He reached over and grabbed it on the second try, sitting up in the process. "Yes?"

He listened carefully, his brow furrowed. "Uh-huh... OK... Yes, as soon as you can." He listened a while longer, then said, "About how long?... Uh-huh. Right, in a half hour." He hung up, then swung his feet off the bed onto the floor, resting his arms on his knees as he tried to finish waking up.

"What is it?" asked his wife sleepily.

The President hesitated before replying, "Apparently, we don't know all the laws of physics."

Emily sat with her coffee at the family computer, jumping from web site to web site while Kara and Caitlin got ready for school. CNN, ABC, the New York Times, the Washington Post, but mostly the Guardian and the BBC in the UK: they were closest to the action. She'd followed the progression of the news since the moment it broke.

At first there'd been widespread disbelief. But the number of eyewitness reports posted, the flood of photographs and videos uploaded to social networking sites, the sheer number of independent sources, was simply too much to dismiss. The "hoax" line of reporting had died within thirty minutes. Still, it was so fantastic that people were slow to accept or understand it.

Even Emily had trouble visualizing the tween superhero dominating the news as the ordinary-looking sixth grader who slept on an air mattress in Caitlin's room. She hoped that worked in Kara's favor. She was starting to understand how Kara's father got away with being two different people in a world where no one knew that Clark Kent was Superman.

Emily had hoped that Kara's second major outing would be like the one in China, where disbelief had overwhelmed the evidence. There was simply too much evidence this time. Though there was debate whether she was "really" Supergirl or someone masquerading as her, the current view was summed up by the New York Times banner headline:

*SUPERGIRL RESCUES STRICKEN AIRLINER
Comic Book Superheroine Comes to Life*

Emily heard the girls finishing up, so she closed the browser and shut down the computer. Unfortunately, unlike Metropolis, wherever that was, everyone here knew that Clark Kent was Superman. And at least two other people outside her family had heard Kara's whole story when she arrived.

Emily reviewed her decisions to date. Every step of the way she'd done the best she could to care for Kara while also trying to do the right thing. Could she make Kara stand idle while people died? A man drowned? Dozens of coal miners suffocated in the dark? Hundreds of people killed in a horrible plane crash? She didn't know if someone else could, but she couldn't.

Hundreds of people were standing on one trolley track, with Emily's family on the other track. And she'd thrown the switch aiming the trolley straight at the three of them.

She knew it was only a matter of time. The only question was, how much time did they have? Would Superman find them before the world descended on her family and all hell broke loose?

"Now remember," said Wells, "you must strive to stay hidden until you understand the world in which you find yourselves. Given the distance from our own, things may be wildly different. I cannot guarantee even that the inhabitants will be recognizably human. Even if they are, their culture and society may be alien to you. Don't assume your currency will be accepted—"

"Yes, Mr. Wells, we understand," interrupted Lois. "Get the lay of the land first."

"As you say," agreed Wells.

They were gathered in the secret room in the Kent townhouse, which housed Clark's Superman uniforms and other paraphernalia. It was just large enough to accommodate the time machine, now augmented with the new three-axis device. On a small table against one wall sat the beacon, a small box with a single light that blinked regularly.

Not knowing what to expect, Lois and Clark were dressed for the outdoors. They had brought equipment and supplies for wilderness camping. It would hold them for a week or so, long enough to determine their next steps.

All of this was stowed in the time machine; they were ready to depart.

Clark helped Lois into the passenger side, then took the driver's seat. "Thank you for all your help, Mr. Wells. Thank you for helping us get Kara back." He shook Wells's hand from where he sat.

"Yes, thank you," said Lois.

"As always, it is my privilege to assist you," replied Wells, tipping his head in acknowledgement. He stepped back.

Clark double-checked that the coordinates matched those on the paper they'd found, then threw the switch. A glow grew around the machine. Suddenly it seemed to move in an impossible way, sliding in a direction that didn't exist. The glow faded to nothing, and they were gone.

Wells sighed. If all went as planned, from his perspective they should be back in less than half an hour. He checked the beacon one more time. As he did, he heard the doorbell ring.

He frowned. "Who on Earth could that be? One of their friends, perhaps, or a neighbor?"

He mentally rehearsed the story they'd made up on the off chance someone came by while Lois and Clark were gone. He was to be an old friend of Jonathan Kent's, recently moved from London to Metropolis, looking for a place to live and staying with Lois and Clark in the meantime. He exited the secret room, touching the control that concealed it, and headed for the door.

Being from the early Twentieth Century, he didn't think to look through the peephole before opening it.

It was Tempus, holding a large pizza box and a six-pack of beer in bottles. Wells gaped.

“Hey, did someone order a pizza?” Tempus did a theatrical double-take. “Oh, that’s right... I did!”

They stood in tableau for a minute, Tempus’s wild grin fading slowly. Finally he said, “Manners, Herb. It’s not cricket to leave an old friend standing on the doorstep.”

Wells didn’t say anything.

Tempus cleared his throat. “May I come in? The pizza’s getting cold.”

Wells stepped aside.

“That’s better!” Tempus ambled in, setting the pizza box on the coffee table along with the beer. He heard the door close, and turned to find Wells holding a revolver on him.

Tempus tsked. “Herb! I don’t know whether to feel hurt, or to congratulate you for trying to be more my kind of guy. Now if you actually started shooting I could really start to respect you.”

“What do you want, Tempus? Why are you here? What have you done with Miss Kent?”

“What do I want? I want to party! Share a pizza and some brews with my best bro! And ‘Miss Kent’” — he mimicked Wells’s accent — “is right where I left her.” He nodded towards the wet bar hiding the secret room. “In the world her parents just left for.”

“How do you know that?”

“Herb, Herb, Herb... having one of those gizmos myself, don’t you think I’d also have a gizmo for tracking one? I’ve been waiting for them to leave.”

“What do you hope to accomplish, Tempus?”

Tempus rolled his eyes. “You can put the gun down, Herb; I’m unarmed. I told you, I’m here for the celebration!”

Wells squinted. “What celebration?”

“Why, of the deaths of Superman, Lois Lane, and Utopia, of course!”

Wells felt a chill go up his back. “And how is that to come about?”

“It already has. Or it will. Once they arrive in that world. Oh, and thank *you*, Herb! You really came through. I knew you’d show them how to get there. I *did* leave a heavy-handed trail of breadcrumbs, but they needed you to solve the last piece of the puzzle.”

Wells lowered his revolver and felt slightly faint. “What’s going to happen?”

“Well, I’ll get to that, but you’re looking kinda peaked, Herb. You should eat something first.” He flipped open the pizza box. “Pepperoni or plain? I got half and half.”

Chapter 17: Six Impossible Things

“And this next image is a composite sketch based on the witnesses’ descriptions, the photos, and the videos.”

The President examined the drawing on the screen: an artist’s rendition of a somber-looking little girl, her hair pulled back by a headband. He knew the expression was due to the artist and not the child. Police sketch artists did not usually draw happy people.

He glanced around at the civilian and military officials assembled in the Situation Room. They were taking in the portrait, their expressions guarded.

The analyst, a young man with wire-rim glasses, continued his briefing. “We also have a watercolor from one of the British papers; they commissioned it for their front page.”

This one was more flattering: the child was smiling. The President felt a pang of fatherly affection, and pushed it down. He couldn’t afford to be sentimental about this.

There was precious little data so far. There wasn’t a single photo or video that had gotten close enough to capture her face in detail. Her age was estimated to be between eleven and twelve based on height and overall physique as measured from the photos. Blue eyes, blonde hair, just like her comic book counterpart.

“So far she’s demonstrated independent flight and enough strength to support the weight of a fully loaded jumbo jet. She also departed the scene at hypersonic speed, though curiously the sonic boom was much less than we’d expect. She seems able to partly or fully dampen the side effects of her super-speed. The report from the mine cave-in in China was quite terse, and for obvious reasons we don’t want to ask the Chinese for more, so pretty much all we know comes from London.”

“Can we track her?”

“Only sporadically. She’s just too small and her radar reflectivity is low. We can’t get a reliable signal.” The analyst shrugged. “Our systems were not designed to track flying kids.”

The President frowned. That wasn’t good. “Have we been able to identify her?”

“No ID so far, sir. The sketches aren’t good enough for the recognition algorithms; there are way too many hits. We need a good close-up photograph or some other key. MI5 tried to get fingerprints from the aircraft but they were too smeared.”

“Can we tell whether she has other powers besides flight, strength, and speed? Like...” He tried to remember.

“Invulnerability, vision, hearing, freezing breath?” The President nodded. “We’re convinced she’s invulnerable. Hearing and vision are likely.”

“Why’s that?”

“From the limited data we’ve collected it appears she’s mostly traveling at several miles per second in the lower thermosphere...” The analyst paused at the President’s glazed look. “Um, right where the atmosphere starts to thin out into space, about sixty miles up. She can fly at high speed with very little air resistance.

“But she’s also gone through denser air and generated plasma. Like a spacecraft during reentry, or a meteor, but hotter because she’s moving faster. We estimated it at ten thousand degrees, as hot as the surface of the Sun. Also, we’ve tracked her accelerating at nearly a thousand g’s. Even a machine couldn’t withstand conditions like that, much less a human. She must be invulnerable.”

“Good God,” someone murmured.

“Hearing we think is likely because she was able to come to London so quickly. Either she spends all her time watching TV, or she overheard it. Vision we think is likely because we don’t see how else she could navigate at the speeds she travels.”

The President had trouble finding words. “I see. Any ideas on how she does all this?”

“None, sir. What she does is impossible according to current human knowledge. We think she’s tapping into laws of nature we haven’t discovered yet.”

The President mulled that over, frowning. “And her intentions, behavior? Any profiling?”

The analyst shook his head. “Again, very little data, sir. What we have suggests she’s behaving as a child of that age would. There appears to be a genuine desire to help. She tried to reassure the passengers with a gesture as she started the rescue. She could have set the aircraft down once it was stopped, but she didn’t want to cause damage, and she cooperated with the emergency workers.

“Those are all positive signs and our behavioral experts are cautiously optimistic. Still, we can’t be sure yet. If she’s truly an alien as in the comics, it’s possible her psychology has non-human aspects.”

The President sighed. “I can’t believe I’m asking this, but *can* we learn anything useful from the comics?”

The analyst spread his hands. “Probably not, Mr. President. While Superman’s biography and personality have been fairly consistent across the years, Supergirl is another matter: her back story and personality are all over the map.”

The President spoke forcefully. “We can’t keep flying blind

like this. We need to talk to her in person, interview her, understand her. Get more data! That's our top priority." There was a murmur of agreement from around the room.

His expression turned grim. "And now the ugly part. Is there any way to neutralize or control her?"

There was a heavy silence.

The analyst sounded rather more somber. "None that we know of, sir. There doesn't appear to be any substance known to our scientists that could be Kryptonite. If she's like her comic counterpart her power comes from the sun, but we can't deprive her of it without subduing her first. And we don't know how long her power would last without exposure to sunlight; it could be a long time. In the comics, Superman doesn't run out of power in the middle of the night. He's supposedly invulnerable even to a nuclear weapon, so..."

The President shook his head. "Not an option except as the very last resort."

The analyst nodded. "Of course. Besides, if she's powered by the sun a thermonuclear weapon could be just like an energy drink for her.

"Without Kryptonite we're stumped. If ten thousand degree plasma and a thousand g's don't faze her, nothing else short of a nuke is going to."

He hesitated. "Of course, we don't know that she's just like the comic character. We could experiment, try throwing weapons at her to see if anything works, but the most likely outcome is that she'd be unharmed and angry. We'd burn our bridges." He coughed. "Not to mention the P.R. debacle if the public found out."

The President sat back in his chair. "So you're saying we don't have a clue how to stop her if we had to?"

The analyst shook his head. "None, sir. Again, whatever drives her superpowers is far beyond our science."

The President was silent for a minute and looked very unhappy. The United States of America was not accustomed to relying on the kindness of strangers. "Assuming she's not hostile, who or what is she? Why pretend to be Supergirl?"

The analyst shrugged. "At first we were certain her appearance was a ruse, but that theory doesn't hold up. The only motivation would be to influence us not to attack her, but there are far better reasons not to attack her. So if it's not a deception... she might *be* Supergirl."

"How could she *possibly* be the fictional character?"

"We don't know, sir, but given all the impossible things she's *doing, being* Supergirl is just one more. It may even be the simplest explanation for her having Supergirl's exact abilities. Occam's Razor."

"Six impossible things before breakfast," quoted the President. He rubbed his eyes; he needed more coffee. "All right. Until and unless there's a known way to neutralize her, or she becomes hostile, let's keep watching."

The news from London had been too late for the newspapers' home delivery editions, and most parents were too harried to watch TV or browse the web while getting their children ready for school. Most of those who did have time didn't share the news with their children, not wanting to distract them. So the day started out as a fairly normal one at school. It didn't remain that way for long.

When the bell rang for Social Studies, Mr. Ordemann began, "Class, we're going to skip the topic I had planned for today and concentrate on a current event, one that I think you'll all find much more interesting than usual." The students all looked around, and a little buzz went around the classroom.

Mr. Ordemann was grinning as he went to the room's TV monitor and turned it on. It was set to CNN, where an anchor was reading the news.

"...is still in shock at the events in London this morning. To recap for those of you just joining us: this morning, British time, an airliner carrying hundreds of people was in serious trouble, unable to lower its landing gear. The plane was on its way to attempt an emergency crash landing at London's Heathrow airport, when passengers looked out the window and saw this."

The video switched to something obviously taken from a phone or the like. Kara saw an image of herself, viewed from the window of the plane as she flew alongside. Fortunately, between the typically scratched airplane window and the distance, you couldn't really make out her face.

The broadcast switched to other videos, including one showing her passing overhead with the plane above her. Another video showed her floating and holding the airliner up as the emergency crews lowered the landing gear. There was a still of her that wasn't too clear, but was clear enough to show the shield on her chest.

Mr. Ordemann muted the audio on the TV but left it playing. Suddenly, the whole class began talking at once.

Mr. Ordemann raised his hands and motioned. "Quiet, everyone, please!" The class reluctantly settled down. "I do want to hear what you have to say, but one at a time. I don't have a lesson plan for this — it just happened this morning. So today, we're going to analyze this together.

"Let me summarize: I'm sure most of you have seen a superhero movie or read a comic book. It's great fun, escapist fiction. But here we have a real, live, actual superhero. Not only that, she appears to be someone we already knew from the comics: Supergirl. I don't know about you, but that blows my mind. I think it's going to take a while for the world to understand this, but I want you to talk about what it means to you, what you think. OK, who wants to go first?" He looked over the sea of raised hands. "Trevor?"

"It's gotta be a fake! I mean, come on..."

"I thought so too, but there are nearly a thousand eyewitnesses, with several thousand photographs and videos. Also, it wasn't widely publicized but this wasn't her first rescue: she helped out at a mine disaster in China a few days ago. It can't be a fake; there's just too much evidence. Next?" He looked around again. "Alyssa?"

"I mean, she looks like Supergirl, and she can fly and everything, but how can she be the same person? Supergirl is a comic book character."

"Excellent question! You could say she's just someone with the same abilities and appearance, but you all know the saying: if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it's a duck. Personally, I think she raises more questions about metaphysics than about physics."

The students stared blankly.

"Uh, right, sorry. New word: metaphysics, the branch of philosophy that deals with the most basic things, such as being and identity, or what it means to know something. Not a sixth grade topic but you can look it up on Wikipedia if you like. Next? Nick?"

"Yeah, about that, how can she fly? Isn't that, like, impossible? Against the laws of nature?"

Mr. Ordemann laughed. "Everyone thought so. I'm not your science teacher, but I bet you can tell me what he'd say." He looked around at the blank expressions. "Come on, *somebody* must know."

Kara slowly raised her hand. This was a good opportunity to participate without talking about herself in the third person.

"Kara?"

"If experiments disagree with your theory, you need to change your theory," she recited.

"Exactly right!" beamed Mr. Ordemann. "I'm sure Supergirl will keep physicists guessing for a long time to come." He

pointed. “Eric?”

“Shouldn’t we, umm, learn more about her before we talk about it more?”

“Good idea. There isn’t much, but let’s spend ten minutes catching up on what the talking heads have to say.” He moved to turn the volume back up.

Kara spent the rest of the period watching her classmates eagerly absorb all they could about Supergirl, in a way she’d never seen them try to learn before. It left her feeling uneasy.

She started to worry when she met Bailey on the way to lunch. Her friend kept looking at her with the strangest expression. She knew she was in trouble when she spotted Megan and Kevin at their table. Kevin had a half-awed, half-fearful expression on his face that was not at all reassuring. During the entire time she was getting her lunch, she felt like a condemned prisoner walking to the gallows.

It started the moment she sat down. “Kara...” began Kevin quietly. “We know.”

Kara’s heart was pounding, but what could she do? “Know what?”

Megan made a face, and Kevin rolled his eyes. “I mean, come on,” he whispered, ticking points off on his fingers. “You show up out of nowhere. Your name is Kara Kent. You didn’t know anything about Superman comics or movies. Your parents are both reporters. Your brother’s and sister’s names sound like Superman’s parents. For some reason your parents don’t seem to be coming to get you. Your grandparents have a farm in Kansas. You started wearing glasses. And your cat is named *Streaky!*”

Kara couldn’t help herself. “Why is *that* important? It’s just a name.”

“It’s the name of *Supergirl’s* cat!”

“Oh. I didn’t know she had a cat.”

“She does, *apparently*. I’ve been noticing this stuff all along, but I thought I was nuts till I heard the news this morning.”

Kara looked down. She hated to do this to her friends, but she knew she had no choice, at least not until she talked to Emily. “I see where you’re going with this, Kevin, but me, Supergirl?”

Her friends looked incredulous. “Oh come on, Kara,” whispered Bailey fiercely.

Kara couldn’t look her friends in the eye. She knew that they knew she was lying. She hated the way that made her feel.

“Do you think we’re going to rat you out or something?” hissed Megan. “We can keep your secret!”

Kara couldn’t reply; tears started to drip down her nose, landing on her sandwich. The inside of her glasses became flecked with tear droplets.

“Look—” began Kevin, exasperated.

Kara couldn’t take any more. “*No!*” She left her lunch behind and fled.

Chapter 18: The After-School Conspiracy

“Oh, honey...” came Emily’s voice.

“They hate me,” whimpered Kara into her phone. “I *finally* made some friends, and now they hate me. I know I’ll go home eventually, but it was so *nice* to make some friends.”

“Honey, they don’t hate you. They’re just upset. I’m sure they’re still your friends.”

“I don’t blame them. I’d be upset too. I feel awful.”

“Honey...”

“Can’t I tell them? They know anyway...”

“They *suspect*, sweetheart. That’s not the same thing.”

“It’s pretty close in this case!”

“Kara, we’re not going to resolve this over the phone in the middle of the school day. We’ll talk about it tonight, OK? I promise.” Kara heard a sigh. “This whole thing is getting so out of control.”

Kara felt a pang of guilt. “OK. You promise? Tonight?”

“I promise. Unless something urgent comes up.”

Kara ended the call with a sigh, and made her way to her first afternoon class.

“I feel awful,” said Bailey.

“Me too,” sighed Megan. “I guess we were too hard on her. I mean, what was she supposed to do, tell us everything in the middle of the cafeteria? And I bet she’s really worried about all the news and getting found out!”

The three of them sat in Kevin’s room at the Tong home, dissecting the way lunch had gone. Poorly, they agreed.

“I mean, maybe she can’t tell us? Maybe there’s some reason? She must *know* that we know.” Bailey frowned. “Maybe we’re wrong?”

Kevin snorted. “No, we’re not wrong. Too many things about Supergirl match up with her. That would be a weird coincidence, except now that we know there *is* a real Supergirl, it can’t be a coincidence. Especially since Supergirl showed up less than three weeks after Kara. I mean, *come on*.” He rolled his eyes.

“Yeah,” sighed Bailey.

“So what do we do?” asked Megan.

They sat for a while, without an answer.

“I don’t know about you,” said Bailey, “but I’m going over there right now to apologize and give her a big hug. Even if she can’t tell us for some reason, she needs a friend.”

The other two nodded, and they all got up.

Kara was sitting on the sofa, staring off into space and anxious for Emily to get home. She didn’t exactly want to jump her foster mother with the issue the moment she walked in — she was getting old enough to know that usually didn’t help — but it was all she could think about.

At the moment she was leaning against Caitlin, while the latter worked on a homework assignment. Caitlin had recognized Kara’s somber mood when they’d started walking home together, and Kara had told her everything. Caitlin knew she couldn’t fix the problem but a hug always helped, or at the moment, a friendly arm.

Kara heard Emily’s heartbeat, then the key turning in the lock; she sat up straighter. She began, “Hi Emily—”

Dr. Penny and Detective Spalding walked in right behind her foster mother.

“Oh,” finished Kara.

Emily looked unhappy. “Sweetheart, Dr. Penny and Detective Spalding want to talk to us.”

The two other adults were staring at Kara the same way Emily and Caitlin had the night she’d returned from her first flight. She felt very uncomfortable, like a bug under a microscope. She averted her eyes in embarrassment.

Caitlin bristled. “She’s not a zoo exhibit!” She squeezed her foster sister.

The adults broke their stares. The detective murmured, “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” asked Emily warily.

Detective Spalding frowned. “Don’t get cute, Dr. Jordan.”

Emily couldn’t meet his eyes. “What... what do you mean?”

“Look,” said the detective impatiently, “I don’t want to play games—” He closed his eyes, rubbed his forehead, and sighed.

“Detective,” chided Dr. Penny. “Emily, do you know what the most puzzling thing about Kara’s case has been for me?”

“...No?”

“All along, I’ve known she’s been telling the truth as she sees it. What I couldn’t understand is why she would see it that way. After this morning, I think I understand. Are you asking me to believe they’re unrelated?”

“I’d like to ask you to believe that,” said Emily. “I think it

would be better for everyone if you believed that.”

Dr. Penny held a hand up to Detective Spalding, who’d opened his mouth again. He shut it. “I’m not so sure. Being a single working mother of two children is hard. Especially if one of them has... special needs.” She quirked a small smile. “You’ve got her, but who’s got you?”

“Believe me, Dr. Jordan, I understand why you want to protect her,” said Spalding more calmly, “but we’re not here to expose you. We just want to help.”

“How do I know you want to help?” asked Emily. “How do I know you won’t get the government involved?”

“If I wanted the government involved I wouldn’t be here. A whole bunch of guys in black suits would be here, pounding on your door. And if you don’t want the government involved, why are you letting her fly around—”

“Detective,” admonished Dr. Penny again. “Emily, we can help. You don’t have to go it alone.”

Emily looked at Kara; Kara looked back, pleading for guidance.

Glum and unsure, Emily looked between the two visitors again. She finally closed her eyes briefly, sighed, and nodded to Kara. “I think it’ll be OK, honey, but it’s your decision.”

Kara also looked between the adults. They looked encouraging, but that didn’t make it any easier. She had to look away before she could say it. “Y-yes, it’s true. I’m... I’m Supergirl.”

“*YES!!*” came an exultant shout from just outside the window.

“Can you do it? Please?”

Megan rolled her eyes. “Kevin, this isn’t cosplay at Comic-Con! We’ve got important things to discuss!”

“But...”

Emily shook her head. “Just go ahead, sweetie.”

Kara nodded and blurred into her bedroom, then back as Supergirl.

“Wicked!” crowed Kevin. “But why did you go in the other room?”

Kara looked around uncertainly. “Because... I didn’t want to change my clothes in front of everyone?”

“I mean, it’s so super-fast no one could see you...”

Kara looked unbelievably to Megan and Bailey, who looked back, equally unbelievably.

“Can you—”

“Kevin,” said Emily, not unkindly, “I think that’s enough for now.” She turned to Kara. “Sweetheart, can you change back?”

Kara was back in her normal clothes in an instant. She sat on the couch next to her foster mother, who put an arm around her.

The room was crowded with all eight of them, but Emily only wanted to tell this story once. With the chairs from the kitchen and some of the kids sitting on the floor, they all fit, just.

They listened, rapt, as Emily related the whole tale, focusing especially on why she’d decided to let Kara be Supergirl.

She blew out her breath. “It’s a no-win situation. If she helps, she risks exposure. If she doesn’t, she has to live with letting people die.” She shook her head. “So here we are; this is the choice we made. I guess I’ll have to answer to her parents on whether we made the right one.” She squeezed Kara, who hugged her back.

She looked down at her foster daughter. “We’ve discussed this before, honey, but it bears repeating. Dr. Penny and Detective Spalding and your friends figured it out right away, because they already knew all or part of your story. It will take other people longer, but I think soon, people out there are going to make the connection between Supergirl and Kara Kent. People who may not have your best interests at heart.”

“But my dad...” Kara did some mental arithmetic. “He’s

been Superman for eighteen years and no one’s figured it out.”

Emily nodded. “I know. But things are different for you, because here, everyone knows about Superman and Clark Kent, and has since... umm...”

“June, 1938,” supplied Kevin helpfully.

“You’re not him, but your name, and the timing, will lead people to suspect you. And some people know about Supergirl, too.”

Kevin nodded. “I told you: one of her names is Kara Kent. They didn’t use that one a lot, so people won’t see it right away, but if someone really looks...”

Emily continued, “People are going to be a whole lot more interested in Supergirl now, sweetie, and many of the kids at school know your name, even if you’re not close with them.” Kara nodded glumly.

Detective Spalding put his head in his right hand. “Her file...”

“What?”

He looked up. “Her file. It’s gone to the FBI because of the kidnapping. It doesn’t say she’s Supergirl, but it has her photo — *without* glasses — her fingerprints, the whole story. Clark Kent and Lois Lane, Metropolis, everything.”

Emily winced. “Ouch.”

“So the government *does* know about me?” asked Kara, frightened.

“Well, yes and no,” said Spalding. “The government has your file, but it has billions of files. Did you see *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where you come from?”

Kara nodded. Her parents had finally let her watch it at Uncle Jimmy’s, though she’d had to cover her eyes several times during the film. Jordy had teased her about it.

“Do you remember the last scene in the movie?”

“Uh-huh... Oh! The big warehouse?”

He nodded. “Like that. Well, it’s all computerized but it doesn’t matter; they still can’t read ‘em all. The thing is, I’ll bet Washington is searching frantically for information about this young lady. When they stumble across her file will depend on how it’s been tagged. But I guarantee they’ll find it eventually.”

“Now that Supergirl is out there the next human who reads that file will know *she’s* Supergirl, just like we did. Assuming the folks in Wilmington haven’t remembered the case already, though knowing them I’m not too worried.”

“Are you going to tell them?” asked Kara in a small voice.

“Kiddo, informing the government about the secret identity of superheroes isn’t in my job description, and I ain’t never seen a memo about it either. As far as I’m concerned you’re Kara Kent, a kidnap victim, and my job is to find out who did it and get you back to your parents. I don’t see how someone like me is gonna be able to do either, given what I know now, but that’s my problem.”

“As for what you do in your spare time, as long as you attend school regularly and don’t commit any crimes, officially, I don’t care. Citizens are allowed to assist emergency services and law enforcement as long as they don’t break the law while they’re at it. If they do it in a costume while flying under their own power, well, the law says nothing about that. So if they ask me why I didn’t bring it to their attention, I’ll ask them where it says I’m supposed to.”

“You’re also a minor under foster care in my jurisdiction, and protecting kids like you *is* in my job description. So I’ll be looking out for you.”

Kara smiled. “Thank you.”

“Besides, I don’t want your daddy mad at me when he *does* show up. And seriously, anyone with the sense God gave a turnip ought to feel the same way. If you don’t tug on Superman’s cape, man, you *definitely* don’t touch a hair on his daughter’s head.”

“You don’t have to worry about me either, Kara,” said Penny.

“You’re my patient, so everything is covered under doctor-patient confidentiality. I couldn’t tell anyone without breaking the law.

“Which leaves you three,” she continued as she gazed at Kevin, Megan, and Bailey.

“We won’t tell, honest!” said Bailey. Megan and Kevin nodded.

“Kids, it’s more than just not telling. You have to be actors. You have to pretend you *don’t know*. If people see you reacting, say, looking at Kara when there’s just been news about Supergirl, they’re going to get suspicious.”

“You mean,” said Kevin, “we have to play dumb. Right, Aunt Penny?”

Penny smiled. “Basically, yes. Just treat her as your friend Kara, the way you did before you found out. Act like you don’t know, even though you do. Can you all do that?”

The kids nodded.

Emily looked around at everyone. “The longer we can keep people from figuring it out, the more likely Kara’s parents will find her before things get crazy.” She shuddered. “Once the government finds us... I have no idea what will happen.”

Over the next few days the media frenzy continued. Absent any new information most of the coverage devolved into rampant speculation. Who was she? Where had she come from? What were her intentions? Was she an alien? What kind of music did she listen to? Who was her favorite movie star? Was there a boy she liked? What was the impact on world affairs? On the upcoming elections? On religion? What did the copyright owners of the fictional Supergirl think? (They were “studying the matter.”)

Despite the intense interest Kara’s identity remained undiscovered. On the web, references to the fictional character were pushed far down in search rank by new pages dedicated to the real thing. The number of people who knew her well enough at school was limited. All this bought her more time.

After the excitement of her first two big rescues Kara found she enjoyed the quiet of everyday life, though she continued to miss her family. The only reminder of her alter ego was Kevin’s insatiable curiosity about herself, her family, and her life in Metropolis. Any time it was safe to do so he bombarded her with questions. Megan and Bailey were equally curious, if not quite as intense.

He begged her to demonstrate her superpowers. Kara obliged by sitting on the ceiling, lifting furniture, making hot cocoa with her heat vision, and other party tricks. She made her friends laugh out loud by walking upside-down on two fingers, and had to hurriedly drop into a normal handstand when Mrs. Tong stuck her head into Megan’s room unannounced to see what was so funny.

He asked her to describe all the people in her family and whom she knew at the Daily Planet. He grilled her for every possible detail about each person she mentioned. He asked her all about the Daily Planet itself, but she didn’t know much about it as a newspaper or web site, only needing to look at it occasionally for school — she was a kid, after all.

It was just the place her parents worked, where she and Laura hung out when there was no one else to babysit them. It was where she went for Take Your Kids to Work Day.

It was also where she went to sell Girl Scout cookies. Lots of Girl Scout cookies. Uncle Perry alone could be counted on for at least six boxes of Savannah Smiles.

Kevin asked her about “supervillains” Superman had fought, but other than the invasion by the New Kryptonians there’d been no discussion of anyone like that in school. She told him she’d heard of Lex Luthor but thought he was long dead.

He asked her about a whole string of other superheroes she’d never heard of. She knew about Gotham City and she’d heard of Batman, but didn’t know much about him. She vaguely recalled

hearing the name Bruce Wayne but couldn’t remember where, or who he was.

Kara thought she understood. She too was curious about a world where one of her favorite heroes was real. She’d finally succumbed to temptation and read the Wikipedia entry on Amelia Earhart; naturally, it was quite different from the one she’d read back home.

It had been interesting to see how this person differed from the character in the book, and how she was the same. It was amazing to see photographs of an actual, real person instead of illustrations — she looked incredibly cool, just as Kara had imagined.

Still, it was hard to get past the unhappy ending. Kara hoped Kevin wasn’t similarly disappointed.

“Jeff? Could you come to my desk for a second? I have something you should see. Yeah, thanks.” Cory Dreager, a researcher at the CNN Washington bureau, hung up his phone and turned back to the small TV/VCR combo that sat on his desk.

A minute later Jeff Reyes, his supervisor, popped his head over the cubicle wall. “What’s up?”

Cory motioned. “Have a seat and look at this tape.” Jeff sat in the guest chair as Cory pushed play on the VCR.

The video was only about fifteen seconds long, had no sound, and was black and white. Nonetheless, it was very interesting.

“Well?” asked Cory.

Jeff nodded. “It sure looks like her. Where did you get it?”

Cory picked up a padded shipping envelope. “From a Charles Yates in Milford, Delaware. He said a local retiree took out his brand new fishing boat and managed to sink it on the first day. Mr. Yates runs the marina where the boat was berthed. He and his coworker heard someone whistle, then went out only to find the guy soaking wet and unconscious.

“They reviewed their security camera tape later and found this. They thought no one would ever believe them so Yates sat on it. Once the news broke from London, though, he thought he’d try mailing it in to us, see if he could get something for it.”

Jeff frowned. “This is several days before the mine rescue in China. If it’s legit, it’s the earliest appearance so far.” He scratched his head. “A drowning man in rural Delaware? Why start there?”

“There’s something else, too,” said Cory. “I searched the archives of the local paper for the weeks before and found this.” He brought up a web page on his computer.

Jeff leaned in to read it. “Young Girl Found Unconscious on Cedar Beach Road.” He continued silently to the end. “Huh. Probable kidnap victim. Eleven years old. Name and description withheld due to age. Can’t find the parents, so she was placed in foster care.” He turned to Cory. “Maybe this girl was an earlier rescue?”

“Why would Supergirl leave someone she rescued by the side of the road instead of at a hospital?”

“Assuming the tape is genuine, she didn’t leave the guy she rescued from the boat at a hospital, either. Maybe she didn’t want to be seen at that point. Maybe she saw someone coming down the road and left the girl where she’d be found right away.”

“That’s a lot of maybes, Jeff. And again assuming the tape is real, she wasn’t spotted in the area until nearly two weeks later. Why would her first *two* rescues be in Milford?”

“Yeah, good point.” They both thought for a while.

“Still,” said Cory, “this is starting to feel a little... odd? I dunno, something. Do you think we should send someone out there to look around?”

“Yeah, I’d say so,” answered Jeff. “She’s still our top story and this is material no one else has. Even if the kidnapping is unrelated we can get details on the marina rescue. But I can’t authorize a trip like that on my own. Let me send this up the food

chain and see what the bigwigs think.”

“Do you think we should run this tape on-air?”

“The producers may want to, or they may want to collect more material first. Did he send the tape to anyone else?”

“According to his letter, no.”

“Then we have some time. Tell him we’re working on it and we expect to compensate him. That should help keep him from shopping it around.”

Chapter 19: Adult Supervision

“Kara, what’s a chordate again?”

There was no response so Bailey looked to the foot of her bed, where Kara sat cross-legged. She wasn’t looking at her textbook; her head was tilted and her eyes weren’t looking at anything, as if she were listening to something only she could hear. Bailey realized with a start that was probably exactly what was happening.

Kara’s breath caught and her eyes widened. She lowered her glasses and looked around. “Good — your mom’s downstairs in the kitchen.”

“You heard something, didn’t you?” asked Bailey quietly.

Kara nodded and pulled out her phone. Her thumb blurred momentarily over the keyboard, and the phone made a “text sent” noise. Half a minute later it rang. “Emily?” answered Kara. She lowered her voice. “There’s a guy in Colorado holding some kids in a school hostage.” Bailey gasped. “Yes... I know... I will, I totally will, I promise!” She listened some more. “I’ll come straight home after... OK... bye.” She hung up.

“Does Supergirl need to go?” asked Bailey.

“Yes.” Kara packed her backpack at super-speed. She shouldered it, and Bailey escorted her guest downstairs to the door.

“Mrs. Harker,” called Kara. “Emily called and I have to go now.”

The Harkers were well off and had a large home, so it took Mrs. Harker a few moments to come from the kitchen. Kara fidgeted nervously the whole time. “I’m sorry, Kara. Didn’t you just get here?”

Kara nodded. “I’m sorry too. I wish I could stay.”

“Do you want me to drive you home?”

Kara shook her head quickly. “No thank you, Mrs. Harker. I have time to walk and you’re busy.” She moved towards the door.

“Do you want a cookie? If you can wait a minute I have a batch coming out of the oven. They’re oatmeal chocolate chip.”

Kara shook her head again. “They smell delicious, Mrs. Harker, but I really need to go.” She looked desperately at Bailey.

Bailey took the hint and opened the door. “Call you later?”

“Sure, Bailey. Bye!” Kara scooted out the door and headed down the walk at a trot.

Mrs. Harker looked after her, puzzled. “She seemed in an awful hurry to leave.” She eyed Bailey suspiciously. “Is everything OK between you two?”

Bailey rolled her eyes. “Yes, Mom. She just had to go.” She reached out and closed the door. A second later there was a whooshing noise from outside. A few seconds after that there was a faint sonic boom.

Mrs. Harker shook her head. “There goes another jet from Dover. We never used to get sonic booms around here.”

Kopp Middle School in Fort Collins, Colorado, was a circus. Naturally there was a swarm of emergency vehicles, but beyond that the media had all the surrounding streets choked off. Captain Colleen Mason knew they had a right to be there but still, part of her resented having to devote any attention or resources to managing their presence when she wanted to be totally focused on the situation inside.

The gunman must have had access to the school calendar,

because he’d started his attack right after the beginning of an all-school assembly. Almost all the children and teachers were in the auditorium, held hostage. He was armed with an assault weapon.

Unfortunately the auditorium had only high windows, and there were no tall buildings in the area from which they could see in, or from which a sniper could take a shot.

For someone who had planned so carefully the gunman was making all sorts of bizarre demands; one of them was that the President of the United States resign immediately. They’d tried to talk him down over the phone but negotiations had gone nowhere.

Captain Mason wasn’t planning the strategy — that was up to the command team — but she needed to execute the plans they came up with. At the moment she was trying to figure out how to position a SWAT team without the lunatic inside finding out. Not that she had any idea how a SWAT team could move in without resulting in a bloodbath.

“Excuse me?” she heard a young girl ask as she felt a tug on her sleeve.

Had another one of the kids managed to get out somehow? A few had been cutting the assembly and managed to escape once the fireworks started. She turned around and looked down, then blinked.

The kid was dressed like the flying girl who’d been on the news recently, but her costume was obviously homemade. Mason frowned. “What are you doing here? Are you one of the kids who made it out? You should be over there with the medical team.” She pointed.

“No ma’am,” said the girl. “I just got here. I wanted to ask if there’s anything I can do to help?”

“Just got here?” asked Mason. “Are you not a Kopp student?”

“No ma’am, like I said—”

The officer grew angry. “Look kid, I don’t know where your parents are, but this is a very dangerous situation. How did you get through—”

She cut herself off when the girl floated up into the air.

“Oh.”

Supergirl squinted. “Oh... I think so. He has some flat things he’s wearing under his coat, and I see wires like you said to look for.”

“A suicide bomb. Great,” sighed Richard Halstead. He was with the FBI’s Denver office, an antiterrorism specialist who’d flown in by helicopter. He was leading the command team.

He’d been surprised when one of the local police had led Supergirl over to them. Word from Washington was that a policy was forthcoming on how to deal with her, but it wasn’t available yet. All they’d said was, “if encountered, observe closely; learn all you can; do not provoke.”

The first thing he’d observed was that she was exactly what she appeared to be: a little girl. Analyzing people was an important part of Richard’s job. Though she was trying to be polite and formal, it seemed clear she was a normal kid, except for her abilities.

He’d thought she was too young to help, but quickly changed his mind when she started reporting on how the gunman was positioned, what his weapon was like, and the vital fact that he was wearing enough explosive to kill everyone in the auditorium if it detonated.

“He’s yelling at them again,” offered Supergirl. She winced; the gunman was using words inappropriate for kids. She’d relayed the content of his rants to Richard’s team and they’d quickly reached the conclusion that he was paranoid and delusional.

Richard rubbed his temples. “Can you sketch out how the wires are connected to the bomb?” He handed Supergirl a pencil and a pad of paper.

"I have to go look from the other side," she said. "I'll be right back." She vanished with a slight whoosh.

The team had grown somewhat used to her moving around at super-speed, but it was still disconcerting. It seemed an obvious violation of the laws of physics. Then again, so was pretty much everything else she did.

Supergirl reappeared as suddenly as she'd vanished. "It looks like this." She handed the sketch pad to Richard.

Despite the subject matter and super-speed the drawing looked exactly like what any child her age might produce, down to the carefully neat labels. *Supergirl has good penmanship.* The idea of a child being a superhero kept throwing him off balance.

"Hmm." He traced his finger over the diagram. "He's not making this easy. There's a dead-man switch."

"What's that?" asked Supergirl.

"That means, if he turns it on then lets go of it, the bomb goes off. Is he holding this switch?"

Supergirl peered at the school. "No, he has a big gun in one hand and he's pointing at the kids with the other one while he yells." She bit her lip. "They're pretty scared."

"I'll bet," murmured Richard. He frowned in thought. "Do you have heat vision?"

Supergirl nodded. "Yes."

"Can you burn out wires from a distance?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I never tried." She brightened. "I did light a candle once; that's pretty small. Is that good enough?"

Richard suppressed a smile. "I think maybe so. Janet, can you get her something to practice on?"

Janet Kosich rummaged in their equipment box for a while, then held up a piece of wire. "Does this look like what you saw?"

Supergirl nodded again.

"OK, let me stand about forty feet away, and you see if you can cut the wire. I'm going to hold a rag in front of it to represent his coat, and a piece of paper behind it to represent his shirt. See if you can cut the wire without burning the paper; that way, he won't feel it."

Janet walked off a ways, and held up a sandwich: the rag in front, the paper behind, and the wire between them. "Go ahead."

Supergirl squinted in careful concentration. Everyone jumped slightly when twin laser-like beams shot from her eyes.

Richard stared. *Jesus.* It was beginning to sink in just how powerful this girl was. Given his profession, he couldn't help thinking of ways that power could be abused. He thought he ought to be deeply concerned about such power in the hands of a child. Strangely, he found he wasn't.

Janet saw the wire smoke and fall in two. She yelped when the paper caught fire as well, then dropped it on the ground and stamped it out with her boot.

Supergirl's ears turned red.

"OK," said Richard, shaking himself out of his contemplation. "Let's try that again."

"Do you remember everything?" asked Richard.

"Yes," said Supergirl. "Burn out the bomb wire you showed me first. Make sure I don't aim anywhere near the explosive. After the wire's cut, melt the barrel of his gun. Then I can bring him out to you," she recited.

"That's exactly right," approved Richard. He felt like he was coaching his ten year old son on how to throw a football; it was surreal.

They were going to send Supergirl in through a service corridor, then into the backstage area of the auditorium. That would give her the best shot at disarming the gunman unobserved. Richard wasn't thrilled about relying on a child, especially since she seemed apprehensive, but paradoxically this approach had the best chance of success. Anything else was

likely to cause severe loss of life.

Suddenly Supergirl's gaze jerked towards the school. "He just shot one of the teachers!" she cried.

"What's the teacher's condition?" asked Richard urgently.

"I think she's still alive, but she's bleeding a lot! The kids are crying." She sounded close to crying herself.

Richard looked around at his team. "We need to move *now*. Now that he's shot someone chances are it won't be long before he does it again." He turned to Supergirl and said reassuringly, "You'll do great, so don't worry, OK? Let's go!"

She nodded uncertainly and vanished. Richard crossed his fingers.

Kara floated silently into the right wing of the auditorium stage, much as she'd snuck out of the house the night she'd learned she could fly. She was still hidden from the audience but had a clear line of sight to the gunman. He stood at the front of the stage, screaming at the frightened children and staff. She hoped he couldn't see her hovering in the darkness.

She zoomed in on the wiring; it looked the same as it had from farther away. Mr. Halstead had told her several times that if anything looked different she was to come back so they could reevaluate the proper way to disable it. She spared a glance for the wounded teacher, who appeared still to be alive.

She tried to calm her jittery nerves. She'd been surprised when Mr. Halstead asked her to do this. This wasn't like her previous rescues, which had been straightforward. Here, if she made a small mistake it could be catastrophic. She tried hard not to think of just how catastrophic. Horrible visions were lurking at the edges of her imagination, like monsters under her bed.

Mr. Halstead had told her she was ready. She sure hoped he was right.

She shifted into super-speed so she could react properly if the gunman started to move; she'd found it also gave her the best control over her heat vision. As an added benefit she didn't have to listen to him rant anymore. He was frozen with his mouth open and a stupid expression on his face, and she would have giggled if she weren't so worried.

She wasted no time and started to burn through the wire Mr. Halstead had identified. At super-speed it seemed to take forever.

Tricia Murchison had wanted to be in the front row for the special assembly this afternoon and had had several hours to regret it deeply. She was a dozen feet away from the madman who was holding them all hostage.

She thought she was reasonably brave, but she'd cried when looking down the barrel of the man's assault rifle. Plus, she was close enough to smell him and he *definitely* needed a bath. Now he was screaming at them again, and Tricia cowered in her seat.

Suddenly, a red laser beam struck the side of the man's coat; it seemed to be coming from offstage. A thin wisp of smoke rose. After a few seconds the beam jumped from his coat to the barrel of his gun.

He seemed completely unaware of it. Even though he was waving the gun around the beam tracked it unerringly.

Suddenly the man dropped the gun with a yelp, shaking his hand in pain. He pulled what looked like a button out of his pocket, and Tricia cringed as he pushed it furiously several times. Nothing happened, though.

A movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Like everyone else in the auditorium but the gunman, her head turned and her breath caught as she saw the girl in blue and red floating in from the wings. She wore the famous S shield: Supergirl.

Kara went over the instructions twice; she'd completed them all. She then floated out onto the stage.

At that point the gunman, realizing his bomb wasn't going to go off, pulled a small handgun from his pocket. Kara hadn't spotted it earlier amongst the clutter of the bomb mechanism. He aimed it at a child in the front row, who sobbed in terror.

"No!" cried Kara loudly, and the gunman finally noticed her. He swung around and gaped for a moment, then started firing his pistol at her. Kara shrieked and cringed reflexively as she felt the first bullet strike her chest, then the second her forehead.

Her panic started to subside; then she heard the whine of the first two bullets as they ricocheted. They'd bounced off her and shot across the auditorium. Children and teachers alike screamed and ducked for cover.

Kara finally thought to shift back into super-speed to give herself time to think. She now remembered that Superman didn't let bullets bounce off him, because they could hit bystanders; he caught them instead. At that moment she saw the glow of hot gases shining from the rear of the gun, and another bullet left its muzzle.

She didn't have much time: even with her at super-speed the bullet traveled relatively fast. It appeared to be moving at a bit under a normal walking pace.

She forced herself to stay in front of it. Her instincts made her want to shy away as it headed straight for her, but she couldn't let any more stray bullets fly. She didn't even know yet if anyone had been hit by the first two.

She kept her eyes on the bullet and held her hand up in a catcher's position. She wanted nothing more than to duck but steeled herself not to. The bullet slapped into her hand, squishing like Silly Putty, then started to rebound. She instinctively closed her fingers around it, then pulled her hand back and looked in her palm. The bullet had flattened and felt quite hot but her hand was unharmed.

Now she had time to act. She ran up to the gunman and used her heat vision on the weapon, shifting back into normal time as she did so. Before he could take another shot he screamed and dropped it, shaking his hand.

Mr. Halstead had said to bring him out, but she was very worried about the hostages. So she blurred to the wings and back to grab some rope she'd seen and tied the man up instead. She was glad she remembered her knots from the Girl Scouts.

The man was silent as he sat trussed on the stage, his eyes filled with a seething, cold hatred.

She turned to look out over the auditorium; only then did she notice that nearly a thousand people were staring at her.

"Is everyone all right?" asked Kara, unconsciously echoing the movie she'd seen. "Is anyone else hurt?"

It looked like the two errant bullets hadn't struck anyone, but hands waved frantically around the injured teacher. Kara blurred over and heard the woman's rapid, weak heartbeat; she was very pale and her blouse was soaked in blood. Kara didn't think she could lift the woman in her arms without injuring her further.

She had no idea what to do and was starting to panic again. She wished Emily was there to give advice, then remembered that advice was available.

"I need to go ask the doctors what to do. I'll be right back," she said, and blurred out of the auditorium. The crowd started to murmur; everyone was still too much in shock to react to their rescue.

Seconds later Kara returned with a backboard, which she laid down next to the injured woman. She blurred over to the main doors and ripped off the chains that held them closed. The sound of police entering the building and running down the halls became audible. Many people started to weep in relief.

Meanwhile, two teachers with first aid training had gently transferred their injured colleague onto the backboard and strapped her down. Kara lifted it carefully, keeping it level, and flew out through an emergency door that another teacher held

open, just as a SWAT team burst through the auditorium doors.

Seconds later she was at the medical area, where doctors started working on the woman immediately.

Kara turned away, her eyes wet, and headed back to the command post on foot. Policemen, firemen, and EMTs watched her silently as she passed.

Richard was feeling pretty good about his decision to use Supergirl when Janet tugged on his sleeve. He turned to see the hero of the day with tears on her cheeks.

His smile faded. "What's wrong?" he asked gently.

"I messed up," said Supergirl, crestfallen.

The superhero facade was gone; Richard could see only an upset child. "What? How?"

"I didn't notice he had another gun when I looked before, and he almost shot a kid in the front row! It's only 'cause I yelled at him that he shot me instead. And then the bullets bounced off me and could've hit people, 'cause I never had someone shoot at me before and I was scared. And maybe this teacher is going to die because I didn't get here fast enough!" She looked at him beseechingly. "Is she going to die?"

Richard and Janet exchanged concerned glances. He knelt down and put his hands on Supergirl's shoulders, looking her in the eye. "I don't know," he admitted softly. "We'll never know if things could have gone better, but I do know this: if you hadn't been here a lot of those kids," and he nodded towards the children who were starting to stream out of the school, "would be dead or badly hurt. So don't beat yourself up, OK? You did *great*." Cheers and shouts of joy went up from the crowd behind the police barriers as they saw the children were unharmed.

Supergirl nodded slowly. She looked over to the medical area, then back. "Can I wait a little to see if she's going to be OK?"

Richard smiled. "If you don't have anywhere you need to be, I don't see why not."

Emily gently stroked her foster daughter's hair; Kara had finally fallen asleep. Though by any measure the rescue had been a success, it had been so harrowing the girl was still anxious hours later. She hadn't even come home until the doctors on the scene had assured her that the teacher who'd been shot was going to live.

Emily thought that lingering in Fort Collins had been unwise, but she'd held her tongue. After an hour of listening to Kara, Emily had called Penny for help. Penny had talked with her young patient for forty-five minutes in the privacy of Emily's bedroom while Emily and Caitlin had waited on the sofa, too worried to do anything else.

Finally they'd emerged, Kara sporting a fragile smile. Emily had held her arms open and Kara had run into them, staying there for a while. Emily had finally put her to bed, and was seriously thinking of keeping her home from school tomorrow and taking a sick day to look after her.

As she'd held her foster daughter, Emily had seesawed between guilt at allowing Kara to get into this situation, and guilt at entertaining the idea of letting hundreds of children die just to spare her distress.

She closed the door to the bedroom behind her; Penny was waiting on the sofa. Emily plopped down with a sigh.

"She'll be all right," said Penny. "She may be a superhero but she's also a kid, and she's just been through a tough experience under enormous pressure even for an adult. I didn't detect any signs of real trauma — she's just stressed. I think going to school and being with her friends is exactly what she needs. I think she needs to lay off rescues for a few days." Emily nodded.

Penny's brow furrowed. "I am worried, though. Putting an eleven year old under this kind of pressure on a regular basis is

not healthy.”

Chapter 20: Your Cape is Showing

The President silently watched the news from Supergirl’s latest rescue, the first on American soil — as far as they knew. At the moment the networks were running video of her sitting stiffly, her hands clasped together, waiting for news on the teacher who’d been shot. She looked like an anxious relative in a hospital waiting room. A subtitle headline flashed: “Girl of Steel Has a Soft Heart.” All the coverage had been sympathetic and flattering in the same vein.

The video was clear and there had been many detailed stills. The media had already been present, equipped with high power telephoto lenses. Like many celebrities before her, Supergirl had been caught unawares in what she had thought a private moment.

This was by far the longest she had ever stayed in one place, the most she had ever interacted with others. The FBI team and others in Fort Collins had been debriefed, yielding solid intelligence.

“Mr. President,” called the lead analyst in the Situation Room. “With the new photos and the fingerprints we’ve been able to identify Supergirl. The team has just now sent us the file with their preliminary analysis.” Without further preface a summary slide popped up on the main display. “We’ve had this file for weeks as it turns out, but it doesn’t have any of the keywords we were searching for.”

The assembled officials peered eagerly at the photo on the screen. She looked different with her hair down, but it was clearly Supergirl.

“Kara Zoe Kent?” The President felt a prickle on his scalp. “What else does it say?”

“Sir,” said the analyst, consulting the tablet he was holding, “it says she was found unconscious by a road in Milford, Delaware the night of October 19 of this year, an apparent kidnap victim. Birthdate, June 29, 2000. Family...” he trailed off for a few seconds, staring. “She said her parents are Clark Kent and Lois Lane, and that she lives in Metropolis, Delaware with them, an older brother, and a younger sister. She’s been placed with a foster family and is attending sixth grade in Milford.” He looked up. “There are no entries in the file after October 21, when it was sent to the FBI from the Milford Police.”

The room was silent for a full ten seconds.

“Clark Kent and Lois Lane? That’s impossible!” said someone heatedly.

The analyst sighed quietly. “What she does is ‘impossible,’ too. As I keep saying, we need to update our priors—”

“English, please,” interrupted the President.

“Sorry, sir. What I mean is, last month I would’ve agreed it’s impossible. But now we know something we didn’t know last month: there’s a little girl out there who has Superman’s powers. Flight, invulnerability, incredible strength, vision... the evidence is conclusive. That’s a *fact*. We have to determine what’s most likely to be true given that fact.”

“The story could still be a deception!” argued a general.

The analyst took off his glasses and polished them as he composed his thoughts. “Deception is an unreliable strategy. It’s something we use when we don’t have better alternatives. If it’s a deception, whoever is behind it is after something they can’t get more easily. Given her enormous power that doesn’t make sense. Why would *we* use the Trojan Horse to deceive Stone Age tribesmen armed with clubs?”

The President nodded slowly.

“The psychologists are now convinced Supergirl has the mind of a normal human child. She could be spinning some kind of fantasy, but they say her story doesn’t follow that pattern. They think she’s telling the truth as she sees it.

“So either her story is true, or *she’s* being deceived too. And

again, why bother? Anyone with that much power could take what they want from us by force. Unless it’s something they can’t get by force.”

“So what are the possibilities?” asked the President. “How long will it take you to run scenarios?”

“We’ve already run scenarios like this, Mr. President. You’ll recall I mentioned during the London incident that her being Supergirl might be the simplest explanation? We’ve generated three plausible scenarios, sir, and this new information is consistent with two of them.”

“And they are...?”

“The first is that she truly is the fictional character Supergirl, who is also, somehow, a real person, brought here from some other reality.

“The second is that some extremely powerful being is bringing characters from our own literature to life to watch our reactions. Like teasing a cat with a laser pointer.

“The third is that she’s even more powerful than she appears and is emulating Supergirl because she’s a fan, or to ease acceptance. This one doesn’t fit the latest psych profile, however.”

There was muttering around the room. “You’re telling us those are the *most* likely scenarios?”

The analyst coughed. “Yes, sir, given what we know. We generated tens of thousands of them. Those are what made the cut.”

“Which one has the highest probability?”

“The first, sir. If an alien were to create Supergirl to toy with us, they’d likely create one of the versions we already know. Our Supergirl is younger than any of those by a couple of years. And there’s never been a Supergirl who is the minor child of Clark Kent and Lois Lane, outside of fanfiction.”

The President rubbed his eyes; the whole conversation was unreal. It felt like a pot-fueled college dorm discussion. “Was there any other information?”

The analyst peered at his tablet again. “She initially rejected the idea that her father is Superman, though she believes Superman is a real person. She had blood drawn, so at the time she wasn’t invulnerable. Her siblings appear to be named for Superman’s Kryptonian parents. Her own name suggests she is Kara Zor-El, Superman’s biological cousin.”

“Any recommendation on how to deal with her?”

“We think attempts to coerce her would fail, possibly badly, but we believe she can be influenced by those she trusts. In fact, we believe that’s the only approach that can succeed.”

The President thought carefully for several minutes, digesting all he’d heard. For the first time since this crisis had begun, he allowed his feelings a say in his deliberations.

He studied Supergirl’s image on the screen again, watched her expressions. The facts all pointed in one direction, but it was possible they’d overlooked something. An incorrect decision either way could be disastrous. He prayed he was making the right one.

He turned to one of the other officials in the room. “What’s the status of Project Emerald?”

The man looked uncomfortable. “No progress, sir. What she can do is so far beyond our current knowledge that we barely even know where to begin.” He ran a hand through his hair. “This is going to take years, and we have no way of testing anything we come up with except on her.”

“Where is this research being conducted?”

“All over the country, sir, in various labs.”

“We need to suspend it all, *immediately*, and destroy all materials.”

“But Mr. President,” objected the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, stunned. “What if she became a threat?”

“General, as best we can tell her father is *Superman*. Do you

think that however she got here, wherever she came from, he's not going to try his best to find her? Do you want us to risk a man who can see through walls and hear things for miles around discovering that we're trying to find ways to kill or capture his daughter?"

The general grimaced. "No, sir."

"*She* might not understand the implications of something she overheard or saw, but I'm sure *he* would. And I sure as hell hope neither of them is listening right now."

"Understood, sir. You said 'suspend'..."

"First, we need a place to conduct this research where they can't find out about it. I don't know, build a secret lab in an old lead mine a mile underground — whatever it takes. Once you have a location that's secure from *them*, you can start over.

"But if it's really going to take years and the only way to test it is on them, Project Emerald has to be our last resort, in case they turn hostile. We can't count on it — can't even *talk* about it, even at locations we usually consider secure, like this room. For now we're going to have to assume it will fail, act like it doesn't exist, and hope to God we never need it.

"As far as we know the *only* effective way we have to deal with her is to influence her. We can't do that unless she trusts us *completely*.

"So we are not to threaten her in any way. We are not even to make her *feel* threatened in any way. We are not to *talk* about threatening her. We are not to assume she won't notice any attempts to deceive her. One mistake, and any trust she has in us will be gone.

"If we're careful, on the other hand, if we're her friends, if she trusts that we're on her side, we have our best chance of getting her aligned with our interests. If she winds up staying here, that could be a *very* good thing.

"So as far as I'm concerned this administration is her new BFF, and I don't mean just for show. That goes for anyone close to her, too. I want you to communicate that to everyone, clear on down to the janitors." He sighed. "We need to brief the Congressional leadership on this, too. I hope they have the sense to follow our lead."

"Are you worried she would fight back or lash out, sir?" asked the Chairman.

"Given what we've learned, no; she doesn't seem to be that kind of person. I'm much more worried she'd run away. Suppose she went to China, or Russia? I'd rather have her here and have influence over her than have her elsewhere viewing us as enemies. I want her to be *our* asset, not theirs.

"I also want her here to *protect* her: she's a child, and I don't want to have to explain to her father how she got hurt on our watch."

"But Mr. President, she's invulnerable. What could hurt her?"

"I'm talking about emotional harm." The President gestured at the screen showing the ongoing news coverage from Fort Collins. "Look at her face."

The analyst added, "Mr. President, speaking of protection... a followup report from the Children's Services caseworker says she's grown attached to her foster family. If a bad actor or one of our enemies were to threaten those she feels close to, use them for extortion... she's only eleven. We don't know what she might do, what they might talk her into. We recommend putting them under Secret Service protection."

A woman interjected, "It would be easier if we moved them to a secure location."

The President considered that. "Let's get some more information first. Given her enhanced senses, is there any chance of covert observation?"

"We don't think so, Mr. President," responded the analyst. "Even if we speak in code she's going to notice if people nearby are talking about her."

"Can we monitor their conversations at home?"

"Risky, sir. In the comics, Superman can detect eavesdropping devices. That would be a quick way to lose their trust."

The President frowned. "Then we're going to have to make direct contact — covertly, of course." He paused. "In fact, I'd like to meet with her and her foster family personally. Put together a brief on them."

"Mr. President!" said the leader of his Secret Service detail, aghast. "She has practically unlimited power! We wouldn't be able to protect you. We need to discuss the security implications."

The President nodded. "We can talk it over, sure. But if she wanted to attack me, do you think she'd have any trouble finding me?" The agent looked uncomfortable. "I want to understand what makes her tick. I want her to know she can trust us. And the best way to do that is face to face." He smiled faintly. "Besides, I don't want my kids to think I'm afraid of an eleven year old. It might give them ideas."

Kara wasn't surprised when Supergirl came up again in Social Studies the next day. Mr. Ordemann didn't spend much time on her latest rescue, using it only as a current event topic. Still, he played around five minutes of news footage from the day before.

Kara was surprised to see how clearly her image had been captured this time. She'd noticed the cameras but had thought they were much too far away to produce images like this.

Her classmates again paid rapt attention, and she felt horribly exposed as she sat in their midst while Supergirl's face was on the TV. Still, no one called out in surprise; no one turned and pointed. She was glad when the TV was turned off and Mr. Ordemann went back to his lesson plan.

Other than that it was a low-key day, which was exactly what she needed. The conversation with her friends at lunch studiously avoided Supergirl, focusing on more mundane topics. Having faced down bullets she was even able to face and hit a softball for the very first time in PE.

She was waiting for Caitlin at the front entrance when she heard a familiar voice calling: for some reason Emily was there to pick them up. Kara waved in acknowledgement and Emily nodded.

Her foster sister joined her and they went over to the beat-up Honda. "Hey Em, what's up?" asked Caitlin. "Shouldn't you still be at work?" They both slid into the rear seat and buckled up.

"Detective Spalding called. He says he needs to speak to us about something. It has to do with that file he sent to the FBI." The two girls looked at each other as Emily eased away from the curb, inching out of the parking lot as students continued to stream out of the school and around them. Finally, she made it out onto the street and headed into town.

Traffic was heavy due to all the parents picking up children, and it took them a while to reach the police station. They parked and went inside to the desk.

"Excuse me," said Emily. "We have an appointment with Detective Spalding? My name's Emily Jordan."

"I'll tell him you're here, ma'am," said the receptionist. She picked up the phone. "Detective? An Emily Jordan and her children here to see you?" She nodded and hung up. "He'll be right out to get you, ma'am."

Malcolm Spalding appeared in short order and beckoned them to follow him. They wove their way through the administrative area of the station and into the sole conference room. He closed the door behind them.

Kara wondered why his heart was pounding.

The detective ran a hand through his close-cropped hair and sighed. "There's no way to sugarcoat this so I'll just give it to you straight. The Feds found out. About Kara. They finally found that

case file I sent to the FBI last month and put two and two together. I got a phone call this morning from Homeland Security.”

Emily paled and put her arms around the girls. “What’s going to happen?”

“Well, that’s the odd part,” he replied. “They’re being remarkably relaxed about this. I thought they’d come storming in here with troops and set up a command post or something, but this is about as low-key as I’ve ever seen these people. They want to talk to you, but they say it’s entirely up to you. They say they don’t want you to feel pressured.”

Emily, Caitlin, and Kara all looked at each other.

“If, and only if you want to take them up on it, there’s someone waiting to take you to Dover Air Force Base to meet with them. If you want to think it over first they gave me this.” He pulled a card out of his shirt pocket and handed it to Emily. It contained only a handwritten telephone number.

Emily turned to Kara. “How do you feel about this, honey?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Maybe we should just... get it over with? I’m kind of worried now.”

Emily thought for a moment, then sighed. “Yes, I think so. Let’s just rip the band-aid off.” She looked to the detective. “We’ll go now.”

Chapter 21: Things I’m Learning About You

Once they’d decided, Spalding poked his head out the door and called, and a tall, wiry young man wearing a black suit joined them. He had an earpiece in his ear.

“Hi,” he introduced himself. “My name’s Jarrod Gardiner. I’m your Secret Service protection, and this time around, your driver.”

“Umm, hi,” croaked Emily.

“Protection?” asked Kara.

“Not as much for you, Miss Kent,” said Jarrod with a smile. “For your foster mother and sister.”

“Oh.”

“Ladies, if you’ll follow me?”

He led them to a nondescript gray government sedan parked in the back and held the doors open for them. Emily sat in the front passenger seat and the two girls in the rear. “Sorry it’s not a limo, but we want to keep things quiet. We don’t want folks wondering what government limos are doing in Milford. Cars like this one come through all the time. Anyway, it’s a short ride and there’ll be refreshments when we get there.”

“Oh, umm, it’s... it’s fine,” stammered Emily.

He went around to the driver’s side and slid in, pulling the door closed and buckling up. He touched his earpiece and said, “Gardiner. Bluebird and friends en route. Out,” then pulled out of the parking lot onto Front Street.

“What’s ‘Bluebird?’” asked Kara.

“That’s you, Miss Kent,” replied Jarrod with a grin in the rear view mirror. He headed for the Route 1 bypass.

“Oh,” said Kara, blushing. Emily and Caitlin were too nervous to smile.

Kara watched the rural scenery go by and wondered what was going to happen. Dover Air Force Base was about twenty miles away up Route 1, and they were there in half an hour.

They pulled onto the base access road. Jarrod flashed an ID at the gate; they were waved through by a stony-faced guard. Their bodyguard navigated the car through the roads of the base and pulled up next to a moderate-sized building. “Here we are, ladies,” he said.

Kara, somewhat worried, looked into the building. There wasn’t much to see: military personnel going about their business, and a large conference room where a handful of civilians and military were gathered.

“This way,” said Jarrod. At no point did anyone hold a gun on

them or force them to do anything.

They went inside and were met by an officer; Kara didn’t know how to read his rank insignia. He guided all of them to the conference room she’d seen earlier and ushered them inside, Jarrod included. Kara clung to Emily, nervous at the way everyone was looking at her, and Caitlin stayed close.

A thin, middle-aged man with gray hair at his temples rose from his place at the table and came to meet them. “Dr. Jordan? I’m Fred Douglas, Homeland Security. I’ll be your family’s liaison going forward.” He held out a hand, and Emily shook it, a bit dazed.

He nodded to the girls. “Miss Jordan, Miss Kent. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.” He turned. “This is the rest of the team. If you’d all introduce yourselves?”

A woman in uniform stood. “Felicia Mendoza, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force. I’ll be your interface with the military, should you need it.”

An Asian-American man stood. “Harry Matsuoka, State Department. We can help you with any international issues.”

Mr. Douglas continued, “We don’t have a representative from every Cabinet department because we wanted to keep the team small. However, they’re all available if you need them for anything.”

Emily, Caitlin, and Kara exchanged looks.

“Uh, thanks,” said Emily. “Do you mind my asking... umm...”

“Why you’re here?”

“Um, yes?”

He nodded. “I guess you could call this a ‘getting to know you’ meeting. Naturally, we want to understand this young lady here better,” he indicated Kara, “and we want you all to get to know us. We want to help her continue to help out, if we can, while making sure she doesn’t get in over her head.

“Speaking of ‘getting to know you,’ the President wanted to meet you all personally. He’s busy at the moment, but he’ll be heading this way by chopper shortly. He should be here in about an hour.”

“The President is coming?” asked Kara excitedly, her anxiety forgotten.

“Yes, he is,” replied Douglas, smiling. “Would you all like to sit down?” He waved at the conference table. Jarrod took up a station near the door, while Emily and the girls sat.

There was a knock at the door.

“Ah, that’ll be the refreshments. Would anyone like something to drink?”

“OK,” said Caitlin as they drove through the streets of Milford. “Was that really the U.S. government or have we landed in Bizarro World?”

“What’s Bizarro World?” asked Kara.

“I’ll tell you later,” said Caitlin. “Em, what’s up with this?”

Emily thought as she drove. It was getting on in the evening and the girls would barely have time to do their schoolwork once they arrived home.

“I think we were interrogated, but it was certainly the nicest interrogation I’ve ever heard of,” she mused. “Considering this was one of my ‘ultimate disaster end of the world worst case’ scenarios, it turned out pretty well.”

“That was like the ‘Hello Kitty’ version of interrogation,” observed Caitlin. “It couldn’t have been any nicer if they hugged us.”

They’d been asked what seemed like a thousand questions. This despite their hosts already seeming to know a truly creepy amount about Emily and Caitlin.

A child psychologist had come in. Emily had explained the reluctant process that had led from her complete refusal to allow Kara to use her powers in public to the debut of Supergirl. The

psychologist had interviewed Kara about how she felt about helping. He'd wanted to talk to her in private but Emily had insisted on being present. There'd been no pushback on that.

He'd ultimately agreed with Emily's approach to the issue. He'd recommended she continue to exercise caution in what Kara was permitted to do, as if he advised the parents of preteen superheroes all the time.

They'd been served dinner.

The President had arrived and had a friendly chat with them all, for a bit more than an hour. He'd asked about their family life and personal interests. Considering that he was the *President of the United States*, Emily was impressed with how much time he'd spent with them. He'd seemed a little stiff at first but had quickly grown warmer.

He'd spent the most time talking to Kara, asking her not only about life in Milford but also life in Metropolis. He'd laughed when she'd asked if he was really the President. After some back and forth they'd realized that wherever she came from, he wasn't. There was a President Cutler in office instead.

He'd asked about her father, Clark Kent. Not about his superpowers, or Superman, but about him as a person. Kara had been quite voluble about her family and gotten a bit sniffly. Tissues had been provided.

Emily had had the distinct impression that they were all being treated as VIPs. This had been driven home by the discussion of Secret Service protection. Not the President's. Theirs.

The Secret Service wanted Jarrod to be around them full time. Emily had pointed out they couldn't fit anyone else in the cottage and besides, how would they explain the new member of the household? DHS had promised to go off and brainstorm. Perhaps they'd rent another house on the street.

As a parting gift they'd been given a list of contacts to call if they needed anything. Emily had not given them any phone numbers; they hadn't asked. She figured they already knew them all.

Emily tapped on the steering wheel as she waited to make a left turn. "Kara, let me ask you a hypothetical question: how would you feel if the government took you away from Caitlin and me, or took us away and put us in jail or something?"

Kara thought for a moment. "I guess I'd be pretty mad. I don't know what I'd do, though."

"And how do you think your dad would feel if you got hurt, or the government treated you badly?"

"He'd be really angry, but..." she shivered, "but *Mom* would completely blow her stack."

"Oh," said Caitlin. "Now I get it."

Emily nodded. "I think they approve of what you're doing, Kara. As long as that's the case they want to keep us happy." She sighed. "Let's hope we can keep it that way."

Mike Hooper closed the door to his room at the Super 8 Motel on Route 1 and walked to his car, to head into downtown Milford for the day. Personally, he thought the lead for this trip was thin. However, the Supergirl story was still white hot and his bosses at the CNN Philadelphia bureau thought it was worth checking out. If something came of it he'd get a camera crew from a local affiliate and film a report.

He was planning to stop at the police station first to ask about the kidnapping, but knew they were unlikely to give out any details that hadn't already been in the local paper. He could always ask them to give his contact information to the foster family of the girl, to see if they were willing to grant an interview.

He had to be very careful about any investigation involving minors: people tended to get suspicious when you started asking questions about kids, especially girls. Mike thoroughly approved but it made his job harder.

His best leads were probably the guys at the marina and the man whose boat had sunk. If he was confident they weren't faking it the security tape was enough to get the story on the air.

Mike sat down with his pastry and coffee in front of the bakery downtown and reviewed his notes.

He tended to believe what he'd heard from the men he'd talked to that morning. Scott Reid in particular had said he didn't recall anything from the time his boat sank to when he woke up in the ambulance. Similarly, the two men at the marina office hadn't had much to say beyond the bare details of the story. People who invented stories to get on TV tended to embellish them with detail they thought would interest viewers. They usually didn't say they couldn't remember anything.

The biggest question was, what had Supergirl been doing in Milford, a small city in the middle of rural Delaware? If the kidnapping was related, what had she been doing in Milford *twice*?

Mr. Reid's boat had sunk a couple of miles offshore in Delaware Bay. There had been no witnesses to his calls for help, no radio report; no one had known he was in trouble. This was a vital detail that hadn't been in the original letter or the local news reports. How had Supergirl known about it? He didn't know how far her hearing extended, but just based on the speed of sound and the timing she couldn't have been too far away.

She must already have been near Milford when the accident occurred.

Mike started to get a prickly feeling on the back of his neck. He supposed she could have just been passing through, to Mr. Reid's good fortune. But if she'd been here twice...

He took a bite of his pastry and a sip of his coffee, and looked around. At least it was a beautiful fall day. He supposed the outside tables wouldn't get used for too much longer.

He caught the eye of an elderly man at the other table, who smiled at him. "Beautiful day, isn't it?" said the man.

"That it is," agreed Mike. "Nice town."

"You not from around here? Come to think of it you don't look familiar, and Milford isn't that big."

"No, you're right. I'm a reporter in town on an assignment."

The old man perked up. "A reporter, eh? Say, do you think you could look into the noise problem from the air base?"

Mike didn't have any intention of doing so but played along. "Maybe I could. What noise problem is that?"

"Those jet fighters they have. Every few days there's a sonic boom. I admit they're not that loud, but they're annoying."

Mike took another sip of coffee. "How long's it been going on?"

"Started two, three weeks ago I reckon."

"Huh," said Mike. "Thanks for the tip. I'm busy with my own assignment but I'll pass it on where I work." Mike honestly thought he might; it might make a good local interest story.

"Well, thank you." The man tipped his head, then motioned towards the notebook computer on the table in front of Mike.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to take you away from your work. I'll let you get back to it."

Mike smiled. "Not a problem."

Mike went back to work on his story. As expected, the police had been tightlipped about the girl. Since the case involved a minor they'd refused to give out any personal information. Mike had learned few details beyond the news account.

She'd been found unconscious by the side of the road, late at night. She'd had nothing but the clothes she was wearing. Other than a short illness, no doubt due to exposure, she'd been unharmed, thankfully. She'd been found by a driver going by. Chloroform had been found in her blood so it was definitely a kidnapping. But why had the kidnapers dumped her by the side of the road?

Mike had a hard time believing that Supergirl would dump an unconscious, feverish girl her own age out in the middle of nowhere, even if she hadn't wanted to be seen at that point. It was just too dangerous. Too many things could go wrong.

Her own age...

Mike frowned. The timing was plausible. But Supergirl wouldn't be susceptible to chloroform or illness, would she? Nor could she have a blood sample taken: bullets had bounced off her in Colorado. Really, the thought didn't make sense.

Something was buzzing in the back of his head, but Mike couldn't quite put it together. He needed to take a break from thinking about this. He pulled out his smartphone and looked for information on fighters at Dover AFB — his laptop didn't have a cellular connection.

Wikipedia listed the commands stationed there as airlift. No fighters or anything else supersonic. Mike frowned.

Well, Wikipedia wasn't always up to date. The man had said it had started two or three weeks ago...

Mike closed his eyes. What if Supergirl hadn't been in Milford the one time, or twice? What if this was her home base?

He looked around. It seemed ridiculous. Why here, of all places?

Unless she were kidnapped. Brought from... wherever, and left here?

On a whim, Mike Googled "Supergirl Delaware."

He scanned the listing and stopped about three quarters of the way down the page. There was a listing for Metropolis in Wikipedia, and he didn't even need to follow the link: the summary read "... stated that Metropolis was located in Delaware ...". He followed the link anyway, and read about the various locations proposed for Metropolis.

One of them was exactly where Milford was located.

Mike had the prickly feeling on his neck again. He picked up his coffee, tossed the remains of his pastry into a nearby trash can, and headed for his car.

Dover was only a half hour away.

Mike didn't go anywhere near the air base; he knew better than to try to get information out of the military personnel. He could point out that the sky was blue and they'd just say they couldn't comment.

Instead he went to Starbucks and started interviewing people, saying he was doing a story about noise pollution. He asked them if there was a problem with sonic booms from fighter jets.

No one recalled hearing any jets or sonic booms. One man testily informed him there hadn't been a fighter jet at Dover in years.

One woman had observed a different aircraft. "There haven't been any jets, but the President was here a few days ago."

"The President? Are you sure?" There hadn't been any release from the White House about a visit by the President to Dover AFB.

"Well, it was his helicopter, anyway. Marine One. It's pretty easy to recognize."

Mike had to allow as how it was, in fact, pretty easy to recognize.

He thought hard on the drive back to Milford. He had a theory but it was pretty speculative at this point. The key to proving it or disproving it was the kidnapped girl. However, finding her was going to be a big problem. Hanging around spying on kids at the middle school was a good way to get arrested. The police weren't talking.

This story wasn't going to be easy.

Chapter 22: Just Like the Movies

Emily reached groggily for her phone and checked the time before answering. She swore: it was 4:18 AM, and she wasn't

even on call. *I'd really like to get an uninterrupted night's sleep one of these days...* "Hello?"

"Dr. Jordan? This is Fred Douglas, DHS."

"Oh," said Emily, biting off the choice words she'd planned for the fool who'd woken her up. "Um, hi Mr. Douglas. What's up? I mean, what... I mean, why are you calling?"

"I apologize for disturbing you but we need Supergirl."

Emily sat up in bed. "What do you need her for?"

"There's a fairly large chunk of space debris on a collision course with the International Space Station. Usually, we just move the ISS out of the way, but we need 24 hours notice to plan a maneuver for that. That's not normally a problem because we keep pretty good tabs on space junk. Somehow, though, this one got deflected slightly into a new orbit, and that wasn't detected until about four hours before the projected collision. The chance of collision is about 70%. The astronauts can evacuate using the docked Soyuz capsules, but..."

Emily sighed. No one was at risk of death or injury. On the other hand, the destruction of the ISS would be a major loss to the entire world. It *was* an international project. She rubbed her eyes; this had slippery slope written all over it.

Then again, they'd taken the exit for "Slippery Slope" some time ago, and were looking to buy a condo and settle down there.

"What do you want her to do?"

"All she needs to do is intercept the debris and slow it so it falls from orbit. It'll burn up harmlessly in the atmosphere."

All she needs to do, he says. "Is this safe for her? How high is the ISS anyway?"

"About two hundred sixty miles."

Emily bit her lip. "That's a lot higher than she's ever been before. How long will she need to be out of the atmosphere?"

"We estimate it will take about thirty to forty minutes for this mission."

"Frankly, I'm worried, Mr. Douglas. She may be Kryptonian but she's only eleven. This sounds like it could be dangerous."

"We'll be taking precautions. She'll be supplied with an oxygen mask and a communications system. If she starts to feel any ill effects we'll abort the mission. Based on what she said her father's first mission was to lift a transport to their own space station. We feel she'll be safe."

Emily closed her eyes and planted her face on her knees. *Sorry about your daughter, Superman...* But she couldn't think of any concrete reason to say no. "I'll discuss it with her. Where do you want her to go?"

"We have a team standing by here at Dover Air Force Base, in the building we met in before. Just tell her to go there. We'll brief her." He paused. "There's only about two hours left now."

Emily sighed. "Mr. Douglas... if anything happened to her... I..."

"I understand, Dr. Jordan. We have her best interests at heart as well."

Emily sat there for a few moments, unsure she believed that. "Very well. I'll go talk to her."

"Thank you, Dr. Jordan. Goodbye." There was a click.

Emily put on her robe and slippers and left her bedroom.

Kara was curled up on the sofa in her robe, a closed book in her hands. She looked sheepish. "I'm sorry. I've been waking up around three-thirty recently. I don't feel sleepy and I can't get back to sleep." She shrugged.

Emily nodded. "It's OK, sweetie. Did you hear that?"

"Uh-huh."

"How do you feel about it?"

"Well, they're right that Dad lifted a space shuttle to Space Station Prometheus."

Emily nodded. "He's a full-grown Kryptonian." She smiled. "You're a kid-sized Kryptonian."

Kara giggled. "I guess." She grew sober. "Dad didn't just

save the space station. A few months later he stopped a huge asteroid from hitting the Earth. It would've killed billions of people, maybe everyone." She looked down. "He actually got hurt that time, but that asteroid was ginormous. I don't think this will hurt me." She sat up straight. "I think I can do it."

Emily goggled at Kara's description of her father's feats, all the more because she knew they were real and not something out of a movie. And because Kara could do things like that herself. She shook her head and tried to focus on tonight's problem. "How sure are you?"

"Pretty sure. I've already flown to China and back and been up where there's almost no air. I don't think this is that different." Emily sighed. "All right. Did you hear how to get there?"

Kara nodded, then blurred into the bedroom and out again dressed as Supergirl. Emily went and hugged her, then kissed her on the forehead. "Please be careful, honey. I don't want you to get hurt."

"I won't, I promise," said Kara. Emily released her, and Kara opened the door, then closed it gently behind her. There was a soft *whoosh*.

Emily knew Kara couldn't promise anything of the sort. When she'd made the costume, she'd never had anything of this scope in mind. That night seemed years ago.

She picked up her phone and called Mr. Douglas back. "Yes, Dr. Jordan?"

"She's on her way. Can you... I don't know... 'patch me in' or something? I can't bear to just wait."

"Of course. I'll call your Secret Service detail; they'll bring over some communications gear."

"OK, this is a special headphone that works using vibration. You should be able to hear us even when there's no air." Kara nodded. Lt. Col. Mendoza hung it on Kara's right ear.

"Here's your oxygen mask; it has a microphone built in. This is a special mask for very high altitudes. An ordinary person couldn't use it in a vacuum but you should be fine. Still, we'll test it before you need it. Have you ever been on an airplane?"

"A few times."

"Well as they say, just breathe normally — when you need to. The tank is small but it should be enough for this trip." Mendoza hung the mask around Kara's neck; the tank was in a harness on her back.

"We've only got about ninety minutes left. Fortunately, the debris is on this side of the Earth at the moment so you won't have to travel all the way around. Still, you've got thousands of miles to cover. We'll guide you to the debris based on a tracker we have in your communications gear. We have some goggles with a built-in display showing you the course, range, and bearing."

"The what?"

The officer smiled. "Sorry, how far away it is and what direction you should be going. In fact, let's test that now." She took something that looked like a cross between huge sunglasses and goggles and put them over Kara's head. It was made for an adult and so covered most of her face. Between that and the mask she looked like a junior fighter pilot.

Intellectually, Mendoza knew the girl had fantastic powers, but she felt like she was dressing a child for Halloween.

She tried to focus. "Now, can you see the display?"

"Umm, yes, but there's a problem. I can't see through these goggles."

Mendoza frowned. "I can see your eyes. What do you mean?"

"Oh, I can see the *regular* way. I just can't *see*. I mean, with my extra stuff."

Mendoza sighed and rubbed her eyes. "That's not good; they must have lead in the glass or something. Theoretically you shouldn't need your vision powers for this trip, but we don't want

you operating with a handicap." She put her hand to her chin. "I think we need to go with the backup plan." She pulled the goggles off Kara's head. "The backup is audio. Instead of a visual display we'll use three tones to give you the same information. Let's try it out."

She nodded to the technicians. "The first tone will tell you if you're at the right altitude." Kara heard one repeating note that rose in tempo, merged into a continuous tone, then reversed. "The second tone tells you if you're going the right speed." There was a different note that went through the same changes. "This tone tells you if you're pointed in the right direction." Kara heard yet another note. "The goal is to keep all the tones continuous; then you'll be on course. Can you keep all those tones straight?"

"Sure," said Kara. "It's easier than listening to everyone talking all the time." It was kind of like someone saying, "you're getting hotter... you're getting colder..." Well, three different people saying it at the same time and about different things.

"Space is awfully big and that debris is pretty small, so you need to follow the directions or you'll never find it in time. It's a needle and haystack thing. OK?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"In that case let's go."

They walked outside; the sky was still dark. "Let's get your mask on." Mendoza pulled the oxygen mask over Kara's mouth and nose and made it tight. It would have been uncomfortable for anyone else. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, ma'am." Her voice was muffled by the gear.

Mendoza held out her hand. "Then good luck, Supergirl."

Kara shook the officer's hand, then looked up, raised her right fist, and shot upward, quickly vanishing into the darkness.

Mendoza's jaw fell open. *Unbelievable... just like the movies*. She wondered why something felt off, then realized it was the absence of music: some part of her had expected a soundtrack. She shook her head and went back inside.

Kara kept her speed subsonic as she plowed through the thickest part of the atmosphere. After a minute she was ten miles up and started to accelerate rapidly.

"Supergirl, this is Dover. Do you copy?" It was Mendoza.

"Yes, ma'am. Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear. We're going to start your tracking tones now. Can you hear them?"

The three tones started beeping at her. "Yes, I hear them."

Kara continued to accelerate upwards, heading higher than she'd ever been before. She followed the directions of the tones, pitching over from her vertical path and starting to accelerate to orbital velocity. It was pretty easy, actually; she'd been going faster when she flew to Huozhou and London. She was high enough now that the sun had risen over the horizon; she was flooded with its raw energy. *Yum!*

She was trying to decide which was better, sunlight or chocolate, when she heard, "Supergirl, Dover here. How are you feeling? Is your oxygen OK?"

"I feel fine. I haven't needed to breathe yet."

"Could you try it? Remember, we want to test it before you need it."

Kara took a breath; it felt fine. "The oxygen is working, I think."

"Copy that. You're still on course."

The Earth continued to fall away. About twenty minutes later Kara was marveling at the view. The curvature of the planet was obvious and she could see a large portion of it. She was in space, just like an astronaut! Just like her dad!

A thought popped into her head: how long would it take her to get to the moon and back? She wondered if her dad had ever been there. She thought she could probably fly fast enough to get there in a few minutes, but was too nervous to try it before

talking to her dad. Her musing was interrupted by another transmission.

“Supergirl, Dover here. You should be closing on the debris now. It should be dead ahead.”

Kara peered ahead with her vision and saw something. It looked like a mangled chunk of rocket or satellite, tumbling end over end. “I think I see it. Can I just zip over to it?”

“Affirmative.”

She closed the remaining distance in a moment. “Is this the one you want?”

“Affirmative, that’s it. There is one hour until collision. Probability of collision is now 93%.”

“It’s spinning.”

“That shouldn’t matter, but if stopping it makes it easier to grab then go ahead.”

Kara felt the slight onset of a need to breathe. It wasn’t the least bit uncomfortable yet, but she took a breath from the mask anyway and the feeling went away.

She squinted at the spinning junk, unsure what to do. It was kind of like catching a baton, but she’d never gotten the hang of twirling when Kayla Irig had tried to teach her in Smallville.

“Where should I grab it?”

There was a short pause. “In the middle, the axis of rotation — I mean, the point it’s spinning around. That should be the easiest place to grab it, because it’s moving the slowest.”

Kara nodded; she remembered Kayla saying something similar. She maneuvered around the object, reached out, and grabbed it with both hands. It stopped spinning almost immediately, and without making her spin in reaction, oddly enough. “I’ve got it. Now what do I do?”

“OK, we want you to rotate until the single tone you’re hearing becomes continuous instead of a series of beeps. Got that?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She turned around as directed.

“You’re now facing against the orbital motion of the object. All you have to do is slow it down, so accelerate back the way it was coming.”

“Couldn’t I just give it a push?”

“We don’t know how big a push that would be, so we don’t know what the object would do. It’s safer this way.”

“Oh, OK.” Kara started to head in the direction indicated, taking the space junk with her. “So, like this?”

“Perfect. Just continue that for three... two... one... done. You can let go of the object now.”

Kara backed away from it. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. Our tracking shows that you and the object have slowed enough to drop out of orbit. It’ll definitely miss the space station.”

“Are we all done?”

“Affirmative, Supergirl. Thank you. You can come home now.”

Kara looked around her, then down. She wasn’t quite sure where she was since she’d been focused on other things. She was over a land mass she didn’t recognize. “Umm, OK. Which way is that?”

As always, Kara checked the surroundings of the cottage before landing; it wouldn’t do for anyone to see Supergirl coming and going. She felt bad at peeking into the surrounding houses, but someone might be looking out a window so she had to at least check those. Caitlin had thought of that.

The coast was clear so she darted down to the door and let herself in, closing it quickly behind her. Emily was sitting alone on the sofa — Jarrod had left as soon as Supergirl had returned to Dover AFB. “Hi... I’m home.”

Emily rose quickly. “Are you OK, honey?”

Kara smiled. “I’m fine. It was pretty easy, except I got a little

lost on the way home. But it wasn’t a big deal.”

Emily came over and hugged her foster daughter tightly. “I was so worried. I’m so glad you’re OK and everything went well.” Kara hugged her back.

The two separated and Emily put her hands on Kara’s shoulders. “It may have been easy for *you*, but it’s not every day you send your eleven year old into outer space.” She lifted her right hand to Kara’s cheek and smiled. Kara smiled back.

Chapter 23: Minor Difficulties

Mike growled in frustration, earning him a strange look from the woman sitting at the other table at the downtown coffee shop. Because the kidnapped girl was a minor it was impossible to look at any of the records involved. School enrollments, found children, foster placements, foster caregivers, hospital admissions: none were accessible to the public. Any of those would have helped enormously. He could check the missing children database but without any personal details about the girl he’d have no idea if he’d found her or not.

His hunch was that Supergirl was living somewhere in Milford. There were around 300 students in the sixth grade at the middle school, half of whom were girls. Only some of those would match Supergirl’s physical characteristics, but that still might be quite a few girls.

The response to his interview request, passed to the family and back via the police, had been that the girl didn’t want to talk to the press. If she was Supergirl that was hardly a surprise.

He’d already talked this over with the folks back at the office. With the new, stricter laws in place and the whole scandal over hacking by journalists still going full blast in the UK, trying to get into the databases was out of the question. Since there wasn’t anything illegal or unethical going on no whistleblower was going to risk their job leaking the information.

A PI experienced in finding missing children would be able to locate her from a photo, but no PI would take the case because neither CNN nor Mike were Supergirl’s parent or guardian. They’d run the risk of losing their license. And the first thing they’d do is check in with the local police, anyway.

Everyone agreed this was a hot lead and Yates had been paid for an exclusive on the tape. They weren’t airing it yet because they didn’t want to tip off the competition. That was getting harder to justify because it had been over a week since they’d received it, three days since he’d come to Milford, and Mike still hadn’t been able to figure out a way to track down the girl without getting into trouble with the law.

Mike heard children’s voices and looked up from his donut. Three tween girls were walking up the street in his direction. Mike smiled; one was a redhead, one a brunette, and one a blonde. They looked like a hair color commercial. They were the right age, but none of them looked like Supergirl.

“Finally!” said the brunette. She looked partly Asian. “How far was that?”

“About a mile,” said the blonde. She was wearing glasses.

The brunette was still complaining. “What ice cream is worth walking a mile for? We could have had ice cream at my house. Assuming Kevin hasn’t eaten it all.” Mike had to hide his smile behind his coffee cup.

“Hey!” protested the redhead. “It’s really good. They make it right here in the bakery. I still can’t believe you’ve never been here before.”

“As long as they have chocolate,” said the brunette.

“Ditto,” said the blonde. She fiddled with her glasses, her eyes peeking out for a moment as she looked through the window. “Oh, I guess they do.”

“Of course!” said the redhead.

Mike smiled pleasantly at the three of them as they entered the bakery, and they smiled back. He went back to thinking about

his problem and the smile left his face. He sighed. Too bad Supergirl hadn't come for ice cream.

Hmm. With a recommendation like that maybe he should have tried the ice cream instead of the donut. He reflected that at this rate he'd have a chance to try everything on the menu.

Mike was brushing his teeth that night when it occurred to him that Supergirl might actually have a "secret identity" like her fictional counterpart. Not that he'd expected her to wear her costume all the time, but might she make other efforts to alter her appearance when being a superhero, a civilian, or both?

He was still getting his head around the idea that a superhero was real, and a child. The idea that she might have a secret identity too was even further down the comic book rabbit hole, just past the cupboard with the orange marmalade.

Still, he had to admit it made sense. Celebrities did the same thing when they went out and didn't want to be recognized, and it worked for them. Supergirl could wear her hair differently; she could wear glasses like Clark Kent.

It was even possible she wore a wig when in civilian guise; most versions of the fictional Supergirl did. Mike thought that was unlikely — a wig was too easy to dislodge accidentally — but he couldn't rule it out. That would make for far more possibilities.

Mike turned and glanced at the TV, to see if it was back from the commercial break yet. It wasn't; a hair color ad was on. He smiled, reminded of the girls he'd seen that afternoon during his coffee break...

Wait a minute.

Hadn't one of them been a blonde? Had she been wearing glasses? He strained to remember, but drew a blank. He hadn't looked closely at any of them because you didn't stare at kids.

He thought he'd been keeping his eyes open, but he hadn't considered a disguise. Was it possible Supergirl had walked right by him? He banged his head on the mirror. More than once.

This was taking too much time. If he didn't find something soon they'd just have to run the tape from the marina on its own. The network was desperate for news on Supergirl. They were running anything they could, even features on her fictional incarnations and their secret identities.

"Mr. President, Mr. Lamb would like a minute."

"Send him in, Carol."

The President started to smile at his Chief of Staff, but it faded at the expression on the man's face. "Uh oh; this can't be good. What is it, Pete?"

"Mr. President, some of the other countries involved in the ISS were tracking the debris as well. And by 'some of the other countries,' I mean the Russians, of course. They noticed that it fell out of orbit in a completely unnatural way. Not only that, they picked up the tracking signal from Supergirl's communications link. They're asking questions."

The President sighed. "Your recommendation?"

"We'll have to release the statement we prepared, sir. Better to tell what really happened than have speculation run rampant. The Chinese have gotten wind of it, and they were already nervous about her."

The President nodded. "That's what I think too; let's go ahead." He pressed his lips together. "I just hope this doesn't turn into a circus."

Mike's smartphone chimed, and he pulled it from his pocket. He'd gotten a notification from the CNN app: the headline read "Supergirl Saves ISS from Collision with Space Junk."

He tapped through to the actual story. There was a short statement from the White House, to the effect that they'd contacted Supergirl and requested her assistance in deflecting a

piece of space debris that had posed a serious threat to the International Space Station. She'd agreed and had flown into orbit, then redirected the object to burn up in the atmosphere. The President had said, "The United States is grateful to Supergirl for her help in protecting this important scientific resource for all of humanity."

The framing was interesting. Mike could see that the government was trying to spin it so that other countries didn't think Supergirl was under U.S. control. If it looked like she was doing whatever the U.S. wanted, that could be destabilizing. For the sake of world peace, he hoped that the spin was true or — far more crucial — that the U.S. could convince other countries it was true.

But it still couldn't hide two plain facts: the government had a way to contact Supergirl, and she was open to taking requests. That led to two questions: how did they contact her? And what kind of requests did she take?

Emily rose from the sofa as the door opened. *Finally! It's nearly midnight.*

Kara closed the door behind her. Emily took one look at her and winced. Kara was looking rather bedraggled, her hair stringy and her uniform covered in dried salt. She looked to be near tears.

"Oh sweetheart..." began Emily, holding her arms open.

"What happened?"

Kara ran into her embrace and buried her face in Emily's shoulder. "He yelled at me!"

Emily felt herself bristle. "Who yelled at you? When?"

"When I put the ferry down by the dock."

"Wait, when you *put it down*? What did you do?"

Kara had flown to rescue a ferry in the Caspian Sea. It had been sinking with over six hundred aboard, news they'd received via their government contacts at about ten that evening. She'd broken her own previous speed record, reaching the vessel three minutes after leaving Milford. Most of that had been getting up to an altitude where she could really move and descending on the other end. She'd left a spectacular glowing trail high in the skies above the East Coast, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe.

"It had a big hole in the side and I didn't know how to fix it. I guess it hit something. So I just picked it up and flew with it."

"You *lifted it out of the water*?" Emily boggled at the idea; she couldn't imagine the weight of a ship that size. "Umm, wouldn't that frighten the passengers?"

"I wasn't that high! I was just above the water, and I flew it to the nearest port I could see. It turned out that's where it left from. Then I put it down in the shallow water so it wouldn't sink."

"Is that why they yelled at you?"

Kara shook her head. "No, after I put the boat down I flew up on the dock to see if they wanted me to move it. I was talking to the men on the dock — they spoke English and were really nice — when this man in a robe started yelling at me and pointing and shaking his fist. I couldn't understand him but he was really, really mad." She started crying softly.

"Wait, where was this?"

"The men at the port said it was in Iran."

Oh boy. "Then what happened?"

"Some of the men on the dock started arguing back at the man. They all got angry. One of them told me the man was one of their clerics, and he didn't like the way my hair was or the way I was dressed, or that I was American, or that I was in their country without permission. The man who was translating said they were grateful because I saved a lot of people, and they knew I was trying to help, and that's why they were arguing back. Then more people showed up and it got even more angry and everyone was yelling at each other, and the man said he wished I could move the boat a little from where I put it, and he was really sorry, but it would be better if I left." She sobbed. "So I did."

“Oh, honey.” Emily squeezed her tighter.

“I didn’t want to make anybody mad! I just wanted to help!”

“And you did! I’m sure every person on that boat is grateful to you. Who knows how many would have died if you hadn’t helped?”

Kara nodded, still sniffing.

Emily was rubbing her back in soothing circles. “How about you clean yourself and your suit up, and I’ll make you some hot cocoa. Would that help?”

“Yeah,” came the quiet reply. “Emily?”

“What, sweetheart?”

“I wish my dad was here.”

“I know honey. I do too.”

Emily held her for a few more minutes, until Kara disengaged and looked up with a fragile smile. Emily stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. “Shower and then cocoa?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well?” asked the President.

Pete Lamb shrugged. “Cooler heads prevailed, this time. Of course officially we don’t talk to each other, but unofficially, they let us know they’re glad she saved the ferry, even if some factions don’t like that she’s American and female. They also realized she’s only eleven and scaring her off was counterproductive.

“So they asked us to tell her she’ll be welcome if she comes to help again. She’ll probably even get an official thank you. Through a third party like the UN or Russia, of course.” He shrugged again. “We won’t, but they know we told her about the accident.”

The President didn’t respond, and the other man continued quietly, “Do you regret telling her about it? She probably wouldn’t have found out in time if we hadn’t passed the word.”

The President smiled without warmth. “I’d prefer not to answer that question.” He sighed. “Let’s get some sleep. There’ll probably be more fallout in the morning — no good deed goes unpunished.”

Emily took one look at the news story on her computer and winced.

The Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs asked the White House to explain why, in his words, “Supergirl is helping America’s enemies.”

White House Press Secretary Theresa Foley issued a statement from the President: “The Administration passed information about the sinking ferry to Supergirl purely out of concern for the passengers. Regardless of the state of the relationship between the United States and Iran, six hundred innocent civilian lives were at risk. Supergirl demonstrated, as always, her compassion and desire to help, and went to assist, saving all aboard. The Administration hopes that all Americans will feel proud of this humanitarian action.”

Chairman Myers promised to call hearings on Supergirl’s latest rescue, and more generally on what should be done to make sure that her actions “are aligned with America’s interests.” He emphasized that he was not criticizing Supergirl herself, given her age and obvious good intentions, but insisted that decisions on how to apply the power she wields “should not be made by a child.”

I’d trust her judgment over yours any day, you clown, thought Emily. She’d never met anyone with a bigger heart than her foster daughter. Given who her father was, she wasn’t surprised.

Chairman Myers also demanded that the Administration make Supergirl accessible to Congress, saying, “the American people’s representatives have a right to learn more about her.”

Emily shut down the computer and went to get ready to walk the girls to school. As she did every day, she hoped fervently that Kara’s parents would find her soon.

Chapter 24: Viral

Kara could hear every conversation that went on in the school, or for that matter in all of Milford and for miles around. She tried to respect people’s privacy — especially after some acute embarrassments early on — so she didn’t listen in unless it sounded like someone was in trouble. Even so, she couldn’t help picking up fragments.

She wasn’t sure when it started that morning, but not too long after homeroom she had to notice: the other kids were talking about her. And as the day went by, more and more of them were. What she heard was unsettling.

“...Kara Kent...”

“...Supergirl...”

“...glasses...”

“...it’s true?”

The kids were looking at her, too. They glanced at her then hurriedly looked away. Even the teachers were starting to stare. During Social Studies Mr. Ordemann’s eyes kept straying in her direction.

Finally, anxiety drove her to listen in, and what she heard was the rumbling sound of the ground giving way beneath her feet:

“She looks just like her!”

“You can look up her name on the Internet.”

“She came out of nowhere right before Supergirl did!”

“Did you hear? Kara Kent is *Supergirl!*”

She was numb when she joined her friends in the cafeteria, and they only confirmed what she’d overheard. No one knew who’d started it but it was everywhere: how one of the fictional Supergirl’s secret identities was Kara Kent, and how Kara herself looked very much like Supergirl.

“I did everything I could to make fun of the idea,” said Bailey. “I said it was silly to think Supergirl would go to school here. But everyone thinks it’s true.”

“I said it was a common name, and maybe your parents were Supergirl fans, but no one was listening,” commiserated Megan.

“They don’t have any proof,” offered Kevin in consolation.

Kara wasn’t sure that mattered.

Mike Hooper was about ready to pack it in. He’d gone over the problem every which way, but to make further progress either he’d have to recognize her — which he hadn’t — or he’d have to resort to the paparazzi approach and stalk her. That was not something Mike was willing to do. He was a reporter for a respectable news organization, not a tabloid muckraker. He had no doubt that if his suspicions proved true people like that would be oozing into town in short order, but he wasn’t going there.

He was taking a break at the bakery, enjoying an afternoon coffee — he’d become fond of the place. His enjoyment was diminished as he pondered how he was going to explain that despite his suspicions, the trip was a bust. The simple fact was the rules were different for minors and that had made tracking her down impossible.

His ears perked up at the sound of young voices; he looked up. A group of boys and girls from the middle school was headed his way, but none of them could possibly be Supergirl unless she was a shapeshifter. He took a big sip of coffee and winced; it was still a little too hot.

They seemed quite agitated, and as they drew closer he couldn’t help overhearing their conversation.

“... she totally is! She looks just like her except for the glasses and hair!”

“So what? People look like celebrities all the time. Katy Green looks just like that girl on *iCarly*.”

“And then there’s her name! I mean, come on. Kara Kent?”

“Supergirl used lots of names. Linda Lee, Linda Danvers... they never even used Kara Kent much in the comics, just on TV. I

never would've noticed except they talked about it on TV the other night and I was like, oh, that's weird, there's a Kara Kent at school."

Mike's attention was fully engaged.

"But, like, *glasses?* Get real!"

"Well they worked, right? Until we found out about her name. Did you notice she looks like Supergirl before you heard?"

"Umm... I guess not."

"Do you think Emily Jordan made the costume?"

Mike was typing furiously.

"Did you see her and Caitlin when school let out? She was totally freaking out. Caitlin was holding onto her like she was gonna take off. Get it? Take... off..."

"Ha ha. That doesn't mean anything. With everyone talking about it she'd be freaking out anyway."

At this point the kids made a turn into the bakery and the topic changed. "Do you think they still have mango sherbet?"

Mike was already on his smartphone. He didn't need to look up Kara Kent — he was already familiar with the name from his background research on the fictional Supergirl. He tried looking up Emily Jordan in an online phone directory but failed, swearing under his breath. Either she didn't have a land line or it was unlisted. He tried Googling "Emily Jordan Milford Delaware."

She was listed as a doctor on staff at Milford Memorial Hospital. There was no photo.

He paused to take stock. If he was understanding the gossip correctly, there was a student at Milford Middle School named Kara Kent, whom the other students now suspected of being Supergirl. She had some kind of relationship with a doctor at the local hospital and another girl named Caitlin.

He still couldn't go on air with this; it was just hearsay. If it was wrong he'd make the network and himself look foolish. You only got to do that once.

But it sounded like things were starting to heat up on this story. He needed to be here when it broke open.

Mike took another sip of his coffee. Now, it was just right.

Emily sighed. "We knew this day might come. No, we knew this day *would* come." She tightened the arm she had around Kara. The three members of the family were huddled together.

"I guess," said Kara. "But... I was kinda hoping it wouldn't happen for a long time. Not till after I got to go home. I didn't think it would take this long for my parents to find me." She sniffled. "Now I'm wondering if I'm going to be stuck here forever. What if I never get to go home?" Her voice broke. "What if I never see my family again?" She looked up at Emily. "You and Caitlin have been so nice to me. You've been a family for me here and I love you both. But..."

Emily hugged her and Caitlin took her hand. "Honey, we understand." Emily squeezed a little harder. "I love you too, but I would never try to replace your mom or dad. Don't give up. I know your parents are going to find you, you'll see." She stroked Kara's hair.

"What are we going to do? Everyone *knows!* What's going to happen?"

"Everyone doesn't *know*. Everyone *suspects,*" said Caitlin. "If you can keep Supergirl separate from you, and not give them any confirmation, it may blow over." She shrugged. "Or it may not. But we still have a chance."

"Confirmation? I'm not going to admit it!"

"I mean don't get caught doing anything super; be extra careful. If things go long enough without proof people will start to wonder if they were imagining it. I mean, it's not like someone's going to shoot you to see if the bullets bounce off."

"Caitlin!" scolded Emily. "Don't even talk about something like that!"

"What if they don't give up, even if I don't get caught?"

Emily sighed. "Then we'll have to live with it. You'll be a celebrity. Lots of famous people survive that. It'll be different from what you're used to but life will go on." She hugged Kara again. "I just hope they don't take you away from us."

"I won't let them!" said Kara firmly.

"I'm glad you feel that way, honey." Emily frowned. "But I think we'd better let our handlers know what's going on."

"Do we have to?"

"They probably know already. Remember, there's a Secret Service team a few doors down the street. Besides," she added, "maybe they'll have some ideas."

"Mr. Douglas," said Emily, one hand on her forehead and the other holding her phone, "I appreciate your concern, I really do. And I understand the risk to Caitlin and myself. But I'm not ready to take that step yet."

"Dr. Jordan, we really feel it would be best if you all had 24/7 Secret Service protection at this time. It's not just the risk to you, which is bad enough. If someone thought to use you or your sister for extortion against Miss Kent..."

"You do realize she's hearing this conversation?"

There was a short pause. "I do forget that sometimes. My apologies, Kara. Still, it doesn't change my point."

"What we have right now are suspicions and gossip. If we're seen walking around with bodyguards that will just confirm it. There's really no evidence right now, and if there isn't any people may think they were mistaken."

"I understand. We feel that odds are the secret will come out, though."

Caitlin spoke up suddenly at the same time. "Could we do some kind of misdirection?"

"I didn't catch that," said Mr. Douglas.

"Just a second, Caitlin said something about misdirection. What did you mean, honey?"

"Like, could we find a double or something? So that people could see Supergirl and Kara Kent together?"

"Caitlin is asking if we could find a double for Kara, so Supergirl and Kara Kent can be seen together?"

There was a moderate pause. "Things would have to get significantly more difficult for you before we could try that. Otherwise, why would Supergirl come to appear with Kara Kent? How would she hear about it? Still, it's not a bad idea. Maybe we could come up with some other form of misdirection or misinformation. We'll get to work on it."

"Regardless, your safety is paramount. We're willing to wait a little longer, but if there's a risk to any of you, you'll need to have protection at all times. The consequences don't bear thinking about."

The next morning in homeroom she and Bailey were talking about their science homework while waiting for the bell. Kara heard the heartbeat of the boy sitting behind her suddenly increase in tempo; other heartbeats in the room followed suit. She turned around just in time to see him reaching for her hair with a pair of scissors.

"Craig!" she screeched, whipping her hair out of the way. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"What's going on?" asked Mr. Kroum, looking up from his desk. He got up and came over.

"Craig was trying to cut my hair!" said Kara indignantly.

Mr. Kroum turned to the boy. "Mr. Leighton?" He held out his hand, and Craig reluctantly turned over the scissors. "Just what were you hoping to accomplish?"

The boy couldn't meet his eyes. "I was just trying to see if I could, you know... Cut it, that is. Everyone's saying she's Supergirl, so..."

Kara hadn't even thought of that; her own heart started to

pound. She'd only been thinking that he was trying to butcher her hair. She hadn't had her powers long enough to realize immediately that the scissors would break. She'd almost been exposed.

"Mr. Leighton, you and I will be taking a trip to the principal's office." Mr. Kroum looked around at the class. "This goes for everyone. I don't care what you think about Kara. I don't even care if it's true. We have rules here; please try to remember them."

He jerked his head towards the door. "Craig, let's go. The rest of you, please read chapter nine until I get back." Craig got up and glumly followed Mr. Kroum out the door as the bell rang.

Kara noticed that everyone's eyes were still on her. Suddenly, she felt as if Craig Leighton had just cut the ribbon and declared hunting season officially open.

After her close call Kara made sure to listen for kids talking about her. Surprisingly, most of those didn't seem interested in exposing her — they were just gossiping. Some were actively plotting but were stymied on what to do without getting into serious trouble. Poking her with sharp objects, attempting to cut her hair, throwing something at her; anything like that would get a student a trip to the principal's office, or even suspension. No one was curious enough to risk that.

One student had the idea of tripping her to see if she got hurt; bullies got away with that often enough. Kara simply avoided his ambush. She got in the habit of looking through every door before she went through it, through every corner before she turned it, just to make sure nothing was waiting.

During lunch, she heard an anguished scream for help from the athletic fields. She looked through the wall and zoomed in on the bleachers, where she saw a group of kids, one of whom had a camera. One girl put her hands to her mouth and yelled for help again; she didn't look the least bit distressed. Kara fumed and turned her attention back to her lunch. Her friends wondered why she was abusing her meatloaf.

When she got to the end of the school week without anything happening she dared to begin to hope. A smile came back to her face and she walked home with her foster sister thinking that the weight she felt on her shoulders had lessened just a little. Caitlin and Kevin were right: no one had any proof. Maybe Mr. Douglas would come up with a way to fool everyone into thinking they were wrong, and school would get back to normal.

Meanwhile, the students didn't just gossip amongst themselves. They tweeted, they texted, and they posted on Facebook, including photos of Kara.

Mike heard his smartphone ring and pulled it out. "Hooper."
"Mike?"

"Hey boss. What's up?"

"The Kent girl... her classmates have been talking about it online, and it's starting to spread all over the Internet." There was a pause. "Whether she's Supergirl or not... there's a story now. The other news organizations are picking up on it and we think Milford is going to get very busy very soon. We want to be out in front, so we're going to run the marina rescue story later today, together with something on the kidnapped girl; that's stuff we have no one else does, yet. Can you get us a location piece from the school to go with it?"

"Sure, just send a crew and have them meet me there. What about her name?"

There was a pause. "It's all over the Internet, but it's still just a rumor and she's a minor. No name or photo. Yet."

Mike felt a pang of guilt. When people got exposed in this business it was for doing something bad, or at least something viewed as bad. He'd never been involved in exposing someone for doing something universally considered good. Not just good,

admirable. He couldn't condemn the girl for wanting a life other than flying around and saving people.

Her name and photo wouldn't be on the air yet, but his intuition told him it was a matter of days at most. Still, he was a reporter and this is what he did.

An hour later he was standing in front of the school with a camera crew. "This is Mike Hooper reporting for CNN from Milford Middle School in Milford, Delaware. Rumors are swirling throughout this school and the surrounding community that one of the sixth graders here may in fact be Supergirl, the world's first real-life superhero..."

Chapter 25: Debacle

Emily had brought home a lot of paperwork that weekend and so hadn't had time to check the news sites as she normally did. Besides, Supergirl hadn't been active and Kara's report on how the week had gone had been encouraging.

The phone calls Sunday night took her by surprise.

The first was from Mr. Douglas. "Have you seen the news?"
"I've been busy tonight. Did something happen?"

"The rumors about Kara have been picked up by the news networks."

Emily's evening fatigue was washed away by a bucket of ice-cold adrenaline. "Have they shown her name, or a picture?"

"Not yet, though they're showing Supergirl's picture of course. Since it's just hearsay at this point, the rules most organizations follow forbid identifying a minor. I can't guarantee that every organization will show that level of restraint but for now, they are." He paused. "However, they *are* showing *your* name and image. I strongly recommend that you allow us to provide you with protection 24/7."

Emily closed her eyes. "I understand, Mr. Douglas, and believe me, I take your offer in the spirit that it's meant. But that will confirm it, won't it? And then her name and photo *will* be plastered everywhere. Won't that make things worse?"

"Again, Dr. Jordan, we feel it's only a matter of time. At this point, very little time."

"That may be, but I'd still rather wait."

"Very well. Are you all at least carrying your emergency signals?"

They'd each been given a small item the size of a car key fob, a panic button they could press if they were in trouble.

"Yes, Mr. Douglas. I make sure the girls have theirs every day before we leave."

"I'm very glad to hear that. I suppose we'll continue to do it your way, for now. Good evening, Dr. Jordan."

"Good evening, Mr. Douglas."

The next call was even more unexpected.

"Dr. Jordan?"

"Yes?"

"This is Gloria Frye."

Emily paused. Gloria Frye was the principal of Milford Middle School. "Good evening, Ms. Frye. What can I do for you?"

"May I meet with you, Caitlin, and Kara tomorrow morning when school starts?"

Uh oh. "Of course. May I ask what about?"

"Well for starters, I'd like to discuss the fleet of media trucks pulling up around my school."

The three of them were very subdued on the way to school Monday. As they turned onto Lakeview Road, they could see that the normally placid surroundings of the school were a mob scene. Children were walking to school as usual, but there were also a number of trucks with huge satellite dishes, as well as a throng of reporters and camera crews. City police stood by and firmly rebuffed any attempts to photograph or approach the children.

They could see that the reporters were scrutinizing each child who entered the school. By unspoken agreement Kara walked sandwiched between Emily and Caitlin to shield her from view. Even so, as they walked up there was a cry of “That’s them!” and the din hushed. All eyes followed them as they entered the school.

They made their way to the administrative offices, students and staff silently moving out of their way. When they arrived they were waved unceremoniously into the principal’s office. The door shut behind them.

Ms. Frye stood up. “Have a seat, please.” When her guests sat down she followed suit. The first bell rang and Kara looked nervously to the door.

Ms. Frye half-smiled. “Don’t worry, girls; you’ll get a hall pass.” She leaned forward over her desk. “Now, would someone please tell me why this circus descended on my school overnight?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Frye,” said Emily. “This is not something any of us want. I don’t know how this rumor got so out of control. Believe me, we do not want the attention.”

“Is it really just a rumor?”

“Ms. Frye...” sighed Emily, slightly exasperated.

Ms. Frye frowned, then folded her arms and sat back. “All right then, what do you propose I do?”

“I propose that you let me bring my girls to school, the same as always, and wait for the media to give up when they realize there’s no story here. It shouldn’t take more than a couple of days.”

The Principal and Emily regarded each other coolly. “And what if they don’t give up? Because they find a story?”

“If and when that happens we’ll have to decide on a new plan.”

“I’m sorry,” blurted Kara.

Emily put an arm around her. “There is nothing to be sorry about, sweetheart. You haven’t done anything wrong, and every child in this country has a right to an education.” She turned her gaze back to Ms. Frye.

Ms. Frye softened her expression. “That is true. However, every other child here also has a right to an education. This... zoo is disrupting that.”

“Ms. Frye, any disruption is entirely someone else’s doing. Kara is just trying to get her schoolwork done. Has she ever done anything to disrupt class or any other school activity?”

Ms. Frye regarded them for a while. “No. No, she’s been a very good student.” She smiled at Kara, then grew serious again. “Very well, we’ll try letting things be for a while. But if things get out of hand then we’ll have to decide on a new plan.” She tilted her head and raised an eyebrow.

Emily blushed slightly. “Fair enough.”

Mike watched as the family who’d been identified that morning ran the gauntlet on the way home from school that afternoon. He was pretty sure Kara Kent was the blonde girl with glasses he’d seen several days ago. If she wasn’t Supergirl, she certainly bore a strong resemblance.

He felt sorry that a child had to be subjected to this experience; if she *was* Supergirl, it was poor payment for all she’d done. The same for the foster family who’d taken care of her. Still, there was no help for it.

The police were escorting them through the crowd of reporters. He shouted out questions with the rest, questions he knew wouldn’t be answered.

Flashes were going off continuously. The two girls’ faces would be blurred out, but Emily Jordan’s wouldn’t.

The next day, Jarrod Gardiner was cooling his heels in the E.R. at Milford Memorial, wishing he could dispense with the

charade and stay close to Emily to protect her properly. True, she was mostly in the same room, but she was out of sight for long stretches. He didn’t like that.

He wouldn’t be here at all if it weren’t for the lengthy, heated conversation between Emily and his superiors last night. She still didn’t want to give any evidence that the government held her family in any special regard; his team thought this was stretching things long past the point where it made sense.

Caitlin was relatively safe, as the school was being watched and it would be difficult for an unauthorized adult to penetrate it. Emily was a different story.

They’d reached a compromise: Jarrod could shadow her in the E.R., but wearing civilian clothes. He’d pretend to be someone waiting for treatment, changing his story as needed. No one paid much attention to someone waiting in an E.R. as long as they didn’t complain.

The story wouldn’t last more than a couple of days, but Jarrod didn’t think that would matter. This smelled like a bad situation to him.

So there he sat, pretending to read a magazine, while he was really keeping an eye on Emily and all the people she interacted with. If anyone noticed him they probably thought he was a stalker.

Emily had just stepped into the staff room adjacent to the E.R. to take a short break. Jarrod fumed silently.

Suddenly there was a shriek from behind the closed door. Jarrod leapt into action, drawing his pistol and eliciting further screams from the people around him as he sprinted across the E.R.

A policeman talking to some EMTs spun around and, seeing Jarrod’s weapon, drew his own as he ran to intercept the agent. “Police! Drop your weapon!”

Jarrod scowled in frustration. “United States Secret Service! I need to get into that room!”

“Drop your weapon!” Everyone in the E.R. was shrinking away from the confrontation.

Jarrod lay down his service firearm and put his hands on his head.

“On the floor!”

“Damn it!” cursed the agent but complied, lying face down.

The policeman approached him carefully. Jarrod was glaring at him. “My credentials are in my back pocket. Hurry up!”

“Shut up and don’t move!” The policeman reached carefully into Jarrod’s pocket, never taking his eyes off his hands. He picked up Jarrod’s weapon and backed away. Only then did he look at the ID. His face paled and he swore vociferously. “I’m sorry! You can go!”

Jarrod got to his feet. “My gun, Officer!”

The policeman handed him the weapon and Secret Service ID, and he grabbed both before barreling through the staff room door. A nurse was cowering in the corner, pointing to a rear door. “They had guns...”

Jarrod swore again and charged out the rear door into a service corridor. He had no idea which way they’d gone, but the trail of terrified hospital employees pointed the way. He finally bolted out a service entrance only to see a parking lot full of cars, with no sign of Emily. He looked at his feet — and saw Emily’s panic button and cell phone.

Kara was watching Ms. Noether demonstrate how to add fractions when something tugged at her attention. It wasn’t a new sound, but something had changed. She suddenly realized it was Emily’s heartbeat. It had sped up briefly, then become slow and steady again.

She ignored it, as Emily often got agitated during the course of a normal day. Then she heard Jarrod arguing with someone about guns, and cursing. That was a concern, but didn’t seem like

something she should leave school for without instruction from an adult.

Then she noticed something else odd: Emily's heartbeat was becoming more distant. In fact, it seemed to be moving towards the shore. That couldn't be right.

Jarrod spoke again, urgently. "Gardiner, declaring Code Red. Hawkeye has been abducted. I repeat, Hawkeye has been abducted. By armed hostiles, likely by car or truck, destination unknown."

Kara was frightened now. Who was Hawkeye? And why was Emily's heartbeat—

She jerked bolt upright and gasped, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. Ms. Noether stopped her lecture. "What is it, Kara?"

"I... I... I have to go!"

Comprehension dawned on many of the students' faces, but others were confused and mistook her meaning. Someone snickered.

Ms. Noether was confused as well; she frowned. "Class will be over in five minutes. Can't you wait until then?"

Emily's heartbeat was getting harder to hear, farther away; Kara was frantic. "I have to go *right now!*"

Ms. Noether sighed in exasperation. "Oh very well, Kara, but —"

She never finished her sentence. Kara blurred out the door of the classroom, leaving a whirlwind of scattered papers and screams in her wake. There was a sonic boom that rattled the windows slightly, and the door swung slowly shut.

The press assembled around the school heard the noise, but there was nothing to see by the time they looked up. They all looked at one another.

Kara didn't pause to change into her uniform. She knew she'd just outed herself but at the moment that was a distant concern. She was focused entirely on saving Emily and every second counted.

She hovered two thousand feet above Milford, lowered her glasses, and cast her vision in the direction she'd last heard her foster mother's heartbeat; it was towards the marina. She detected some commotion there, and zoomed in. She saw a car with its trunk open, two agitated men getting up off the ground, and a boat heading out of the harbor.

Focusing on the boat, she saw men with guns inside; Emily lay unconscious on a bench. Kara looked into her chest and saw that her heart was beating normally. Only then did she allow herself to breathe.

The boat had Milford markings. Kara saw that it was heading towards a larger boat about a mile offshore. She scanned that boat as well; it appeared to be out of Key West, Florida.

She suddenly realized she was flying in her school skirt, which was not well suited to the task. She debated taking the three seconds needed to go home and change into her uniform, and decided she might as well. She might have blown her secret — what little of it remained — but she didn't have to broadcast it to everyone. Maybe the government could come in and erase everyone's memories at school, like in that movie her dad liked. That would be pretty cool, actually.

The reporters camped out at their home didn't even have time to see her when they heard the door slam as she left.

She raced towards the bay while checking again on Emily, who still seemed unharmed. A thought suddenly struck her and she changed course to the hospital instead.

Jarrood was standing in the parking lot talking with another agent — she noticed the black suit and earpiece — so she landed right next to them.

"Supergirl?" exclaimed Jarrod, surprised. He looked around and lowered his voice. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"I heard what happened to Emily," said Kara emotionally.

"Oh." Jarrod hesitated. "We're blocking off all the roads, and helicopters are on the way. I'm sure we'll find her..."

"I already found her," said Kara. "She's in a boat with some men with guns. She's unconscious but she looks OK. The boat is heading for a bigger boat. I wanted to ask you what to do before I went there."

Jarrood closed his eyes in relief. "Can you rescue Emily first and bring her here? Then you can go back, disarm the men, and bring them to the police station. I'll tell them to expect you, OK?"

Kara nodded, turned to go, then stopped. "Jarrod? I, uh..." and she looked every bit her eleven years of age, "I kinda messed up. I was in math class when I figured it out, and I... I kinda freaked out, and..." She blushed and looked down, intently examining her red shoes.

Jarrood sighed. "I understand. I'll let everyone know." He smiled. "It'll be all right. Go save her, OK?"

Kara nodded and was gone.

The stolen boat lay abandoned behind them as they put out to sea. The snatch had gone off perfectly and the "asset" was locked in a stateroom below decks. The woman would soon be in the hands of their boss at a hideaway no one could find. Then they'd see what Supergirl could be made to do, instructed by encrypted, untraceable email.

The men were just settling down to a long-delayed meal when there was a loud *crunch*.

"Check the prisoner!" shouted the Captain, and they rushed below decks. They found the door to the stateroom unlocked and the guard already standing inside, gaping at the new hole in the ceiling.

That barely had time to register when they heard a commotion above decks. They all rushed topside, only to find their weapons gone.

"Let's get out of here!" shouted the Captain. "Full speed!" The helmsman complied, throttling up the engines.

Nothing happened, except for the whine of propellers biting into empty air. At this point they noticed that the ocean was not where it was supposed to be. A seagull squawked angrily at them as it floated by, apparently flying backwards. They then realized it was they who were moving.

Two hundred feet in the air.

A large group of Secret Service agents, Sussex and Kent County deputy sheriffs, and Milford police stood ready with weapons drawn, waiting by the police station for the kidnappers. What they weren't expecting was the delivery method.

Without exception, their jaws dropped as a one hundred foot power cruiser came sailing over the roofs of Milford, Supergirl holding it over her head. She drifted slowly downward.

"Where should I put it?" she called.

Alan Roth, the agent in charge, shook himself and looked around. The river that ran through town passed right behind the station. There was a dock, but the boat was too big and the river too shallow — he didn't want to block river traffic. There was an unpaved area behind the station; he pointed.

"OK," said Supergirl, and floated the boat over, gently setting it down. The cruiser tilted over onto its side as she did so, and the top deck came into view. A very confused looking group of men slid towards the gunwale as their footing was upended. Alan heard a *whoosh* as Supergirl shot off somewhere.

"United States Secret Service!" shouted Alan. "Put your hands in the air!"

The criminals complied meekly, just as a ball of crushed guns landed next to the boat with a loud *thud*. Alan looked up, but Supergirl was already gone again.

Chapter 26: The Eye

Emily slowly became aware of her surroundings and heard, “She’s coming around.” She opened her eyes and saw she was in a hospital bed. Maria Santarosa was taking her pulse.

She looked around woozily; her head was swimming. Jarrod Gardiner was there, as were Caitlin, Kara, and Fred Douglas. “What... what happened?”

“You were kidnapped,” said Douglas, sounding annoyed. “Apparently some Miami crime boss with more greed than sense thought he could control Supergirl by holding you hostage. They injected you with a sedative, probably a narcotic, and were taking you out to sea when Supergirl apprehended them.”

Emily experienced a mixture of feelings on hearing this, but one surged to the forefront of her attention. “Basin!” she croaked, and Maria hurried to comply, handing her one just in time.

Emily heaved noisily for a minute until her stomach was empty, while everyone politely looked elsewhere.

She took some tissues from the bedside table and wiped her mouth. “Uhh. Definitely a narcotic. *Urp*,” she belched, and blushed deeply. “Excuse me.” Maria left her a new basin and took the used one into the bathroom to empty.

“There’s more,” said Douglas. “In her hurry to save you, Kara used her abilities in public at school. I’m afraid the secret is out.”

Emily sighed. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

Kara came over to hug her. “It’s OK. I’m just glad you’re safe.” She was trembling. “I was so scared!”

Caitlin joined the hug and added, “I didn’t hear about it till the Secret Service pulled me out of class. It was all over by then but I was still freaking out.”

Douglas seemed to soften. “I’m very sorry this happened to you. We were concerned, but we didn’t think someone would be this brazen. Well, brazenly stupid.” He sighed. “I’ll let you rest. I hope now you’ll understand why we feel you need round-the-clock protection.”

“You—” Emily grabbed for the basin and heaved again. “*Ugh*. You won’t get any argument from me.” She fell back heavily in her bed.

Click.

“In our top story: Supergirl’s secret identity is a secret no more. Speculation of the last few days was confirmed when eleven year old Kara Kent of Milford, Delaware was exposed as the Girl of Steel. Found abandoned under mysterious circumstances on October 19, she lives with her foster mother, Dr. Emily Jordan, and foster sister, Caitlin Jordan, in a modest cottage in the small city in central Delaware.

“A bold kidnap attempt against Dr. Jordan this morning forced Supergirl into action in front of her sixth grade classmates, revealing her secret to everyone but allowing her to save her foster mother. Later tonight we’ll go inside the lives of the family of the world’s first real superhero, but first—”

Click.

“—single mother worked her way through medical school while caring for—”

Click.

“—come from? How did she get here? Why is she—”

Click.

“—who is caring for the Girl of Steel? She’s a hardworking single mom from—”

Click.

“—liked by her classmates, who describe her as shy but friendly and cheerful. In a moment we’ll return with more on—”

Click.

“—dramatic rescue of her foster mother from an attempted kidnapping. Here is amateur video of the kidnappers’ ship flying

through the air over—”

Click.

Emily was kept overnight for observation, over her protests. She was uncomfortable leaving the girls alone in the house after the day’s events, even with Secret Service protection. The girls felt the same way: they were clingy. Two cots were placed in the hospital room for them.

They watched TV for a few hours for want of anything better to do. It didn’t matter which channel they turned to because they were the news on nearly every one.

They watched half mesmerized, half appalled as their names, faces, and story were repeated over and over and over. Twin photos of Kara and Supergirl appeared endlessly; her name was parsed and speculated on. Emily and Caitlin’s painful family history was dragged out and examined. Every aspect of their lives was dissected. Long-forgotten photographs from years past resurfaced. Candid photos of the three of them were shown, photos that Emily had had no idea were being taken. If they weren’t a gross invasion of privacy she thought she might have liked copies of some of them.

Despite all the attention and all the detail, Emily felt that the media were painting the picture that people wanted to see, rather than the unexciting reality.

She was particularly uncomfortable with the degree of credit being given to her for guiding Supergirl. In her mind it bordered on hagiography. Kara had only been with her for a few weeks! Emily felt that everything Supergirl was came from Kara herself and from her family, the Kents. All Emily had done was try to keep Kara safe and give her a home and family until she could return to her own.

Even though they were being portrayed in a positive light, she felt that their lives were being pinned by a merciless gaze that could turn malevolent at any moment. It reminded her of the Eye of Sauron from *Lord of the Rings*.

She realized that never again would she or Caitlin be an anonymous individual: she would always be Supergirl’s foster mother, and Caitlin Supergirl’s foster sister. They were now celebrities.

The two Secret Service agents stationed outside the door were heralds of the new state of affairs. Even though they’d be going home in the morning, Emily knew that home, and life, would be different.

All along she’d worried about the impact that exposure would have on Kara, how it might warp the girl’s life. For some reason it hadn’t occurred to her that it would upend hers and Caitlin’s in the same way.

Things were rather cramped in their living room between the three of them, Mr. Douglas, Jarrod, and two other agents. More agents were outside. A respectable distance from the cottage the press lay in wait, kept away by city police. The neighbors were not happy.

“Your landlady would like you to move. We also feel that security, and handling the press, will be easier in a different location.”

Emily nodded, dazed. She’d been numb ever since she’d been wheeled out of her own hospital to a waiting bulletproof black SUV, both girls at her side, with cameras clicking and flashing and reporters shouting questions the entire time.

When she’d inquired on the trip home about her job and school for the girls, Mr. Douglas had said that they needed time to “make arrangements.” Today would be spent with them at home while everything was worked out.

There hadn’t been much to do, at least for Emily. In mid-morning an agent had arrived with schoolwork for the girls so they wouldn’t be too far behind when they went back. Neither had been happy about that, but Emily had envied them having

something to occupy themselves. She'd caught up on some reading, but felt like she should be doing something useful. By lunchtime the cottage had felt like a cage.

Mr. Douglas had finally arrived after lunch to brief them. "Fortunately, we were able to persuade her to give you thirty days. We'll be looking for a place that's easy to secure and which affords some privacy for you, while still being within the school district for Milford. In the meantime we've installed the necessary security here."

Emily wasn't attached to the cottage and had always planned to move to a nicer place when she had the means. This wasn't the way she'd planned to do it. "Am I going to be able to afford this?"

"The government will be covering the cost of housing your family for as long as Miss Kent is a member of it."

Emily was caught by surprise. "Oh! Uh, th... thank you, that's *very* kind. I... wow." She tried to regain her wits. "How far away are you looking? Will we be able to walk to school?"

Mr. Douglas sighed. "If you walk you're putting yourself at risk and exposing yourself to the press. There's no problem with recreational walking; even the President likes to get out and stretch his legs sometimes. But for your regular, predictable movements, like going to work or school, you should travel by armored car."

"But—"

"Dr. Jordan, the government is treating Miss Kent the same way we would the child of a visiting head of state. You are part of her family. We were willing to give you more leeway when she was incognito, but now that everything is out in the open please allow us to do our jobs in providing security for you three."

Emily just nodded, subdued. She was still ashamed of her part in enabling the debacle of the previous day.

"We've discussed security with the school. They are willing to accommodate you for now. Your sister and Miss Kent will be able to attend as usual. There will be an agent with each of them at all times. These agents are young women and are trained in providing security for children in a school environment, so they shouldn't be disruptive."

"You have agents like that?" asked Kara.

Douglas showed a rare smile. "Of course. The President has two girls about your ages. Many foreign visitors have children too, except none of them are bulletproof like you."

Kara smiled back. "Do I really need someone to protect me?"

"The agent will be there to protect the people around you, too."

"You said they were willing to accommodate us 'for now,'" observed Emily.

"Naturally, the Principal is concerned about the reaction of the other parents. She's willing to give it a try, but if things get too out of hand she wants to meet to discuss other arrangements."

"And the hospital?"

"They too are willing to give things a chance. You won't be working in the E.R. any more as screening all the people you'd meet there is impractical. If you only see patients who've already been admitted we feel we can manage security."

Emily nodded in subdued acquiescence.

"The Administration would like to give you time to settle into this new situation. After that there is the issue of the press. They would very much like to interview the three of you. That is something we can advise you on when you're ready to consider it.

"One thing you should know is that the President is considering how to release the information Miss Kent gave about her life prior to coming here. Right now the public and press only know about what happened once she was found here. We're asking all the people who know the full story to keep quiet about it until the President decides how to proceed."

"What's the issue?"

"That's a matter of national security I'm not at liberty to discuss."

Emily, Caitlin, and Kara looked at each other.

"What about our friends? Can we see them?" asked Caitlin.

"You're welcome to speak with them on the phone, as long as you don't divulge anything we've asked you not to. We'd recommend holding off visiting them for now."

"We can't see our friends?" asked Kara, disappointed.

"I wouldn't say 'can't.' It would just be better to wait until things calm down some. The press usually leaves minors and the friends of celebrities alone, unless they're newsworthy themselves. But right now, everything *you* do is of intense interest, so if you visit anyone openly there will be swarms of reporters watching. You could meet your friends out of the public eye, though."

"So can we see our friends, like, in school?" asked Kara.

"Yes, we think so. The press isn't allowed inside, and your principal has... let's say, *requested* all the students to respect each other's privacy more when posting online." He sighed. "Given what happened yesterday, they might even listen."

Emily hoped he was right, because otherwise she'd have to look at moving the girls to a different school. She knew they wouldn't be happy about that.

"And we go back to school tomorrow?" asked Caitlin.

"No, next week. Today was the last day before Thanksgiving break."

Emily put her face in her hands. "With all the craziness I completely forgot about that. I haven't done any shopping, or preparation!" She looked around. "I'm not sure I want to spend the whole long weekend cooped up here, either, but what choice do we have? Usually we go out and visit friends but that's not possible this year." She sighed. "I guess we're stuck."

Mr. Douglas nodded. "That's the last thing I wanted to discuss with you. If you're interested, there's an alternative."

"Oh?"

"The President has told me you're welcome to spend the holiday weekend at Camp David. You can even go this afternoon, if you like."

Emily blinked. "Excuse me? Camp David?"

"You know, the Presidential retreat?"

"Really?" asked Kara, excited.

Emily shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Douglas, I know what Camp David is... I was just surprised. You're serious?"

"Perfectly serious. He knows you're under enormous pressure, and that all this," he motioned at the Secret Service agents in the room, "is new to you. He thought you could use a chance to get away. That's what it's there for."

"Isn't it... well... for the President?"

"It's for the President's use, yes, but that includes hosting guests, even when the President isn't there."

"Will he be there?" asked Caitlin.

"The First Family will be spending Thanksgiving at the White House this year; there's a large dinner planned with about fifty people attending. He thought you would prefer some peace and quiet."

"That's... very kind of him," said Emily. Something about the offer made her uneasy, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Still, it was not the kind of invitation one turned down lightly.

"Believe me," said Douglas, "the President understands what it's like to be at the center of public attention."

"Wow... you're really going to spend Thanksgiving at Camp David?"

Kara nodded, though Bailey couldn't see her. "Uh-huh. I'm supposed to be packing a suitcase right now." She paused. "It sounds exciting and all but I wish I could spend Thanksgiving

with you guys. Or at home.”

“It’s only for a little while; it’s OK. We all understand. After seeing what happened to you I’ve decided I never want to be famous.”

Kara laughed without humor. “Yeah.” She looked up. “Uh oh... I have to go. Emily is giving me her ‘you should be doing something else’ look.”

Emily spread her arms, pantomiming *Yes, so...?*

“I’ll call you back later, OK, Bailey?”

“Sure thing. Hey, you have to tell us all about Camp David, OK? Bye!”

“OK. Bye!” She closed her phone.

She looked up at Emily again. “Thank you for letting me use my phone like this. I know it was supposed to be only for emergencies.”

Emily smiled. “Since you can’t see them in person just yet it’s the least I can do. Now come on, let’s get you packed. The car is ready to leave.”

While Kara could pack at super-speed she needed Emily to help her select what to take, and her foster mother moved at human speeds. It took a few minutes to pick out enough clothing, books, and other items to last through the long weekend.

As Kara was closing the suitcase Emily said, “You know... you don’t have to wear the glasses anymore if you don’t want to.”

“I know,” said Kara. “But I’ve gotten used to them. I kind of like them now; they help me keep Supergirl and me separate. And I’ll be wearing them when I go home.” She wilted. “If I go home.”

Emily put an arm around her and squeezed. “I’m sure they’ll find you. Remember, you’ve got Superman looking for you.”

Kara nodded. “Yeah. And Mom, too.”

“So just give them some time, OK? Are you ready to go?”

“Uh-huh.” She paused. “Emily?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

Kara hugged her. “Thank you. For being my mom away from Mom.” She smiled.

Emily laughed, for the first time in days. “You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

The rear door of the armored SUV made a solid *thunk* as Jarrod closed it. He climbed into the front passenger seat; the other agents were in a second vehicle.

Kara was looking around the interior of the armored limo, curious, but Caitlin was staring off into space and biting her lip. Emily put an arm around her, and she looked up with a brief, fragile smile.

“We’ll be OK, honey,” said Emily gently, then kissed the top of her sister’s head. She paused, then repeated, “Everything’ll be OK.” Caitlin nodded uncertainly, then turned to look out.

Their convoy pulled out of the driveway and passed through the police barrier that kept everyone but the local residents away from their street. Emily hadn’t realized how much of an inconvenience they were to their neighbors.

Two policemen on motorcycles led them through the streets of Milford. The three of them stared out the windows, watching the citizens stare back. Emily wondered how anyone with similar security could possibly stay in touch with the reality of normal people.

Chapter 27: They Are Different from You and Me

“Hi!” chirped the tall, curly-haired woman who met them after the short trip from the heliport. “I’m Emma McLeod; I’ll be your social director while you’re here.”

Emily hadn’t thought she would ever require the services of a social director.

“What’s that?” asked Kara.

Ms. McLeod smiled. “I make sure everyone gets where

they’re supposed to go and has a pleasant stay. Normally when people stay here there’s an agenda. Meetings, recreational activities, meals, and so on. I coordinate all that. Since you’re not here for a working retreat, things will be a little more relaxed. So I’ll just be helping you if you want to find things, watch a movie, and so on.

“Why don’t I start by showing you to your cabin? It’s right this way.” They obediently followed her up a path to a small, ski lodge-like building, Jarrod and the other agents trailing behind them. “You’ll be staying in the Birch Lodge. The Prime Minister of Israel stayed here during the peace talks way back in 1978.”

“Oh,” said Emily.

“Here we are!” announced Ms. McLeod. She opened the doors.

“Well,” said Caitlin. “I can see we’re going to be roughing it.”

“When you said cabin I thought it would be like Girl Scout camp,” said Kara. “This is really nice.”

Ms. McLeod led them inside to the main living area. “There are bedrooms for each of you; you’ll find your luggage waiting. There are also rooms for your security detail. There’s a dining area; we’ll be serving you dinner there tonight.”

“Oh,” said Emily.

“We’ll let you get settled now. There’s a guide to the facilities in each room. If you need anything, just dial 22 on any of the phones and ask for me, OK? I’ll be here again at dinnertime.”

They all nodded, and Ms. McLeod withdrew.

“Feel free to look around, ladies,” said Jarrod, “but let me or one of the other agents know if you’re planning to leave the cabin. Even here at Camp David we’d like you to be accompanied at all times. One of us will always be out here near the door.”

“Come on, girls, let’s have a look,” said Emily. They walked down the hallway.

There were three bedrooms in a row with their names listed next to the doors: “Dr. Jordan,” “Miss Jordan,” and “Miss Kent.” The girls followed Emily into hers.

It seemed like the kind of room you’d find at a high-end ski lodge: big TV, nice furniture, large bathroom. The only oddity was the telephones. They were more elaborate than the usual hotel unit, more like what you’d see on an executive’s desk, and there were more of them than the usual complement for a hotel room.

Emily plopped herself down on the bed and sighed; the girls sat down on either side of her. *What in the world are we doing here?* she wondered. She felt displaced, like a refugee. This place felt nothing like home.

Then again home felt nothing like home, either. Maybe they were refugees after all. She wondered if any place would ever feel like home again.

The girls were looking at her uncertainly, so she forced a smile onto her face and wrapped an arm around each of them. “Come on, we’re on vacation! Let’s see what kind of things they have to do here.”

They wandered aimlessly around the grounds for a while. Since they weren’t there as part of a larger group for a meeting, they didn’t encounter anyone except the staff.

It was very pretty here, thought Emily, but she realized they were just as isolated as they’d been at home. It was a much bigger, nicer cage, but it was still a cage.

At least the press wasn’t here. It was calm, peaceful. It was quiet. That part was good. Very good.

“Emily?”

“Yes, Kara?”

“Would it be OK if I went flying for a little bit?”

Emily looked to Jarrod, who looked surprised by the

question. After a moment's thought, he asked, "You'll be coming back here, right?"

"Uh-huh."

He frowned. "I don't see why not. Just stay away from people and make sure to come back."

"Dinner is in forty-five minutes, OK?" said Emily. "Please be back at the cabin in half an hour."

"I will," promised Kara. She lifted into the air.

"Don't you want to wear your uniform, honey?"

"Not this time," said Kara, and shot skyward; they watched her rise rapidly out of sight. Emily and Caitlin wished they could tag along.

Kara wasn't sure what had possessed her to come to the Canadian Arctic. It was pitch dark even though it was only around five-thirty. She could see by starlight easily enough but it was dismal. There were no trees, just occasional scrub. She'd had to search a bit just to find the rock she was sitting on.

It was extremely cold. Not that it bothered her, but she could tell. The wind was strong and kept blowing snow onto her; she brushed it off periodically.

She'd hoped to see a polar bear but they must have all gone to sleep already, or something. There didn't seem to be any animals around at all. She'd noticed a native village many miles south, but this area was desolate.

She stood up and brushed the snow off again. This seemed like an incredibly dumb place to build a crystal fortress, unless you *liked* being alone. It was interesting to visit once, but why would you live here?

She darted upwards, back into the clear, starlit night. The ground fell away and the features of the Earth became tiny. She felt a little freer up here.

She reclined onto her back, her hands behind her head. She'd always loved stargazing, and now she could see ten thousand times as many as she'd ever seen before. Here, far from the lights of civilization, the night sky was a breathtaking jeweled tapestry. Galaxies and nebulae were everywhere. She could see Jupiter, Uranus, Neptune, and their moons.

Planet-watching set her mind wandering. *Was I really born on Krypton?* she wondered. *Mom and Dad will know.* She searched the stars, then realized that even if she had been, Krypton had never been a real place here — wherever here was. No matter how many stars she searched, she would never find where it had been in *this* sky.

Suddenly she was hit by a violent bout of homesickness, and turned her back on the stars. She missed them terribly: her family, her home, the city she'd taken for granted until it had vanished. It hadn't exploded like Krypton, but it had disappeared just the same. Had she been orphaned twice?

She kept acting like it was only a matter of time until she saw her parents again, until she could go home. She had to believe it to keep from driving herself crazy. But the truth was she might be stuck here forever, and every day that went by without a sign of her parents made that more likely. She wept, her tears freezing as they fell towards the ground far below.

She wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. She didn't want to be late for dinner; she'd promised.

She streaked south at Mach 35, generating a sunlike fireball that briefly turned the Arctic night to day until she rose out of the lower atmosphere. Far below her a lone arctic fox looked up, confused.

Dinner was surreal.

It was very good, there was no doubt of that, and the staff was very efficient. It was kind of like flying first class, but on the ground.

That was the problem. Emily was not used to flying first class

and wasn't sure she *wanted* to get used to it. This was a vacation. On a vacation you were supposed eat at a local pizza place or neighborhood restaurant with plastic tablecloths and paper napkins, not have a sumptuous meal prepared by a master chef. At least, on *her* idea of a vacation.

It wasn't even like going to a very expensive restaurant. It was like the very expensive restaurant coming to you.

At least the girls were enjoying it. It was educational for them to see how the rich and powerful lived. Though the lodge did have a small kitchen it wasn't geared to full-scale meal preparation, so feeding themselves wasn't an option. She wondered why it was there, then supposed that even the Prime Minister of Israel might want, once in a while, to make himself a sandwich instead of having someone do it for him.

Emily finally smiled when the girls got hot fudge sundaes for dessert. They seemed to be enjoying them in the way that only kids could, without worrying about calories. Kara had chocolate all around her mouth. Caitlin was methodically going after every last bit of fudge, the way she had when she was younger. Emily realized it had been way too long since she'd taken her little sister out for a hot fudge sundae, and felt guilty.

Why not? she thought. *Let them enjoy it. We don't have to live this way at home, wherever that winds up being.* She wondered what the rich and powerful did for entertainment.

Then a thought struck her.

"Ahhh!" cried Caitlin in frustration.

"Pay up," said Kara smugly.

Caitlin squinted at her. "Are you sure you're not using your powers?"

Kara folded her arms. "Caitlin, there isn't a superpower for winning at Monopoly. Or if there is, I don't have it." She smiled sweetly. "I got my hotels the normal way."

"It doesn't seem fair that you can fly *and* that you bankrupted the rest of us."

Emily reminded her, "Caitlin, you creamed both of us at Uno."

Kara tilted her head, smirking. "Are you going to pay me or not?"

"All right, all right," grumped Caitlin. She counted out the rent. "That's it for me. I'm broke."

"I'm not," gloated Kara, holding up wads of play cash.

Caitlin reached over to tickle her and she shrieked, dropping the bills and giggling.

"Ah ha!" cried Caitlin. "Who needs Kryptonite when Supergirl is *ticklish*! I've discovered her secret weakness! The world is mine!" Kara continued to laugh helplessly, squirming all the while.

Emily let Caitlin have her fun for a few seconds, then said, "OK, OK, Supergirl has met her match. Caitlin..." Caitlin finally let her foster sister be, the giggles trailing away. "Do you girls want to play another game of Monopoly?"

"No way," said Caitlin. "I'm convinced she has a superpower for it." Kara stuck her tongue out, then retreated when Caitlin held out her hands and made tickling motions.

"Well, let's see," said Emily, looking over at the stack of board games on the table. "What else do they have?"

"Candyland," observed Kara.

"Candyland is for little kids," said Caitlin.

"I know, but I like it anyway."

Caitlin stretched. "Do you guys want to watch a movie instead?"

Kara considered that, then smiled. "OK."

Apparently Camp David hadn't made the transition to video-on-demand yet. They had a huge library of DVDs, though: essentially their own video store. There was a listing of the available movies in the cabin.

When they called Emma McLeod, she told them that they could also get any first-run movie and watch it in the theatre located on the grounds. Emily decided she wanted to continue with the low-rent theme, so instead they watched an old Marx Brothers comedy on the large TV in her room. They laughed themselves silly.

When they finally went to bed everyone was in a much better mood.

Jarrold sighed. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Caitlin and Kara looked at each other; Caitlin had her arm around Kara's shoulders, and Kara had her arm around Caitlin's back. "Yes," they both said.

Jarrold looked to Emily, who said, "I'm sure Kara won't drop her." Kara nodded emphatically.

Jarrold closed his eyes. "I don't want you going anywhere where there are people. I'd be happier if you stayed over Camp David."

"I guess..." said Caitlin. "We don't have to go anywhere, really. I just want to see what it's like."

"OK," said Jarrold. "Please be careful. If someone gets hurt I'm gonna get my... um, in trouble."

"She won't get hurt, I promise," said Kara. With that she lifted off slowly, making sure that she had firm control of her foster sister.

Caitlin was surprised. She'd expected to feel the pressure from Kara's arm supporting her, but it felt just the same as when she'd been standing on the ground. It was very odd; she still felt gravity, but it wasn't having any effect. She turned to look at Kara. "We can go higher."

"Look down," said Kara.

"Oh my *God!*" shrieked Caitlin. Camp David was a thousand feet below them. "This is *amazing!*" She looked around. "You can see for miles!"

"Just wait," promised Kara. She started to move, swooping low; Caitlin watched in awe as they came close to brushing the treetops, making long, leisurely curves. Kara started a lazy spiral, slowly rising higher and higher. They coasted to a stop close to their previous altitude.

Kara closed her eyes and smiled. "What is it?" asked Caitlin.

"The birds and animals. I can hear them for miles." She sighed, her eyes still closed. "It's so beautiful. I haven't been out in the country since I got my powers."

As high as they were, Caitlin couldn't hear anything but the occasional wind gust. She wondered what it would be like to have Kara's senses, but couldn't imagine it. Oddly enough she wasn't cold, though she had been when standing on the ground a minute ago.

Kara opened her eyes. "What do you want to do next?"

Caitlin thought for a moment. "Do you like roller coasters?" She grinned.

"Well yeah, but..." Kara's brow furrowed, then her eyes widened. "I'm not sure about that."

"Oh come *on*..."

Kara looked down at Emily and the Secret Service detail. She tilted her glasses down and took in their anxious expressions. "Emily looks really worried."

"How can you... oh, right." Caitlin sighed. "You're such a goody two-shoes sometimes."

Kara pondered that. "I guess I am." She smiled. "Like Dad." She shrugged as much as she could.

"With great power comes great responsibility, huh?"

"What?" asked Kara.

"Never mind. That was from *Spiderman*. I guess you don't have superhero movies where you come from?"

"Oh, that. I was a baby when that came out. Mom and Dad saw it, but I haven't, yet." She shrugged again. "Laura is seven.

We don't watch movies like that at home when she's awake; she just graduated to PG." Her mouth twisted in a wry grin. "Now, if you quote from a Disney movie or something..."

Caitlin had a brief surreal moment, realizing she was discussing the movie-watching habits of Lois Lane's and Clark Kent's family with Supergirl while they hovered a thousand feet in the air over Camp David.

Kara broke into her strange reverie. "Do you want to fly some more?"

"How is Em looking?"

Kara lowered her glasses again. "More worried."

"Maybe we should land." She paused. "But can we do this again tomorrow?"

Kara grinned.

Chapter 28: Firestorm

Emily was happy that despite the rarefied surroundings she was able to arrange a reasonable approximation of a normal vacation. Apart from Kara and Caitlin going flying their activities had been mundane: reading books from the library, watching DVDs, walking the trails, swimming in the indoor pool. Kara hadn't had a swimsuit, but as always the staff was ready with whatever they needed. Emily tried not to rely on that too much as she didn't want the girls to get used to being waited on. She didn't think it was healthy.

She did indulge Kara's desire to go horseback riding, and she and Caitlin watched as Kara competently rode one of the horses the First Family kept at Camp David. Kara was all smiles when she finished, especially, she said, since she wasn't stiff or sore.

Caitlin had cajoled Kara into playing catch. Kara still cringed every time the ball flew at her, but was slowly getting used to it.

Caitlin was happy she could throw the ball as hard as she wanted. She teased Kara that she threw like a girl, and Kara asked sweetly if she should throw as hard as she could instead.

Thanksgiving dinner was more of the same: simple fare like what they might have had at home. Emily found herself finally starting to unwind, and the girls followed her lead.

Although she didn't want to spoil the girls, she let them have free rein with dessert. Tonight they were having banana splits. Emily usually avoided desserts, but it being Thanksgiving she was splurging with some pumpkin pie.

They were halfway through dessert when an agent walked into the dining room.

Jarrold, as a senior agent, had the rest of the weekend off and had gone home to have Thanksgiving dinner with his parents and sister in Virginia. He'd be back on Sunday. They didn't know the agents who were guarding them for the rest of the weekend, but as always they were courteous and unobtrusive.

"Dr. Jordan?"

Emily tore her eyes away from Kara's banana split. "Yes?"

"We received word of a six-alarm fire in Kansas City, Missouri. We can get the news on the monitor in here."

As if on command, the large display mounted on the wall came to life and showed a local TV broadcast. A large mall under construction was on fire, and the flames leapt high into the air.

Emily looked over at Kara, then back to the agent. "Are there any people at risk? It looks like they won't be able to save the buildings anyway." She didn't want Kara to have to run off whenever someone wanted her if lives weren't at stake.

"There are some homes in the area, Doctor, and the fire chief is concerned it will spread. The wind is blowing burning embers."

She looked over to Kara, who was alternating her gaze between the display and her banana split.

"What do you think, honey?"

Kara fiddled nervously with her spoon. "Maybe I should go? I wouldn't want people's houses to catch fire."

Emily nodded. “If you want to. Don’t worry about your dessert; we can—”

Kara blurred and the dessert was gone; she stifled a burp. “Excuse me.” She blurred out of the room and was back as Supergirl. She hugged Emily and Caitlin. “I’ll try to be fast so we can still watch a movie tonight.”

“Be careful, honey.”

Kara nodded and blurred out of the room.

Kara stared at the inferno below her, horrified. It looked *much* worse than it had on TV. The flames towered hundreds of feet into the air, like a city made of fire, trailing off into thick black smoke that rose high into the sky. Even up here she could feel the intense heat.

Where was she supposed to start? What was she supposed to *do*? She had amazing powers, but that didn’t mean she always knew how to apply them.

She surveyed the scene. The large assemblage of trucks and firefighters was dwarfed by the size of the conflagration. They were clustered on the side near a housing development, attempting to prevent the blaze from spreading. Media trucks and camera crews congregated farther away, at a relatively safe distance.

She knew her dad used his freezing breath on fires sometimes, but would it work on something this size? She hadn’t even tried it yet.

She floated down to an edge of the fire that wasn’t near anything; the heat was even more intense this close. She took a breath and blew.

Nothing happened.

It hadn’t felt particularly super-y, more like blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. She must have done it wrong. Maybe she needed to take a deeper breath?

She took a really deep breath, and blew again.

This time it felt quite cold coming out, but it had no observable effect on the fire; the flames didn’t even waver.

Kara crossed her arms and huffed in frustration.

Maybe she needed to take a *really* deep breath? But how deep? Just how deep a breath could she take?

She started breathing in, and just didn’t stop. She kept breathing and breathing, long after common sense said she shouldn’t be able to continue. After about ten seconds she was just starting to feel a little full. She decided to try it now.

She blew her breath out as fast as she could. This time it felt extremely cold, colder than she’d felt in the Arctic. She expected to see condensation in the air, but the air was so dry from the fire there wasn’t any moisture in it.

Where her breath struck the flames the fire simply went out, and the glow of the embers faded quickly. However, the wind caused by her breath fanned the surrounding flames even higher. When she stopped a very small section of the fire was out, but flames slowly started to creep back in again.

Kara sighed. Maybe if she breathed until she couldn’t breathe in any more?

This time she breathed in for a good thirty seconds, until finally she felt like she couldn’t take any more air in. Then she let it all go as quickly as she could.

There was white fog in the path of her breath, but it wasn’t water vapor: carbon dioxide, nitrogen, and oxygen were condensing out of the air from the extreme cold. The flames went out instantly where her breath struck, and the high wind blew the fire out in surrounding sections, leaving glowing embers that cooled quickly.

When she was done, a section of the fire was out, but it wasn’t a large section. The fire was so huge, it would take her many hours to finish at this rate. At least she could help on the side facing the endangered houses.

Kara frowned. If she wanted to put the whole thing out, she was going to have to figure out a better way to do this.

Fire Chief Andrew Glass watched as Kara floated slowly across the face of the blaze. It took her half a minute to charge up her breath, then a second to put out a small section of the fire. Together with their pumps, they were starting to get it under control, but they had a long way to go. The flames were still threatening the housing development nearby.

After twenty minutes of this she floated down and landed next to Chief Glass.

“You’re having the same problem we are,” he said. “We’re pumping all we can, but it’s so huge that we’re barely making a dent.”

“Is there any way to pump more water?”

“Not really,” he said. “The water pressure is already dangerously low from what we’re pumping now.” He shook his head. “It’s funny, the Missouri River’s a mile away, but we can’t get enough water.”

Kara tilted her head. “Is there any way I could get the water here?”

The Chief paused, nonplussed. “Well... I don’t know. You’d need a big bucket.” His eyes strayed towards the bulldozers and front-end loaders that had been in use for construction. “Why don’t we try it?” He shouted to one of his lieutenants. “Harrison! Ask the owners if they mind our ‘repurposing’ one of their front-end loaders.” The man raised a phone to his ear and spoke for a while.

“They say go ahead!” Harrison shouted back.

“Do you need a hand?” asked Chief Glass.

“Um, let me look.” Kara lifted up and flew over to the machine with the largest bucket, then peered at where it was attached. There were a whole bunch of pistons and axles and things, and she didn’t know where to start. She looked back to the fire chief and shrugged.

He pantomimed taking something in his hands and ripping it apart.

Kara felt guilty about breaking an expensive machine, but reached out with her hands and separated the bucket from the support on one side. To her it felt as easy as tearing construction paper, but there was a scream of rending metal and it broke free. She went to the other side and did the same thing, then lifted the now-free bucket and flew upwards. News cameras followed her as she went.

She spotted the river and zipped over, slowed somewhat by the unwieldy bucket. It was the work of a few seconds to fill it. She flew back to the fire and dumped out the contents on a section of the flames.

There was an enormous cloud of steam; when it cleared, part of the fire was out. It was slightly larger than the area she’d been able to blow out directly with her breath. She sighed.

She landed and lay the bucket down, then zipped back to the Chief. “It’s a little better than blowing, but not much.”

Glass scratched his head. “I can’t think of anything bigger you can use. Too bad you can’t move it without a bucket.” He frowned. “Or maybe...”

“What?”

“Do you know how clouds are formed?”

Kara thought for a moment. “Like, the water cycle? Sure! There was a *Magic School Bus* book about it.”

Chief Glass paused again, an odd look on his face. “Um, yes, right. Warm water evaporates, rises, then condenses and falls as rain.”

“Huh,” said Kara, her arms folded. She shrugged. “I guess I can try it.”

She darted up and over to the river again. She looked down into the water and noticed that there were a few fish and some

other aquatic life. She winced; they probably were not going to survive this. If they did they sure weren't going to like it.

She zipped back and forth along the river, turning her heat vision on it. The water started to steam along a large section, and white clouds began to waft upwards, borne by rising hot air. Rapids began to form on either side of the section she was heating as new water poured in to replace what was evaporating.

Even though they were a mile away, people turned and stared in awe as a cloud began to form and billow above the river, illuminated by the lights of Kansas City. It was white at first, then started to turn gray. The men and women pumping water couldn't turn and look, but the others and the news crews watched silently as an eleven year old girl wielded a power once ascribed to the gods.

Kara felt rain droplets start to fall on her and decided she'd better use her cloud before it fell back down to the ground. She zipped up, took a deep breath, and blew.

All that did was turn a section of the cloud cold; that one section moved in the direction of the fire, raining as it went. The water fell uselessly back into the river and the surrounding area.

She frowned. She needed some way to move the entire cloud. If only there were a big fan of some kind, but there was nothing like that in the neighborhood.

Maybe she could be a fan herself?

She started turning cartwheels in place, faster and faster. At first nothing happened, but she tried angling her arms and legs, and eventually saw that she was blowing the cloud in the right direction — again, though, only a portion of it.

She zipped back and forth, up and down at super-speed as she spun; the effect was as if there were a few dozen of her, blowing from several positions. The wind was applied over a wider area and slowly, the entire cloud began to drift towards the fire. She continued to play human fan, surprised that all the spinning and jumping about wasn't giving her motion sickness, but she felt fine.

As the cloud drifted over the fire she stopped spinning then watched, horrified, as the heat of the flames started to dissipate all her hard work.

Then she remembered the other half of the water cycle. She breathed in deeply and darted through her cloud, seeding it with blasts of freezing breath.

The cloud turned from gray to black and started to rain down on the fire: first sprinkles, then a shower, then a downpour, then a cloudburst. Several hundred tons of water fell on the fire in the space of half a minute. When the cloud was gone, she looked down.

The fire was still burning, but much less intensely; great clouds of steam were rising as the water reevaporated. She flitted about, cooling the steam, forcing it to fall as rain again. When she was done the fire was greatly reduced.

She looked down to the Chief; he was motioning her to go back and do it again, so she did. Fifteen minutes later, with some help from the front-end loader bucket to douse the remaining pockets, the fire was out.

Kara went to set the bucket down, then flew back to land by Chief Glass.

"Young lady," he said, "that has to be the most amazing thing I've seen in my entire life. You just saved my crew an enormous amount of very dangerous work and saved a whole bunch of people from losing their homes. Thank you! Maybe we'll get to have Thanksgiving dinner after all." He reached out a hand.

Kara blushed as she shook his hand. "Umm, thank you, but it was your idea. I don't think I would've thought of that myself."

He laughed heartily. "Thinking it up was easy! Doing it was the hard part."

There were shouts from the press, who had been allowed

forward now that the fire was out. "Supergirl! Supergirl!" Kara turned to look; they were waving her over.

She bit her lip, indecisive. Emily had said not to have her picture taken, but that was back before she'd been exposed. She pulled her cape around and x-rayed her phone in the pocket there: it was around 8 PM, and they still had time for a movie when she got back.

She looked up at Chief Glass; he was waiting patiently with an inquiring look. "I need to get back to my family, but... I guess I have a little while?"

"If you don't mind then it's OK." He waved her on ahead of him. "Ladies first."

She and the Chief walked over to the press barricade. The reporters exploded with questions, all talking at once; Kara flinched slightly.

A press liaison from the Kansas City Fire Department had joined them, a young man in a suit. He held up his hands. "Whoa, whoa, folks! Please, let's do this in an orderly fashion. Just a moment." The crowd quieted down.

He turned to Kara. "Is this OK, Supergirl?"

"I can't stay very long, but I guess I can talk a little."

"OK, then... first question... you." He pointed.

"Ted Croft, Action News 41. Supergirl, how did you make it rain on the fire?"

"Oh, that was Mr. Glass's idea; he suggested it. I used my heat vision on the river, to make lots of water vapor. Then I kind of did cartwheels in the air to be a fan, to blow the cloud over. Then I used my breath on the cloud to cool it down and make it rain." She smiled. "I didn't get it all right the first time, though."

The press liaison pointed. "You next."

"Mara Robertson, Fox News 4. Supergirl, where were you when you heard about the fire?"

"We were eating dinner. Um, dessert."

"Thanksgiving dinner?"

"Yes, ma'am."

At the White House, the President, his family, and their guests were watching on TV, interrupting their party. The President's youngest daughter turned to her father and said, "She's *awesome*, Daddy. Can we have her here to visit? I want to meet her." She listened a moment more. "Oh, they're staying at Camp David? Can we go there?"

The President had his professional smile fixed on his face, watching Supergirl hold a totally unsupervised, unscripted, impromptu press conference. Sadly, no one had thought to tell her not to do so; he was sure that if they had, she would comply. It was just hard to remember that though she could lift jumbo jets, fly into space, and change the weather, she was only eleven and did not know as a matter of course to ask for help before talking to the press.

He watched each response carefully to see if she blurted out something she shouldn't. The bit about Camp David came close, though they'd been planning a press release on that *after* the weekend was over. "We'll see, Sophie. It's complicated."

Sophie frowned, her arms folded. "*Everything* is always 'complicated.'"

It sure is, he thought. Too bad banging your head on the table wasn't Presidential.

Chapter 29: The New Normal

"I'm sorry," said Kara contritely. Emily squeezed her shoulder.

"It's OK, really," said Mr. Douglas's image on the TV; he held his hands up in placation. They were talking over the teleconferencing system in Emily's room, and Kara would have thought it was very cool if it hadn't felt like a trip to the Principal's office. "Nothing bad happened, fortunately."

"I wouldn't have said anything bad..."

"I know, but you'd be surprised at how quickly things can get out of hand at a press conference. Let me show you an example. Supergirl, how did you like your first Thanksgiving?"

"It's not my first Thanksgiving. I've had Thanksgiving plenty of times back home in... oh." She flushed. "You asked us not to talk about where I came from, didn't you?"

"That's right. We're not ready to tell everyone about that yet." He spread his hands. "Do you understand? You'd have been stuck just like that in mid-answer, and then they'd wonder why."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"It's OK. Just, next time, wave, smile, and fly home. We'll arrange opportunities for the press to talk to you under more controlled conditions, so they'll get their chance."

Kara nodded and looked down.

"Please don't take it too hard. It's our fault for not letting you know. The reason I called you this way is so you would know I'm not mad at you; neither is the President. Try to relax and enjoy the rest of the weekend, all right?" Kara nodded. "OK, now I have to get back to my own family. Dr. Jordan, Miss Kent, goodbye."

"Goodbye, Mr. Douglas." The screen went black.

"I hate it when I mess up," said Kara. She looked up at Emily. "Mom always says that the people have a right to know. Superman talks to reporters when he does rescues, too."

Emily hugged her. "Honey, your dad is an adult. Plus, he's a reporter himself so he knows how to talk to the press without saying things he shouldn't. After all, he hasn't told them about who he really is, has he?"

Kara frowned. "I guess not. Maybe people don't have a right to know *everything*." Something about this still bothered her.

"I'm sure that's what your mother meant; you can ask her when you go home. Now come on, it's late."

"I'm sorry about that too. I didn't realize my phone was on Central time when I looked at it."

"I know, honey. We'll have plenty of time for a movie tomorrow."

"Mr. President, Mr. Lamb is here and would like fifteen minutes of your time."

"Did he say what it was about?"

"No sir, but he did say it was some information you wanted ASAP."

The President sighed and turned back to his family, who were sitting patiently, the movie they had been watching paused. "I'm sorry, guys; I need to take this."

His wife shrugged. "It's OK, Roger. It comes with the job."

"Try to hurry up, Dad. It was just getting to a good part!"

"I'll do my best, Becca." He rose and followed the aide out. Pete Lamb was waiting in one of the guest bedrooms in the residence.

"Pete, don't you ever take time off? It's Saturday night on a long weekend. I'm sure Dennis would like to see a little more of you."

He held his hands up. "Sir, I'm all for that. But you said you wanted to hear this as soon as we got it from the analysts." He pulled a red manila envelope from his briefcase. "It's the scenario analysis on public knowledge of alternate realities."

The President half smiled. "Well, I guess this one's my fault then. You said fifteen minutes, so I take it you have a summary? That envelope's pretty thick."

"Yes, Mr. President. First, on public reaction: the main issue is the one we discussed. If fictional characters can enter our world from other realities, then besides benevolent ones like Supergirl or Superman, malevolent ones might come here too. Characters like Darkseid or General Zod from the Superman family of universes if that's all that's out there, or worse characters from other stories if they exist too. There are some

horrible things in fiction we wouldn't want a visit from.

"The psychologists and sociologists think it's likely this topic will come up once Miss Kent's origins are revealed, but as long as no one in a position of authority says it's dangerous they think the public will be unconcerned. Since this is the first documented case of someone fictional traveling here from another reality, they don't foresee any kind of panic."

"Just because it's the first documented case doesn't mean it hasn't happened before. If Sir Lancelot showed up in the Middle Ages, I doubt we'd have heard about it."

"True enough, sir, but the experts feel most people won't take this seriously. They're not concerned, with one caveat."

"What's that?"

"They feel that if the public learns Amelia Earhart is a fictional character in Miss Kent's reality, they're likely to worry more about the possibilities we've been discussing. It's also frightening in its own right: it shows our world is just as fictional as hers. The experts feel people won't take that well."

"You don't have to be a psychologist to see that. I try not to think about it myself."

"They've interviewed Miss Kent's English classmates, and none of them recalled what she said about it. They feel the information is securely contained."

"I hope they're right."

"Which leads to the final point: the analysts believe the alternate reality scenario for Supergirl will be everywhere soon. Enough people are aware of the link between Milford and Metropolis that they expect the discussion to cross over into public awareness within a week or so. There's already been speculation about it on several blogs. So it's going to come out whether we go public with Miss Kent's story or not."

The President frowned. "In that case, given that they don't think there'll be a panic, we should get out ahead of this. Let's schedule a press conference here this week." He rubbed his brow. "Better make it late afternoon so we don't have to pull her out of school. Actually, make it after Dr. Jordan gets off work and give them time to get here by chopper. I'd like Kara's family here to back her up. I'm starting to get concerned about the amount of pressure she's under. How are they doing?"

"Reports are they're back to relaxing. Luckily she hasn't been needed again this weekend."

"Good. She's still just a kid, and the last thing we need is a frightened or upset child with superpowers."

"No argument here, Mr. President."

The three of them flew back to Dover by helicopter Sunday afternoon, wanting time to relax at home before returning to work and school on Monday. They found Fred Douglas waiting for them.

"Good afternoon Dr. Jordan, Miss Jordan, Miss Kent. I hope you had a pleasant vacation?"

Emily nodded. "Yes, Mr. Douglas, we did; thank you. I think Camp David was a little fancy for us but we managed to relax. I hope you had a good Thanksgiving?"

Douglas shrugged. "No rest for the wicked, I'm afraid. I did manage to spend Thanksgiving Day with my family. We've been busy working on the housing issue, which is why I've come to meet you."

"Oh?"

"We've located a potential property. It's a defunct bed and breakfast on the edge of town, a converted farmhouse. The building has lots of rooms and the property is large and isolated from the neighbors. We've been waiting for you to return and have a look at it before making a final decision." He paused. "If you like we can swing by on the way back."

Emily felt uneasy at the pace of things but didn't want to drag her feet for no reason. "Thank you, Mr. Douglas, that sounds

fine.”

On the way back to Milford they stayed on the highway a bit longer, then veered off onto a road on the west side of town. After a minute more of driving they pulled up in front of a large farmhouse with a ‘For Sale’ sign.

Emily followed Mr. Douglas up the front steps, with Caitlin and Kara on either side of her and Jarrod following. Douglas had a key.

They spent about twenty minutes looking through the place. The house had character, though the conversion to a B&B lent it an institutional feeling in places. The kitchen was missing the stove and refrigerator.

Emily felt it was rather too grand for herself and two girls. Also, she knew she could never afford a place like this and would have to move again when Kara went home. She knew room was needed for the security staff, and that they’d probably need other staff for maintaining the place, but still she felt uneasy.

“I’d like to think about this a bit, Mr. Douglas. Is that OK?”

“Perfectly all right. To be honest the property has been on the market for a year, so we don’t have to jump. We did promise your landlady you’d be out before Christmas, though.”

Emily nodded and they left, the three of them feeling somewhat somber. A few minutes later they were nearing home.

The satellite trucks and camera crews were still there and they had to make their way through the police barrier to get to their street. Emily saw some of her neighbors waiting at the same checkpoint to get to their own homes. They had to be cleared through whenever they returned.

Guilt flooded through her: here she was worrying over moving out of a tiny cottage neither she nor Caitlin were particularly attached to, while she put her neighbors through hell. She whispered in Caitlin’s ear, and Caitlin nodded.

Emily turned to their liaison. “Mr. Douglas, that property will be fine. We can move whenever you like.”

On the way to her locker Kara felt like Moses parting the Red Sea. The students moved aside silently to let her pass. Their eyes never left her; their faces were filled with awe. Kara was reminded again of Kevin’s movie: the other kids were looking at her the same way the people in the film looked at Superman.

She was coming from the Principal’s office, where they’d checked in early. Ms. Frye had tried to back out on her agreement with Mr. Douglas; over the long weekend she’d received complaints from some of the parents about having armed bodyguards in the school. She’d been mollified somewhat when she’d met the agents in question, Robin Gilbert and Christie Howell.

Robin and Christie specialized in guarding children. Both were twenty-five, but they were petite and could pass as thirteen-year-olds. You would never guess they were both adults who carried a firearm and were third-degree black belts in Tae Kwon Do.

In the school uniform they blended in just fine, notwithstanding the earpiece each wore. They joked about their apparent age, telling stories about being handed the kid’s menu at restaurants and getting carded constantly. Kara liked them immediately.

Robin was guarding Caitlin. Christie, being the shorter of the pair, was assigned to Kara and followed a few steps behind her as she made her way to her locker. Kara stowed her backpack and withdrew the books she’d need until the next locker break. Christie waited patiently.

The trip to homeroom was more of the same. Kara hoped that in time the others would treat her as just another kid again. She didn’t know if that hope was realistic.

“Hello, Kara,” said Mr. Kroum compassionately. “It’s good to see you back.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kroum.”

Every person in the room was staring at her as if waiting for her to do something. It was incredibly embarrassing and her ears were red. She was sorely tempted to fly around the room shouting “Ooga booga!” just to see how they’d react.

Mr. Kroum smiled and nodded, then turned to Christie. “And you are...?”

“Christie Howell, United States Secret Service. I’ll just sit in the back, sir, if that’s all right? I’ll try to make myself invisible.”

Mr. Kroum appeared slightly flustered, but nodded again. Christie nodded in return, then went to the back of the room. The students’ eyes were diverted from Kara for a few seconds, long enough for her to find her seat.

“Hey,” whispered Bailey as Kara slid into the seat next to her, “are you OK?”

“Yeah,” Kara whispered back. “I guess. This is really weird.”

The students were staring again, and continued to do so until Mr. Kroum started class.

The looks were bad enough but the comments were worse. Though no one said anything to her face she could hear what they said anyway. Kara didn’t understand; didn’t they all know she had super-hearing?

Most of it was innocuous, curiosity and wonder, but some of it was mean. The worst so far was, “I don’t know why she still bothers pretending to be human now that everyone knows. The glasses are just pathetic. What a freak.”

Kara almost took them off.

A close second was, “Of all the names for her secret identity why pick Kent? How dumb can you be?” It would have made her laugh if she were in a mood to do so.

She still had her friends, and she was very happy to see them at lunch after almost a week, but everyone else left them alone. She’d had at least a passing acquaintance with more kids than the three she knew best, but now they avoided her.

Christie didn’t sit at their table, but at one next to it where she could see the whole cafeteria. She had that table all to herself as she munched an apple.

Like Bailey and Megan, the first thing Kevin asked her was if she was OK. He seemed to be treating her a little differently; she had the feeling he’d moved in the opposite direction from everyone else, focusing less on the Supergirl part of her and more on her as a person. She liked that.

“Things were pretty crazy here after you went to save Emily. Ms. Noether screamed, I heard.”

“Oh,” said Kara. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Ahh, she was OK. It was weird, everyone thought you were Supergirl but seeing you zoom off like that still took ’em by surprise. The whole school was talking about it and most of the teachers gave up trying to get anything done last period. The next day, the one you missed, Ms. Frye had an assembly.

“She said if you came back you’d be the first celebrity to ever attend here but that you’d be treated like every other kid — well, except for the bodyguard.” They all turned to look at Christie, who winked and continued placidly working on her apple.

“So why do you need a bodyguard anyway?” asked Megan.

“If someone tries to attack me the people around me could get hurt if she wasn’t here. Also, I guess...”

“What?”

Kara lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned in over the table. “The people who kidnapped me used Kryptonite. They might try to use it again.”

She bit her lip. “Would you guys mind if we talked about something else? I mean, I’m getting used to having powers and maybe being from another planet and everything, but I’m still mostly just me.” She looked around at them. “It’s been hard lately to feel like just me.”

Her friends tried their best to help get her mind off her situation, but there was no escaping that a Secret Service agent followed her everywhere, and that at the end of the day she and Caitlin climbed into a black, bulletproof SUV to the accompaniment of shouted questions from the press, while her classmates' parents looked on in annoyance.

Chapter 30: When in Rome

"Jerry, what are you suggesting?"

The President was meeting with Ernest Roberts, Speaker of the House, and other members of the Congressional leadership. Gerald Munroe was a Congressman from Pennsylvania.

"Mr. President, we lost twenty-two men yesterday in Afghanistan. If she'd been there she could've saved them."

The President could see that many of the other members in the delegation were as surprised as he was. Even Speaker Roberts, a frequent opponent, looked uncomfortable. "Jerry, we can't use Supergirl in a military capacity."

"Sir, I don't understand why not. She is one of the greatest assets this country's ever had. We should be making better use of her."

The President composed his reply carefully. "We have been in frequent contact with the Russians and the Chinese about her. They are understandably nervous given how powerful she is, and given the obvious relationship we have with her. Right now they tell us they don't consider her a threat, because she assists in a purely humanitarian way. If that were to change..."

"With all due respect, sir, what could they do?"

The President felt his temper starting to rise and smacked it back down. Munroe was canny and influential but had a poor understanding of the world; unfortunately, there were too many like him in high office these days. "I shouldn't need to tell you why what I'm about to discuss is not to leave this room. The Chinese and the Russians have both informed us that they would consider any attempt to use her in a military operation to be a direct threat against them." There was a sharp intake of breath; he couldn't tell who from.

Munroe scoffed. "Isn't that just a bluff? Would they really start World War III if she was just protecting our troops?"

"I hope you can understand why I'm not eager to try the experiment, Congressman. Besides which, do you really think we should be sending a child into a war zone?"

"It's not like she can be hurt, is it? OK, leaving the military aside, there are other ways we could be using her. She's just acting as glorified rescue worker when she could be doing so much more. Think of what she could do for industry! She could help rebuild our rusted bridges, help us find new oil and gas deposits, get our economy moving again. That trick she did with the rain cloud, our farmers sure could use help like that."

"She is eleven. Between helping save lives, going to school, and being a kid, she doesn't have time for a job, if it were even appropriate for an eleven year old to have a job. I don't think either she or her foster mother would approve of the idea."

"Well, maybe we need to rethink how we're managing her..."

The President looked to the Speaker, who took the hint. "Congressman, I think you need to give us all time to consider your ideas carefully. Meanwhile, we have other topics we need to discuss with the President..."

The President was glad the press conference was scheduled for that evening. He was sure Congressman Munroe was not the only person thinking of Supergirl as the magic solution to all their problems.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States," announced Theresa Foley.

Kara watched as all the reporters in the audience rose and remained standing as they filed into the room: the President first,

then the three of them, then his Chief of Staff, Mr. Lamb.

The President went to the podium, and Mr. Lamb ushered the three of them to his side. Emily put an arm each around Caitlin and Kara.

All three of them were dressed for the occasion, in clothes they had been provided. Emily, for whom "business attire" meant a doctor's coat over blue jeans and an Oxford blouse, was wearing her first-ever business suit, with a silk blouse and a skirt. Kara and Caitlin were wearing dresses.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please be seated. I'm sorry for bringing you here at dinnertime; thank you for your understanding. I know everyone's been eager to understand more about Miss Kent, and we're here to try to answer some of those questions.

"You'll all receive the press kit afterwards so let me just give you the high points. You know the story of how she was found and placed with her foster family, the Jordans. What we want to talk about today is where she came from.

"Miss Kent was found unconscious, feverish, and drugged with chloroform. That was possible because at the time she did not have any superhuman abilities. The next morning she told investigators about where she came from and about her life, and we're going to share that information with you.

"I don't need to tell you that Miss Kent has all the abilities of Supergirl and Superman in the stories we've enjoyed for generations. This is not a coincidence. As best as our scientists have been able to determine, Miss Kent comes from a kind of parallel world, an alternate reality where Superman and Supergirl are not fictional characters but real people."

A murmur of astonishment ran through the room.

"I won't pretend that we understand how this is possible, but this is what we know. Before she came to Milford she was a resident of Metropolis, a large city located where Milford is in our world. She lived there with her parents and her two siblings. Her parents are Clark Kent and Lois Lane."

A louder murmur ran through the room.

"Until she came here and learned what we all know about Clark Kent and Superman, she had no idea her father was anything other than a reporter for the Daily Planet. Though Superman exists in her world she didn't connect the two of them. Even after coming to our world she was skeptical until she developed superpowers herself.

"She doesn't know how she got here; all she remembers is being kidnapped on her way home from school, then waking up in the hospital in Milford. We have no idea how any such travel between worlds could be accomplished so we have no idea how to return her home.

"Like any lost child, she has been placed in foster care until she can be reunited with her parents. Because of who she is, and who her parents are, she and her foster family are under protection by the Secret Service. Since their family has come into the public eye, for security reasons it's necessary to move them from their previous home to a more controlled location.

"Because of her abilities Miss Kent is able to help out in a way that no one else can. However, we'd like to emphasize that she *is* only eleven years old, and providing her a safe home and family environment is our highest priority. We view her superhero activities as a form of volunteerism, something she does of her own volition as a part-time activity. She has other demands on her time, the most important being school, of course.

"She does not in any sense work for the government of the United States and while we do point out opportunities for her to help, we do not tell her what to do.

"That's the story in a nutshell. At this point we'd like to open it up to questions."

The reporters all shot back to their feet as Theresa Foley stepped forward. She looked out over the sea of eager faces and

pointed. “Gene?”

Kara found the press conference confusing.

The reporters were very polite. This wasn’t at all what she’d expected based on what her mother had said in the past. While Mom mostly worked as an editor these days, she’d attended a White House press conference roughly a year ago and had come home exulting that she “still had what it took to make the President sweat bullets.” Kara recalled her saying similar things after other press conferences.

The reporters seemed awfully interested in asking her about Superman. She explained that she hadn’t spoken to her dad since finding out his secret, so all she could tell them was what she learned about Superman in school. She parroted what she was able to remember from fourth and fifth grade about his debut and other highlights of his career. That hadn’t included details on how Grandma and Grandpa Kent had found him, or what his life had been like growing up with superpowers, or someone named Lana Lang whom she’d never heard of.

They asked about her family and she spent some time talking about them in general terms, including her grandparents and Aunt Lucy and Uncle Ron. She didn’t get into anything too personal, like Mom’s occasional disasters in the kitchen, or the time Laura tried to flush her sneakers down the toilet.

They asked about Uncle Jimmy and Uncle Perry, too, and Kara talked about how Uncle Jimmy taught her about computers, and Uncle Perry let her hang out in his office while he told her Elvis stories.

They asked about Metropolis, and she talked a bit about their house and some of her favorite places in the city.

They asked about her, too, and Kara, embarrassed, stammered about her school, her gymnastics, her reading, and the Girl Scouts. She remembered not to mention *The Girl Who Flew*.

They asked what the chances were of her going home. The President answered that no one knew, but he expected that her parents were looking for her, and he wouldn’t bet against them.

They asked if Kryptonite was real; the President nodded that it was OK to answer. She said it was, back home. They asked if she’d ever been exposed to it, and she said she thought she had been when she was kidnapped.

“Can you tell us what it feels like?” one woman asked.

“It hurts,” replied Kara immediately. She tried to think of what else to say, but all she could add was, “A *lot*.” She shrugged, and they laughed.

It was only near the end that they began to ask questions about how she decided which rescues to go on. Emily answered that as Kara’s foster mother she had to decide, with Kara’s input, whether it was appropriate for her to get involved, taking the situation, school, and other factors into account. She repeated what the President had said about Kara being only eleven, and added that she didn’t want her traumatized by getting into a situation inappropriate for a child. As Fort Collins had shown, that wasn’t always possible.

Kara understood, but wished people would stop emphasizing how she was only eleven. It wasn’t like she was a little kid or something. She was in sixth grade!

Afterwards the President brought them to the Oval Office for a short tour. Kara was looking around, wide-eyed, when Caitlin’s stomach growled noisily.

Caitlin’s cheeks flamed red. “Excuse me...” she squeaked, and looked down.

The President checked his watch. “Have you folks had anything to eat?”

“No sir,” said Emily. “With all the rush...”

“Would you like to come upstairs and get a bite? Stephanie and the girls have probably eaten already but you’re welcome to join me for something quick.” He smiled. “I must admit, Sophie

has been pestering me for a chance to meet you all.”

Emily and the girls looked at each other. “Um... thank you, Mr. President.”

“Are you *really* Supergirl?” asked Sophie Hunter.

Kara and Caitlin looked at each other. “Yes,” replied Kara. “Well, I guess Supergirl is me.”

“You look just like a normal kid.”

The four of them were ensconced in Becca Hunter’s bedroom while the adults had after-dinner coffee. For dinner Kara and Caitlin had had the best cheeseburgers they’d ever tasted. Kara didn’t think it was worth all the hassle of being famous but she had to admit the food was great.

Becca poked her sister. “You look just like a normal kid too, Doofus, but your dad is the President of the United States.” Caitlin grinned.

“Oh yeah,” said Sophie. “Still...”

“Go ahead, Kara,” said Caitlin. “Everyone’s a skeptic.”

Kara nonchalantly levitated two feet off the bed, her legs still tucked under her.

“That is totally *awesome!*” cried Sophie as Kara settled back on the bed. “How do you do it?”

“I, uh...” Kara squinted and thought. She even lifted up again, then floated down, her brow furrowed. Finally, she shrugged. “Um, I don’t know. I just... do it.”

“Oh,” said Sophie. “I was hoping you could teach me how.”

Her sister grabbed and hugged her amidst squeals. “I think you have to be from Krypton, squirt.” She thought a moment. “Do your brother or sister have any powers?”

“If Laura had powers everyone in Metropolis would know Dad is Superman; she’s only seven. Jordy never said anything, but Dad has this thing he does—” Kara briefly focused on a conversation in a restaurant a mile away to demonstrate, “—like that, when he hears something that grabs his attention. Jordy does the same thing at the same time so I guess he’s hearing what Dad hears. I didn’t realize what they were doing till I got my own powers.”

She pressed her lips together. “I mean, I didn’t have any idea about Dad till I came here. I don’t know why they didn’t tell me yet.”

Becca rolled her eyes. “Tell me about it. Dad never says *anything* about work. I guess I kind of understand, but still...”

“Is it hard, living like this?” Kara waved at their surroundings. “I don’t just mean in the White House, I mean, with everyone watching what you do all the time?”

Becca and Sophie looked at each other. “Yes,” they said together.

“I mean, you get used to it after a while,” continued Becca. “It becomes part of the background. It was hard at school to start with. It was a completely new school in a new city, and in the middle of the school year, too. And then people are, like, put off ’cause you’re famous, and ’cause you’ve got an agent or two following you everywhere you go.”

“Yeah,” agreed Caitlin, a bit downcast.

“But eventually people get used to it. It took a year, but I started making friends again. Mini-Me here had it a little easier; she was in first grade when we moved in here.”

“Hey! I told you to stop calling me that!”

Becca ignored her. “We have friends come over here, and we go to their houses, and have sleepovers and everything. So it’s not too bad. I mean, it’s not the same as it was when Dad was a Congressman from Virginia but it’s OK.” She sighed. “It’d just be nice to walk down the street without an entourage.”

“It’s only been a week or two for you guys, right? I think it’ll get better.” She spread her hands. “You *have* to admit you’re pretty interesting.”

“I guess,” conceded Kara.

“But people get used to anything. Give it a month and then someone in Hollywood or Washington will do something stupid, and everyone’s attention will shift to that.”

Caitlin and Kara exchanged looks.

“So,” asked Becca in a playful tone, “do you have a boyfriend, Caitlin?”

Caitlin rolled her eyes. “Em says not till high school. It doesn’t matter anyway. I play sports, and half the boys think I don’t like boys because of that.”

“Most boys are morons,” stated Sophie, with conviction.

“Ha,” said Becca, ruffling her hair. “Just wait a couple of years.”

Kara sat on her new bed in her new bedroom, and looked around again. The room was a bit more girly than she might have chosen herself but she didn’t mind. She wasn’t a girly-girl, but she wasn’t a tomboy either. There was a canopy bed dotted with adorable stuffed animals, a desk, a closet, a notebook computer, her own TV. It was bigger than her room back home, and beautifully decorated.

It had been a *fait accompli*. At the end of the school day she and Caitlin had been driven to their new home instead of to the cottage. Their possessions had already been moved, though Kara hadn’t had any beyond her clothing; her room had been furnished and decorated from scratch.

It hadn’t been a total surprise either. They’d known they were moving, and they’d known it was soon, and they’d discussed the details with Mr. Douglas and the others. But today had been the day that she and Caitlin had been delivered here; Emily hadn’t yet come home.

Kara looked around again. The room was lovely, really. That was the problem.

When she’d been sleeping on an air mattress in Caitlin’s room, that had been temporary. This, this spoke of permanence. This was an arrangement to last months, or years. To Kara, this room was a constant reminder that she might never see her home or family again. As she’d done several times already she burst into tears.

She tried to stop but couldn’t. She took more tissues, wiped her eyes, and blew her nose. The used tissues joined the growing pile in the trash can next to the bed.

That reminded her of the last time Mom had been sick in bed, and Dad had brought her chicken soup he’d made from scratch, from Grandma’s recipe. They’d all had some, keeping Mom company and trying to cheer her up. Kara could taste it even now, and that made the tears come faster. She gave up, buried her face in her knees, and wept.

It had been a month. No, *over* a month. It was early December, and Christmas decorations were up all over town.

She hated the part of herself that whispered that she was never going home, that she might as well get used to life here. It wasn’t a bad life, despite being a celebrity. But it didn’t feel like *her* life.

She didn’t want it to become her life. She didn’t want to lose her old life, to lose who she’d been.

“Hey, what’s this?” asked a gentle, familiar voice, and Emily’s arms wrapped around her. Kara turned towards her foster mother and clung to her as she cried. Emily just rubbed her back and made soothing noises while Kara cried herself out. She finally looked up at Emily with big, sad eyes.

Emily noticed Mount Kleenex in the trash can and sighed. “Oh, sweetheart...” She stroked Kara’s hair with one hand. “What is it?”

Kara’s voice trembled. “The room. I mean, it’s nice and all but... it’s so... *forever*. First it was school. I was just supposed to be sitting in on classes, and now I’m a regular student. And now there’s this.”

“Oh, honey,” said Emily. “I know it’s hard to wait, but you have to keep in mind who your parents are. I bet they’ll move Heaven and Earth to find you, and,” she smiled, “in your father’s case that’s not just a cliché.”

Kara smiled in spite of herself, but it faded quickly. “I know. But not knowing when... or even if...” She sighed. She was all cried out for now.

“I keep thinking it would be nice to change some things, to make it more personal, more mine. Put up posters and stuff. But doing that feels like giving up.”

Emily squeezed her. “It doesn’t have to mean that, but you take things at your own pace, OK?”

“Also... it feels weird having other people do all these things for us.”

Emily looked around the room and sighed. “I know what you mean.”

Chapter 31: Reasons to Be Cheerful

“Our next story tonight is the developing reaction to the recent White House press conference on Supergirl. For details, let’s go to our Supergirl correspondent, Mike Hooper, on location in Milford, Delaware. Mike?”

“Thanks, Bill. While a majority of Americans favor the current arrangements for Supergirl, some in Congress are calling for a change. A growing group led by Congressman Gerald Munroe of Pennsylvania is pushing the Administration to find a new family for the Girl of Steel. Here’s what he had to say earlier today.”

“We believe she would be better off in a family with both a mother and a father. We also believe that Dr. Jordan’s views are holding Supergirl back and keeping her from helping more effectively. While the President may agree with Dr. Jordan’s approach there are many Americans who don’t. We’re grateful to Dr. Jordan for what she’s done so far, but this was supposed to be a temporary placement and we should be finding a good, permanent family for Supergirl.”

“Congressman, is that appropriate, given that she’s expected to go home with her parents at some point?”

“Well, there are respected scientists who find the explanations given by the Administration hard to swallow. Really, parallel worlds populated by fictional characters come to life? She’s a great kid and a real hero, but we all know how active children’s imaginations are, and all we have to go on is what she says. I’d say there are simpler explanations than Clark Kent and Lois Lane being real people.

“No, her real parents must be out there somewhere, and if they want her back, why haven’t they come forward and identified themselves?”

“A CNN flash poll taken today shows that 63% of Americans favor keeping Supergirl where she is, 16% believe she should be moved to a different family, and 14% believe she should be made a ward of the U.S. government. The remainder were unsure.

“So, there isn’t much support for Congressman Munroe at present, but that’s not stopping him. He’s planning to introduce a bill, the Superhuman Minor Protection Act, or SMPA for short. It would make the Federal government Supergirl’s legal guardian and require that decisions about her be approved by Congress.

“That proposal led to an outcry today in the United Nations General Assembly. Several nations argued that making Supergirl an arm of the U.S. government was unacceptable, that we already have an unfair advantage from her living here. Russia introduced a resolution calling for Supergirl to be put under the supervision of the international body, and relocated to what they called a more neutral location such as Geneva or Brussels.

“The White House responded to critics by pointing out that Supergirl has performed rescues all over the world, including countries unfriendly to the U.S. They also expressed full

confidence in Dr. Emily Jordan as Supergirl's foster mother.

"Finally, on a lighter note, there are some who seem to be taking Congressman Munroe's challenge to heart: dozens of couples have come forward claiming to be Supergirl's real parents. Some of them even claim to be Lois Lane and Clark Kent. So far, though, none of the would-be Supermen has been able to give the obvious proof that he's the real deal. For CNN, this is Mike Hooper."

Kara was still getting the movie star treatment at school, and wished she wasn't. The other students kept their distance; they watched her with a mixture of awe, respect, and burning curiosity. When she walked from class to class carrying her books, they appeared puzzled, as if they couldn't fathom why she didn't fly instead. When she was behind schedule and ran at merely human speed, they looked outright mystified.

Between her status as a curiosity and her own personal Secret Service detail, no one seemed inclined to have a conversation with her. No matter where she went in school, unless one of her three friends was with her, she and Christie walked alone.

She looked forward to lunch every day, simply because it was a chance to sit with Bailey, Megan, and Kevin and have something approximating a normal conversation. Usually.

"I always thought being famous would be amazing," observed Bailey. "But people stare at you all the time. Sometimes I just want to shout, 'OK, so she's Supergirl! Get over it already!'"

"Yeah," sighed Kara.

"And all those losers saying they're your parents," added Megan. "What's that about?"

"That's just sick," agreed Bailey. "And I don't mean in the good way."

Kevin added, "I mean, just 'cause you're a real superhero who can fly and bullets bounce off you and you're from another planet in a parallel universe and your dad is Superman..." He trailed off.

There was a long, awkward pause. Kara poked at her spaghetti with her spork. Kevin looked almost as uncomfortable as she did.

"S...So," Kara finally stuttered, "what are you guys doing for Christmas break?"

Her friends came to the rescue. "Our grandma and grandpa are coming from Florida," said Megan.

"It's just Mom and Dad and me," said Bailey. "We don't go anywhere, so I spend time visiting friends. I guess it's not that different from—"

She was cut off by a shriek from across the cafeteria; Kara looked up to see someone in the process of falling. Everything froze as she snapped into super-speed. She lifted up from her seat and flew over, bypassing the crowded aisles.

The person in trouble was Rosa Montes. It looked like she'd slipped on a patch of someone else's spilt food; she was falling backwards, her arms thrown out. If Kara didn't act Rosa would hit her head on a bench in another second or two.

Rosa's tray was following its own trajectory, food already starting to slide off of the plate, the plate lifting from the tray, the cutlery heading in random directions. It was all still relatively close together, though. Kara wondered if she shouldn't try to catch it in something like a trash bag before saving Rosa. Everything was barely moving from her perspective and she thought she might have time to do both.

The tray looked like it wasn't going to hit anyone, though, and Kara decided she didn't want to risk Rosa getting hurt if she got distracted dealing with it.

She positioned herself behind the other girl and dropped back into normal time, catching her gently under the arms. Rosa cut off her shriek, which was followed by the noisy clatter of the tray,

plate, and utensils. Being cafeteria ware, nothing broke, but it was loud. The din in the room stopped abruptly and everyone turned to stare.

It was only then that Kara realized she could have just plucked the items from the tray out of the air, one by one, and used the plate to recapture the food.

She carefully lifted Rosa back to her feet. "Are you OK?"

"Th...thanks," replied the girl. "I... I think so. Thank you."

"It's OK," said Kara, smiling. "I'm glad you didn't get hurt."

Mr. Ordemann was on cafeteria duty and hurried over. "What happened? Is everyone OK?"

"I'm OK, Mr. Ordemann," said Rosa, starting to regain her wits. "I slipped on a wet spot, but Kara caught me."

"I'm sorry about the mess, Mr. Ordemann," Kara apologized, gesturing at the debris of Rosa's lunch, "but I couldn't figure out how to catch it and Rosa, too, till after it was all over."

"That's quite all right, Kara," replied the teacher. "It can be cleaned up." He smiled. "Thank you."

"Yes," echoed Rosa. "Thank you."

The next morning, Rosa said "Hi" to her as they passed in the hall, and Kara said "Hi" back. Kara had a smile on her face for what felt like the first time in days.

A couple of other people said "Hi" too.

Ms. Maloney was diagramming sentence structure on the whiteboard when Kara's attention was caught by someone's radio: "Oklahoma disaster services are reporting that the town of Enid has been struck by a tornado. Reports are sketchy..."

Kara's hand shot up. "Ms. Maloney?"

The teacher stopped writing and turned around. "Yes, Kara?"

"Umm, there's been a tornado in Oklahoma. I need to check with my foster mom."

Ms. Maloney raised an eyebrow. "Very well, go ahead." She folded her arms. Kara blushed lightly as the entire class watched her.

She pulled out her new smartphone, which she had special dispensation to use during class if there was a life-threatening emergency somewhere. She rapidly texted Emily then lay the phone down.

She looked up at Ms. Maloney. "It usually takes a few minutes for her to talk to the government people and then text me back."

Ms. Maloney nodded, bemused, and turned back to the whiteboard. The other students reluctantly turned their attention back to the lesson.

Minutes later, the reply came silently. Kara read it, then put her phone away.

She looked up to find everyone watching her again. "Well?" asked Ms. Maloney, as curious as anyone else.

"Um, I don't have to go. The people in Oklahoma say they can handle it." She blushed again. "I'm sorry for interrupting class."

"We understand, Kara," said Ms. Maloney, and continued on with the lesson. The other students watched Kara a moment longer, then turned their attention back to schoolwork as well.

By the end of the day, more kids were saying "Hi."

Kara spent the first five minutes of the drive home from school watching her foster sister stare out the window and brood.

"Caitlin, are you OK?"

Caitlin glanced at Kara, then stared at the floor and frowned. "This sucks."

"What does?"

Caitlin waved at the interior of their armored SUV. "This. Being famous. All of it."

Kara looked down. "I'm sorry."

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "You don't have to apologize. It's not

like you planned it this way.”

Kara sighed. “No...”

“It’s like Becca Hunter said. We’re ‘interesting.’” Caitlin made air quotes. “It gets old.” She blew out her breath.

Kara thought something must have happened at school, but didn’t want to pry. She thought back on her own day. “Maybe it’ll get better, like she said.”

“Maybe,” said Caitlin, as the car turned into the drive for their new home. They both watched the press, segregated behind barricades, photograph them as they sped by. Their limo pulled up at the old delivery entrance next to the kitchen.

The moment the car door opened, Kara sniffed the air. “Why does it smell like flowers?” The two of them climbed out.

Caitlin frowned. “I don’t smell... Oh, right.” Trailed by Robin and Christie, they went through the back door, past the kitchen, and into the entry area.

There were at least half a dozen beautiful floral arrangements scattered around the room. Some were simple, some elaborate.

“Where did all these come from?” wondered Caitlin.

Mr. Douglas had come to meet them, smiling. “They’re for Miss Kent.” He gestured. “These are from Mr. Reid, whom you rescued from drowning. These,” he gestured again, “are from some of the passengers on that jet you saved in London.” He identified the others. “The Huozhou Coal Mining Group. Kopp Middle School. The space agencies of the International Space Station. The Kansas City Fire Department. And,” he cleared his throat, “The Islamic Republic of Iran.”

“Why did all these people send me flowers?” murmured Kara, astonished.

“Mr. Reid started it. He came to your cottage on Thanksgiving Day, while you were all at Camp David. He said the biggest thanks he had to give this year were to you, for saving his life, and he wondered if flowers would be all right. We said we thought you’d like them, but that you were away for several days. Given the size of the cottage, we also suggested he wait until you moved into a bigger place.

“Then the other people you’ve helped started calling, asking what they could do to express their gratitude, and we mentioned Mr. Reid’s idea.” He motioned with his hand. “This is the result.”

Kara’s cheeks were tinged pink. “There’re so many...”

“There are more upstairs in your room, too.” He smiled.

“And we have several large sacks of fan mail, from all around the world. For some reason you’re especially popular in Japan.”

Kara wandered over to the Kopp Middle School flowers, speechless. There was a large sheet of paper, too, with a big S shield and lots of hearts, all drawn by hand. The paper was packed tight with notes from students.

Caitlin came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. Kara looked up, and Caitlin smiled. They both turned back to reading the notes.

Things had been quiet for a few days, save for the tornado in Oklahoma, so Kara wasn’t too surprised when dinner was interrupted by a call from Mr. Douglas.

“Dr. Jordan, there’s a little boy missing in Yosemite National Park. He’s four and got away from his parents. It’s snowing, and it’ll be getting dark soon.”

Emily looked up at Kara. “Did you hear all that?”

Kara nodded. “I think I should go.”

“What’s going on?” asked Caitlin.

“I think so too. Go ahead, I’ll tell Caitlin.”

Kara blurred out of the dining room and was back a moment later as Supergirl. She went to Emily and Caitlin and hugged them both.

“We can reheat your dinner when you get back,” said Emily.

Kara nodded and zipped upstairs. Her room had a newly installed roof exit; it allowed her to come and go with a little

more privacy than the front or back doors. She liked the idea of having her own personal door that no one else could use. It was fun, like a cat door for people who could fly.

Five minutes later Kara was hovering over Yosemite Valley. Back home, they’d all visited a couple of years ago, with Aunt Lucy and Uncle Ron as guides. It had been a short trip — Laura was five at the time — but she thought she recognized many of the landmarks.

There was snow on the ground, though it wasn’t snowing at the moment. She scanned the valley floor, and noticed the cluster of emergency personnel and a local TV news crew near one of the campgrounds.

As she descended she heard excited shouts, and suddenly dozens of upturned faces were tracking her like a field of sunflowers. Eyes and cameras followed her silently as she floated down to a landing.

“Supergirl!” cried a woman who had to be the mother.

“Thank God!”

A park ranger came to meet Kara, followed by the parents.

“Do you think you can find the boy?”

“Where should I look? Should I just search the whole valley?”

The ranger considered that. “That might take a while, even for you. Is there anything that would help you home in on him?”

“What’s his name? And do you have any pictures? Or something with sound?”

The boy’s father pulled out a smartphone and brought up some video footage. “His name is Ian. This is a couple of months old.”

Kara watched the video of a small boy wearing a cape, a colander on his head of unruly hair, and waving a plastic sword. He lifted the sword high and shouted, “I am the king of the *Universe!*”

Kara suppressed a smile. She listened closely, and picked up something else on the soundtrack besides his declaration of sovereignty.

“I can hear his heartbeat in the video. I can listen for that.”

She looked to the ranger. “Do you have any idea where he is?”

The ranger shook his head. “He’s been missing about two hours, so he couldn’t have gone more than a couple miles at most, but that covers a lot of area. We’ve searched quite a bit of it, but he hasn’t responded to our calls. He might be asleep.”

The mother’s face fell, and even Kara picked up on the unspoken alternative.

Kara nodded, then took off. She started crisscrossing the valley, listening intently.

After about five minutes she was over a less populated area when she heard Ian’s heartbeat. She also heard something else.

“Oh,” she said. The little boy was trapped in the middle of a cluster of tall, brambly bushes. A black bear sat on its haunches, making a determined effort to get at him with one paw, grumbling the whole time. Its arm was small enough to fit in the space the boy had crawled through, but not long enough to reach where he sat. The boy cowered, shivered, and whimpered, both from fear and from the cold. He was bleeding from scratches he’d evidently incurred while climbing into his refuge.

Kara observed the scene from a hundred feet up, uneasy. She knew that if bullets bounced off her she shouldn’t worry about a bear, but that was the thinking part of her. Other, instinctual parts of her told her to stay aloft. It took her a few moments to overcome her anxiety and land about thirty yards away.

“H—Hey!” she shouted, waving her arms. She felt very nervous, almost jumpy.

Ian and the bear both turned their attention towards her.

The bear made a curious noise. It looked back and forth a few

times, trying to decide if the new human was too large. Normally it avoided humans, but it was hungry and the smaller one had seemed easy prey, albeit frustratingly difficult to catch. The bigger one made it nervous, but weariness and hunger tipped the balance. It started charging, its paws throwing up clumps of snow as it accelerated.

Kara fought her rising desire to flee from the oncoming predator. She forced herself to wait until it was ten feet away before she vanished. It scabbled to a stop, confused.

Kara reappeared at the bushes and tore an opening in one side of the cluster, startling Ian; the bear looked around at the noise. She whispered to him, "Come on, let's go," and held her arms open.

"Are you *Supergirl*?" he whispered back, awestruck.

"Yes, Ian, but we need to go before the bear comes back."

Just because she *could* stop the bear with one hand didn't mean she *wanted* to.

The boy leapt into her arms and buried his face in her middle, quivering. Kara put her arms around him gently and lifted them both into the air, just as the bear was heading back their way.

The animal growled and looked up accusingly as Kara made off with its prize; she hovered fifty feet up. Ian had recovered enough to look down from the safety of Kara's arms and shouted, "You are a mean, stinky, ugly bear, and I hate you! Stuffie hates you too!" He cut loose with a defiant, noisy raspberry.

"Who's Stuffie?" asked Kara.

"He is my bear, and he is a *nice* bear. He sleeps with me 'cause there are dinosaurs in my closet."

As Kara sailed off with her small passenger, the bear made a mournful noise. It watched them go until they were out of sight.

Chapter 32: The Best You Can Do

"Kara, sweetie, wake up."

"Huh? Mom?" Kara sat up sleepily and rubbed her eyes. It was Emily, not Mom. Kara couldn't help it: her face fell.

Emily regarded her silently for a moment, then said, "Honey, a plane went down in a remote part of Siberia. They're not sure where exactly, and there's a bad snowstorm so they can't search by air. The Russians are hoping you can find any survivors before they die of exposure."

"Oh," said Kara, still sleepy. "All right." Even she needed some sleep, and it had only been a couple of hours since she went to bed. That had only been a few hours after she returned from California. She swung her feet out of bed and sat for a moment, waking up.

She looked up at Emily. "Emily... I'm sorry... I didn't mean to..."

Emily sat down next to her and gave her a one-armed hug. "I understand, sweetie."

Kara leaned into Emily for a moment, then stood up. She stretched, yawned, then blurred to her closet, where Supergirl's uniform hung on the door. She paused. "Umm..."

Emily smiled. "I'll close my eyes, honey."

"I'm done," said Kara a moment later; she was already dressed. "Where am I supposed to go?"

"Moscow," said Emily. "Red Square, which should be lit up and easy to recognize. There'll be someone waiting there with the information you need. Do you know how to get to Moscow?"

"Yes, I remember." She'd memorized the locations of all the major cities of the world.

Emily stood up, and Kara came over to hug her.

"Sweetheart?"

"Yes, Emily?"

"This is a plane crash; it won't be pretty. I almost said no. Are you *sure* you want to do this?"

Kara thought about people surviving the crash, only to freeze to death. "I'm not sure I want to, but I have to."

Emily kissed the top of her head and released her. "I'm so proud of you. Be careful."

Kara nodded, then floated silently up and through her roof exit. A moment later, there was the faint echo of a sonic boom.

It took Kara over an hour to find the plane, even with the estimated position the people in Moscow had given her. She'd had to search nearly a thousand square miles.

Just looking through the snowstorm wasn't enough: the snow was falling so heavily that the plane was already covered by about four inches' worth. She couldn't even see the glow of the aircraft's residual heat with her special vision. To find it she'd had to focus her sight through the snow and track the contours of the ground as she flew.

Now that she'd found it, she zipped down, then halted, unsure what to do. The plane had made an emergency landing in a relatively flat area, but the fuselage had broken in two. She looked into the cockpit and recoiled: the pilots were obviously dead.

She hesitated, uneasy, but if anyone was left alive they needed her help or they would surely die, and soon. It was well below freezing, and the roar of the wind was like a physical force.

Maybe they're all dead. The thought of being alone with a plane full of dead people sent an electric current of fear through her. She didn't feel the cold, but she was shivering nonetheless.

After a minute, she floated down to the gap between the two halves. There were more bodies strewn all around amidst loose wreckage. Again, she hesitated. She hovered about fifteen feet off the ground, the wind howling fiercely around her like a rabid animal.

She saw men, women, a few children. People like her family and friends, their lives ended abruptly, their bodies mangled.

There were so many of them. They lay lifeless, cold, and silent, covered in thick white shrouds. She wanted nothing more than to fly away from the gruesome sight. It was bad enough with the snow hiding everything; she didn't dare look through it. After all she'd seen she was afraid to look inside the plane.

She finally thought to focus her hearing through the roar of the blizzard and check for heartbeats. She found them: a couple in the front half, and many more in the rear. She shuddered and choked out a sob, half from relief and half from sorrow. The graveyard terrors she'd felt faded, leaving only grief.

Though the dead still weighed on her, she was able to turn her mind back to saving the living. She entered the rear half of the fuselage and noticed a group of about thirty people huddled together for warmth at the back. Several of them were injured. They were as far from the opening to the elements as they could get.

She floated silently down the debris-strewn aisle. As she passed down the length of the aircraft, she noted three people who were alive, but unconscious and still in their seats. There were more dead. She tried not to think about them.

As she drew near, someone noticed her and said something she couldn't understand. The rest looked up in wonder.

She hovered in front of them. "I came to help. Can anyone speak English?"

One woman spoke up in a heavy accent. "I sp-speak English, y-yes." She was shivering, as were the rest.

"I'll warm you up." Kara spent a minute gently running her heat vision over the survivors and the cabin around them, her eyes glowing like heat lamps. The people relaxed visibly and let go of each other, even as they gaped at her.

"Th-thank you," said the woman. "You are Supergirl?"

Kara nodded. "Yes. Is there anyone else alive?"

"There are two in front part. We cannot move them, they don't wake up. Three more in back. The rest dead, I think."

“The people in Moscow told me to bring the plane to Mirny, but they didn’t know it was broken like this. I don’t think I can lift both halves, so maybe we should put everyone in one of them? I guess this one, since it’s bigger?”

The woman looked unsure, and repeated what Kara had said to the remaining passengers. One man spoke at length, and the woman turned back to Kara. “This man is engineer, he says yes, that is good plan.”

Another woman spoke, and a discussion ensued. Kara watched, unsure, until it concluded. Her translator said, “We help get ready. Sooner is better, yes?”

Kara nodded and floated back up the aisle. She warmed the unconscious survivors with her vision as she passed. She floated into the front part of the plane and quickly located the two who were still alive. She didn’t want to carry them over her shoulder, so after warming them she simply ripped their seats out and carried them back to the other half, one at a time. She ripped some unoccupied seats from the rear half to make room, dumping them outside.

She wasn’t sure of the best way to handle the injured. She asked her translator if there was a doctor on board, but none of the conscious survivors had any medical training, not even first aid.

In a few minutes they had the living under control. Kara asked timidly, “What should we do about the... about the...” Her eyes shone, and she couldn’t continue. She waved vaguely at a motionless form a few rows up. She’d never seen so many dead people before. Before she’d become Supergirl, she’d never seen dead people at all. Her mind kept straying back to them despite her best efforts.

The woman regarded her seriously for a moment, then turned and spoke to the others. There was a short discussion, and she turned back. “Is important get hurt people to hospital fast. Others can come later for dead. You mark spot on map, no?”

“But...”

The woman put her hands on Kara’s shoulders and smiled sadly. “Don’t worry over them, OK?”

Kara nodded uncertainly. “Is everyone ready?”

They’d moved everyone towards the center of the rear half of the fuselage, well back from the opening to the elements. Those who were conscious all nodded.

Kara went to the front and floated outside. Following a suggestion from the engineer, she took the jagged ends of the jet’s ruptured skin in her hands, and methodically crimped it together like tinfoil around leftovers until the opening was sealed.

She softened the metal with her heat vision, squeezed it, pushed it, and bent it until it was a somewhat aerodynamic shape, enough for her to fly at a reasonable speed. She was glad the man had suggested this; she never would have thought of it herself. She hoped it held together until she got them to Mirny.

She wondered how she should pick the plane up. The wing would be easiest, but that scene from Kevin’s movie worried her. Superman had tried to grab the spinning airplane by its wing and it had snapped right off. She realized that since the plane couldn’t fly anyway, even if she accidentally damaged the wing it wouldn’t be a problem.

She floated to the one remaining wing and reached under it. The fuselage creaked as she lifted it into the air, but thanks to her... whatever it was, it stayed in one piece. She nodded; Superman in the movie must have been doing it wrong. She was sure her dad would never make a mistake like that.

She held it overhead, and carefully worked her way, hand over hand, towards the center, more or less under where the people were. Then she lifted into the air, breaking through the clouds in a matter of moments. She didn’t look down at those who’d been left behind, and tried not to think about them.

She stayed low since the cabin was not completely airtight

and the passengers had no oxygen. She gently accelerated to a few hundred miles per hour; the plane couldn’t handle supersonic speeds even if it were still in one piece. Her makeshift nosecone vibrated noisily, but held together. The lone wing tried to make the plane flip over, but she was able to compensate easily.

She looked up through the fuselage to check on the passengers, and everyone looked OK. She focused her attention on getting the plane to Mirny.

It was about two hundred eighty miles to Mirny and it took her an hour to get there; the sun had set by the time she arrived.

As she approached the airport she spotted a cluster of ambulances, fire trucks, and other emergency vehicles on a side apron. Looking past the end of the single runway, she gawked at what had to be the biggest hole in the ground she’d ever seen, easily more than a half mile across. It looked to be a mine.

The rescue workers watched silently as she floated down, the plane held above her. She stopped just above the tarmac. She worked her way back out from under the plane in reverse, until she held it by the wing, and finally set it down. The fuselage groaned again as she released it.

She was about to go around to the front to open it up again when the emergency exits over the wing popped out; the rear door swung open as well, extending the emergency slide. Kara expected people to slide down it like they had in the safety videos she’d watched on flights to Kansas and California, but they didn’t.

Rescue workers charged forward and were soon swarming the plane. Kara didn’t quite know what to do with herself, so she just stood in the light snow that was coming down and watched. Everyone was so busy they ignored her.

It was so different from London, where people had been intensely curious. All alone in the middle of Siberia, she felt a little lost. She almost left, but remembered she had to tell someone where the crash site was.

A metal ramp was attached to the rear door, and medical personnel scrambled into the plane. At the same time, the passengers finally started to emerge over the wing. Shortly thereafter, the injured were being carried out on stretchers and rushed to the ambulances. Kara watched them go, biting her lip.

One of the five unconscious passengers was carried out covered with a sheet.

Kara’s breath caught; her vision zoomed into the man’s chest, confirming her suspicion.

He’d died. While she’d been bringing the plane here, he’d died.

Kara slowly sank down into a crouch; she folded her arms on top of her knees, and rested her chin on them.

She hadn’t found the plane quickly enough. She’d hesitated after she found it, afraid of the dead. She hadn’t gotten the survivors here quickly enough. She hadn’t been fast enough, or known exactly what to do. This man had died as a result. Would some of the other people who died have lived if she’d been faster?

Superman — Dad — doesn’t mess up like this. She felt her face turn hot with shame, and tears trailed down her cheeks. She buried her face in her arms.

She didn’t know how long she sat there before she felt hands on her arms, gently lifting her to her feet. She looked up through her tears, and blinked to clear her eyes.

A gray-haired man wearing the red cross of medical services was looking back at her. “What is wrong, child?”

“He died,” she whispered hoarsely. “A lot of them died. They’re... they’re back with the rest of the plane. I should have found them faster... gotten them here faster...”

The man sighed and shook his head. “You found them faster than anyone else could have. You saved many lives today. I am

very sorry a child like you had to face such death and destruction. But it is not your fault.”

“But...”

“You will not find anyone here who thinks you failed. Even the best, most experienced adults cannot save everyone. I am a doctor. Whenever a patient dies, I feel what you are feeling. We can try our best, but it is not always enough.”

Kara nodded, downcast.

“Now, come with me. You can tell us where the plane crashed and we will take care of the rest. Then you can go home, yes?”

Emily felt Kara stir in her embrace, and opened her eyes. The gray light of predawn was just starting to come through the windows.

She’d slept in Kara’s bed, worried she’d be needed when her foster daughter returned. Kara had made enough noise coming in to wake her, and she’d been right: the girl had been distraught. Emily had listened as she’d related the whole tale.

Kara was not a stranger to death: she’d talked about mourning her pet hamster, and how she spent time on a farm every year, where death was part of the natural order. It was just seeing *people* die that she was not used to, especially on the scale she’d witnessed this night. It was a terrible thing for anyone to see, much less a child of eleven. She seemed haunted by the images of the dead.

Emily had spent nearly an hour helping Kara with her grief and distress. She’d reinforced the message of the Russian doctor, trying to help her foster daughter understand that as amazing as she was, she didn’t have the power to make everything turn out right every time.

What counted was that she’d done her best. That was true for everyone, and Emily had told Kara she was sure it was true for Superman. Kara had frowned at that, skeptical.

Finally she’d simply held the girl, murmuring reassurances, until she’d fallen asleep in Emily’s arms. Rather than risk waking her, she’d slowly leaned back, continuing to hold Kara, and stared at the ceiling. She had her own guilt to deal with.

When she’d allowed Kara to start doing rescues it had been with great reluctance, and with the expectation that the Kents would show up soon to collect their daughter. Instead, this had dragged on for well over a month and a half, and there was still no sign of Kara’s parents.

It always came down to the same conundrum: Kara could continue being Supergirl, which had the potential to disturb her as it had tonight. Or she could quit, and do nothing while people died, knowing she could have helped — which would also disturb her. This was a Catch-22 if ever Emily had heard of one.

She had thought that allowing Kara to help would be best, but now she wasn’t so sure. She wished Kara could take a break from being Supergirl, but didn’t know if that would be possible. She did know that Kara needed to have another session with Penny.

She wondered how Kara’s father had survived this dilemma while growing up. Surely he’d been under the same pressure?

Going home with her parents would eliminate the stress on Kara, because Superman would be on the job. But while she was here, the only way to shield her would be to get her away from the news, away from the government, away from people needing help. She didn’t know if Kara would be willing to turn her back on Supergirl, even temporarily, and she was certain that the people who were already complaining that she was “holding back” Kara would complain even more.

She’d chased these thoughts and more around her mind until she, too, had fallen asleep. After a scant couple of hours, she was awake again.

Kara yawned and blinked. She focused drowsily on Emily and smiled. “Morning.”

Emily smiled back. “Good morning, sweetheart. Are you

feeling better?”

“I guess,” said Kara. “I still feel bad I wasn’t able to save everyone.”

“Don’t,” said Emily firmly. “If you hadn’t gone they *all* would have died. Just try to focus on the thirty-six people who are alive today because *you* saved them. Think about how happy their families are to get them back, OK?”

Kara nodded.

Emily kissed the top of her head. “Come, let’s get the day started.”

Chapter 33: Let the Games Begin

Kara was still glum when she arrived at school, but as she walked down the hallway to homeroom she was pleasantly surprised by the number of kids who greeted her. They still seemed more than a little in awe of her, and kept their distance, but to Kara it felt like the first crocus after a frozen winter.

In the days following her exposure as Supergirl, the overwhelming impression she’d received from the other students was that they saw her as an alien. Not just in the literal sense, but as someone strange and incomprehensible, a celebrity interloper. They seemed surprised she was still there.

The smiles and greetings made her feel welcome for the first time in a while. They might not know what to do with her but at least they seemed OK with her being there. That improved Kara’s mood immeasurably. She wanted to go home, but as long as she was here it was nice to feel like she belonged, at least a little. She looked to Christie, and Christie grinned at her.

Kara hadn’t realized how upsetting all this had been until she had lunch with her friends. They talked about Bailey’s art class, Megan’s piano certificate, even Kevin’s comics — though he did talk about how all Supergirl stories were on hold while the writers and artists tried to figure out what to do. With Kara so much in the news, Supergirl’s current fictional incarnation suddenly seemed wrong.

All this made her understand how supportive her friends had been, because they’d been spending all their time talking about her and her problems. Kara was grateful and tried to return the favor. She left the cafeteria feeling that life was approaching something normal again. Whatever normal was for her.

That all changed in math class.

It wasn’t anything anyone in the room did. Shortly after noon, her attention was caught by someone’s radio, though “mugged” might be a better description.

“Hey, Bradley Rosner here, with another dose of ‘Common Sense.’ Let’s start with someone who desperately needs it: Emily Jordan, the woman — unfortunately — in charge of Supergirl.”

Kara gasped a little and unconsciously squeezed her pencil. “Supergirl is a good kid, but like all kids, how she turns out is gonna depend on what kind of parents she has. In this case she has a single mother who has some seriously screwed-up priorities.

“Is Supergirl helping our troops in Afghanistan? Twenty-two of them died recently. Is she helping us find new sources of energy so hardworking Americans can pay less for gas? Is she even helping the good folk in Enid, Oklahoma, whose town was trashed by a tornado yesterday?

“No, she’s flying off to help the commies. *Excuse* me, the Russians. And for photo-ops with cute kids in California.”

Kara gritted her teeth.

“This is a woman who’s already raising a child who was born when she was sixteen, and is living in a taxpayer-funded mansion. That oughta tell you everything you need to know. She says she discusses every rescue with Supergirl and lets her decide. The kid’s only eleven!

“What she needs are parents who’ll provide her with good, firm guidance, not some hippie who lets her do whatever she

wants. Should the most powerful girl on Earth be brought up by someone with these kinds of values? Hell no! In fact—

Mercifully, Kara's attention was diverted back to math class by multiple shrieks. She looked around and everyone was staring at her, including Ms. Noether.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I heard something really nasty on the radio..." Everyone was still staring. "What?"

"Your hand..." whispered Ms. Noether.

Kara noticed her right hand. The splintered remains of her pencil protruded from either side of her tightly closed fist, and black smoke was curling out from between her fingers. "Oh."

"So," said Caitlin in the car on the way home, "I heard you made diamonds in math class today. You were supposed to wait till Mr. Kroum starts covering Earth Science for that."

Kara smiled faintly. As she'd cleaned up the mess in her palm she'd discovered tiny sparkling grains among the ashes.

Apparently she'd converted part of her pencil to diamond. The novelty of this had distracted and excited everyone in math class, and Ms. Noether had nearly forgotten to finish teaching her lesson plan.

"I didn't mean to. There was just this..." — her father and mother warred within her, and this time, her mother won — "idiot on the radio saying horrible things about Emily. He was lying, Caitlin! He was making people think she had you as a baby when she was sixteen!"

"Wait, who?"

"His name was Bradley Rosner. He has a radio show called 'Common Sense.'" Kara rolled her eyes. "As if he has any."

"I think I've heard of him. So wait, he was trash-talking Em?"

"Yes! It was awful!"

Caitlin frowned. "I guess we better tell her when she gets home."

"He thinks we should *what*?"

Fred Douglas held his hands up in placation. The three of them were meeting with him in the downstairs bedroom that had been converted into his office. He now worked in Milford during the week, then spent the weekends with his family in Maryland.

"Dr. Jordan, the Administration feels that your family needs to give an in-depth interview to counteract some of what's going on."

Emily held her hands up to gesture, then dropped them into her lap in frustration. "Bradley Rosner is an idiot! Can't we just ignore him?"

"He's a very popular and influential idiot, unfortunately."

"What is going on here, Mr. Douglas? Why is this an issue all of a sudden?"

Douglas gave a tired sigh. "What is going on here, Dr. Jordan, is called 'politics.' There's a game being played, and rightly or wrongly, you're caught in the middle."

"A game?" asked Kara, puzzled.

Douglas smiled. "Not that kind of game, Kara." His smile faded. "More like chess. A war game."

"What do they want?" asked Caitlin.

"Many people view Kara as an all-powerful genie who grants wishes. They want some wishes, or better yet, they want the lamp."

Kara frowned. "But I wouldn't do what people like that wanted anyway! I'd just fly away, and I'd take Emily and Caitlin with me if I had to!" She looked around earnestly. "I don't want to leave here except to go home, but I will if I have to."

"I know that, and you know that, and the President knows that, but some people are too blinded by their desire for power to know that. And that's not the only reason."

"There's more?" asked Caitlin.

Douglas nodded. "It's a Presidential election year, and the President has stated his support for you, Dr. Jordan, several times. They've decided they can use that support against him for the campaign. It's a good issue for them, because the kind of people to whom this argument appeals cross party lines. There are people of all political stripes who see Kara as an easy solution to their pet problems, if only *they* get to tell her what to do. And they see you as the primary obstacle to that."

He spread his hands. "No one wants to attack Supergirl directly because you can't attack a girl of eleven who saves people's lives on a regular basis. It'd be political suicide. So they're going after you instead."

He leaned back in his desk chair. "They probably realize they don't have much chance of getting their way on Kara. But by whipping up a frenzy on this issue, they figure they have a sure bet to siphon off some support from the President's base."

"Now, we want to push back on both fronts. We want to reemphasize the reasoning behind the approach you're taking to fostering Kara, and that you're doing what her parents would want."

I sure hope so, thought Emily.

"Not only will that undermine the people portraying Kara as a resource, but it will back up the President's judgment in the matter."

"It's all politics, isn't it?" sighed Emily.

"Dr. Jordan, *everything* is all politics. As Churchill said, 'democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.'"

"Huh," said Kara. She'd never heard that before. It was kind of depressing.

Emily was silent for a while. "And what happens to his support if this issue really starts to hurt the President?"

Douglas regarded her seriously. "That's a no-win scenario for all of us, the President included."

"And this interview will solve the problem?"

"Political problems don't get solved; if you're lucky they fade away. The Administration's political strategists believe this will help, though. We have to show people who you are, instead of letting people like Bradley Rosner tell them who you are."

Emily sighed again. She'd ignored their advice the last time, and it had gotten her kidnapped and Kara exposed. She looked to the girls; Caitlin shrugged, and Kara nodded uncertainly. "All right. We'll do it."

They were told the next day that an interview had been scheduled with Kathy Morris, one of the most famous interviewers on TV. It would be a special broadcast, without commercial interruption, and last an hour. They'd have to be interviewed for two to three hours to produce enough material for that.

That much time was an impossibility for a school night, so the plan was to have the interview on Sunday and spend most of Saturday preparing with the White House media team. Ms. Morris was expected to be a friendly interviewer, but the Administration was leaving nothing to chance.

None of them were happy about their entire weekend being consumed, but it was a necessary evil. The necessity was amply demonstrated on Thursday.

As Kara and Caitlin were leaving school and about to get in their car, they were approached by a delegation of three people in business suits; one was Congressman Munroe. They were trailed by a flock of reporters.

"Miss Kent, my name is Norman Graves and I'm from the Delaware Department of Children's Services. I have here an order for your removal from the custody of Dr. Emily Jordan. We will be placing you with another family. Would you please come with us?"

Kara had no intention of following any such order, and looked up at Caitlin, who understood immediately: *Just like at Camp David*. They put their arms around each other, an innocuous-seeming gesture.

Before they could put that plan into action, Robin Gilbert and Christie Howell stepped forward. Robin said, “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to step aside.” Cameras were flashing.

“Excuse me?” said Graves, annoyed. “Young lady, I’m a state employee on official business. This isn’t a time for jokes.”

“I agree completely, sir. I’m Robin Gilbert, United States Secret Service, and these girls are under our protection. Once again, I request that you step aside.” She pulled out her ID and showed it.

Graves squinted at the badge and scoffed. “That’s a very convincing fake, Miss, but no thirteen-year-old is a Secret Service agent. I don’t know if your friends here put you up to this, but go away and let me do my job or I’ll have to call the police.” He moved towards Kara and Caitlin, who tensed.

Robin and Christie both pulled their service pistols in one smooth motion and trained them on Graves, who stopped abruptly. “Please step back, sir, or we’ll have to do ours. Not one step closer,” warned Christie. People on all sides shrank from the confrontation. Fortunately, they were well away from the flow of children leaving the school.

Graves gaped for a moment, then backed off; the agents lowered their weapons but kept them ready. Congressman Munroe came forward, indignant. “What’s the meaning of this? This is an outrage!”

Robin replied, “That’s not for us to decide, Congressman. Our instructions are that these girls go wherever they want, or wherever Dr. Jordan wants, with no exceptions. Right now, I believe they want to go home.” Caitlin and Kara nodded. “If you want to take it up with someone, you can go there and discuss it with DHS.” The cameras continued to flash; the entire confrontation was being recorded.

“That’s exactly what I plan to do,” huffed Munroe. “This is no way to treat a Member of Congress!”

Chapter 34: Paper Tigers

Robin and Christie usually went off shift right after the girls got home from school, but this time they stayed around for the confrontation. They didn’t have long to wait.

Emily had rushed home from the hospital, and her family stood huddled in one corner of the main lounge of the former B&B, surrounded by Jarrod, Robin, Christie, and other agents.

“As you can see, Mr. Douglas,” said Graves, “these papers are completely in order. I’ll have to insist that you turn Miss Kent over to us.” Congressman Munroe stood behind him, a satisfied smile on his face.

Fred Douglas had glanced at the papers briefly then handed them off to a staff member, who was reading them carefully. After a couple of minutes the woman leaned over, whispered briefly in Douglas’s ear, then handed the papers back.

Douglas straightened the papers and handed them back to Graves. “The papers are perfectly in order, Mr. Graves.” Kara held her breath. “However, I’m afraid they’re irrelevant. Miss Kent is not under your jurisdiction.”

“Excuse me?” asked Graves. “What are you talking about?”

“Miss Kent is not a citizen of the United States, and therefore her stay in this country is under the auspices of the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security.”

“What do you mean she’s not a citizen of the United States?” shouted Munroe. “What nonsense is this?”

Douglas was unperturbed. “It’s not nonsense at all, Congressman. There is no record of Kara Zoe Kent being born in the United States, or to a parent who is a citizen of the United States, nor has she been naturalized. She has no documentation to

that effect, and to the contrary has freely admitted to being from elsewhere. Therefore, she is not a citizen, Q.E.D.

“Depending on her personal history, she may be a citizen of an analog of the United States in another reality, or she may be,” he smirked, “merely a strange visitor from another planet. Regardless, her status there has no legal bearing here.

“She is classified as the child of a foreign dignitary and has been granted a diplomatic visa by the State Department. As such, she has diplomatic status and is not under your jurisdiction.”

“Clark Kent is a reporter, not a diplomat! He doesn’t represent their government. And that’s assuming he even exists!”

“No,” said Douglas, “he’s not a diplomat, nor does he represent their government in any way. However, Miss Kent informs us that it’s common knowledge there that Superman, or Kal-El, is a member of the nobility of the planet Krypton, and for a brief time was First Lord of New Krypton, their supreme leader. He’s retired from the position, but of course we extend him the same courtesy we extend to any other former head of state. And the same to his family, including his daughter.”

“This is preposterous! You really believe this story? Superman, King of Krypton?”

“First Lord of *New* Krypton. We don’t have any reason to doubt Miss Kent, as she’s shown herself to be an honest and trustworthy individual.” He paused a beat. “The State Department feels this recognition is the appropriate course of action at this time. Of course, if new information comes to light we can always reconsider her status.”

Munroe was speechless.

“Given all that, since she finds herself lost and separated from her parents, we’ve asked Dr. Jordan to continue as her foster mother until they can reclaim her, and both of them are happy with the arrangement. The President appreciates the care shown by the Department of Children’s Services in placing Miss Kent with a foster family, but you no longer need trouble yourself with her case; it’s now a matter for State and DHS. He gives you his heartfelt thanks, however.”

He gestured to the door. “Congressman, Gentlemen, good day to you.”

Graves looked helplessly to Congressman Munroe, whose eyes were narrowed. It was several seconds before he replied, “Very well. We’ll take our leave. Please give my respects to the President.”

“Of course,” said Douglas.

The Congressman left, his entourage in tow and his anger barely contained. The door shut behind them.

“Is it over?” asked Kara.

Fred Douglas sighed. “I wish it were. That was just one move.”

Caitlin poked Kara in the side. “Hey squirt, you’re an alien princess. Cool.”

Kara blinked. *I’m a what?*

“Did you really need to get her a diplomatic visa?” asked Emily.

“A regular visitor’s visa or refugee status would have been enough to deflect this gambit. We wanted to be prepared in case they try some other dodge.”

Suddenly, Emily gasped, “Caitlin!” Caitlin stiffened in understanding, her good humor fled.

“Yes,” said Douglas. “We don’t think they’ll go there. They no longer have an incentive to ‘persuade’ you to quit voluntarily, as we’ve removed their ability to replace you with someone of their choosing. Still, we’re developing a plan, just in case.”

“What are you guys talking about?” asked Kara.

“Honey, I never adopted Caitlin. I couldn’t afford the legal fees and time involved. So if they wanted to they could take her away from me.”

“That stinks!” said Kara indignantly. She folded her arms. “I

think these people are worse than the people who kidnapped you.”

Fred Douglas, for the first time since they’d met him, laughed out loud. “I think I might agree with you, Kara.”

“Next up tonight, the latest on the Girl of Steel. Mike Hooper is our Supergirl correspondent, live from Milford, Delaware. Mike?”

“Thanks, Bill. Yesterday’s unsuccessful attempt to move Supergirl to a different family hasn’t stopped the bipartisan coalition behind the SMPA. While still a minority in both the House and Senate, their numbers have grown. With me via video is Congressman Gerald Munroe, the bill’s sponsor and chief spokesperson. Congressman, what’s your view?”

“Thank you, Mike. Frankly, we’re disappointed in the Administration’s legal maneuvering to subvert the legitimate authority of the state of Delaware. It’s a classic example of the Federal government overstepping its bounds. And all of this is based on the flimsiest of foundations: the imaginings of an eleven year old girl!”

“Congressman, are you saying you don’t believe Supergirl?”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: she is a great kid. I would be very proud if she were my daughter. But we all know that kids that age have vivid imaginations. She finds herself with these amazing powers, and to make sense of it she imagines she’s the comic book character whose name she’s taken. And with that comes a whole comic book world, complete with Superman and Lois Lane. And because this story helps her feel better about what’s happened she believes it’s true.

“I don’t know who the Administration is listening to but the scientists we’ve consulted think this is crazy talk. They agree that parallel universes are possible, but the idea that there might be entire worlds populated with characters from our own books and movies is preposterous. They tell us that travel between parallel universes is impossible, and that it’s ridiculous to think an alien would look exactly like a human being, much less be able to father children with one.

“We don’t know how Supergirl got her powers but it’s simple common sense that she’s a human girl who’s been here all along. Maybe the kidnapers who left her by that road in Milford used her as a guinea pig in some kind of horrible experiment, and she got her powers from that. Homeland Security should be focused on tracking down those criminals, but instead they’re threatening public servants trying to go about their legitimate business.

“Meanwhile, we believe the best thing for Supergirl is for the Administration to stop fantasizing about Superman coming to the rescue, and either find her real parents or get her into a good, solid family if they can’t be found. That’s why my colleagues and I support the SMPA.”

“Thank you, Congressman.”

“My pleasure as always, Mike.”

“Congressman Munroe is correct that at least some scientists find Supergirl’s story hard to believe. We spoke earlier with Hector Morales, professor of physics at the University of Texas, Amarillo.

“Professor, can you explain it simply for our viewers?”

“Well, I can’t say that we have a complete explanation, but my colleagues and I have run some rough calculations and we find it incredibly unlikely her story is true. It’s essentially impossible.”

“But what about her powers, Professor? Don’t they kind of make a hash of the laws of physics, at least as we understand them?”

“The hypothesis we’re working on right now is that she may have gained superpowers as a result of a quantum fluctuation in the laws of physics. String Theory, which is the leading candidate for a ‘theory of everything,’ does allow for it. We’ve just gotten

started on this work, though, so it may take us a while.”

“Back here in Milford, though, support for Supergirl and her foster family is strong. There was some unhappiness to begin with due to traffic snarls caused by security and the media — sorry about that, folks! — but Supergirl’s relocation to the edge of town has eased those concerns.

“In fact, there’s a kind of hometown pride spreading for the city’s resident superhero. That, and the growing stream of tourists hoping to catch a glimpse of her, led the city council to officially welcome her and award her the key to the city, to be given at a ceremony later today. Milford has also declared itself the ‘City of Tomorrow,’ borrowing a nickname from its sister city of Metropolis.

“Our latest daily poll shows support for the SMPA increasing, but still a minority at 44%. Like Milford, most folks seem to support Supergirl and her family. From the City of Tomorrow, I’m Mike Hooper for CNN.”

“Really? You wouldn’t have her do it at all?” Kathy Morris leaned back in her chair.

Emily nodded. “Not until she was older. Her most important job right now is growing up to be a well-adjusted adult. That’s important for every kid, and especially so for someone like Kara. She’s well on her way, but she’s still eleven. She’ll be eighteen in seven years, and every kid has to go through a lot during that time.

“Being exposed to the adult world is part of growing up, but I think too much of it too soon isn’t healthy, especially not some of the situations she’s faced. Ideally, I wouldn’t have her do it at all. That was my first take.” She smiled at Kara. “I told her there was absolutely no way I’d allow it.”

“What changed your mind?”

“If your child was walking down the street, and they found someone injured, wouldn’t you want them to help? To call the police, or get an adult? You wouldn’t want your child to be indifferent to the suffering of others, to walk on by; you’d want to teach them compassion and responsibility. But you wouldn’t expect your child to stop a plane crash, because that’s not something they could do.

“What I didn’t realize at first is that for Kara, the rules are different. She *can* stop a plane crash, of course. For her, something like that is as easy as stopping to help an injured person is for the rest of us. So if she doesn’t act, and people die or are badly hurt, she feels responsible.

“Her very first rescue was to save a Milford man from drowning. I’d told her specifically not to do anything near Milford, so it wouldn’t be connected to her, and not to go on a rescue without asking first. And she did both.”

“Were you upset with her?” asked Kathy. Kara looked up at Emily.

“I expected to be, but I wasn’t. She had two choices: rescue the man, or do nothing and let him die. I finally understood it from her point of view — how could I ask her to sit in school and listen to a man drown? I couldn’t.” She smiled down at Kara. “I think we can all learn something from our kids.”

“So everything’s all right now?”

“I wish it were. I’m still worried about her seeing things she really shouldn’t at her age, like that Russian plane crash. I’m sure Kara’s parents would prefer she not get involved at all, but that’s in a world where Superman is on the job.

“I feel like we’re walking a tightrope, balancing her need to help with her need to have a happy, healthy childhood. And of course, there’s all this.” She gestured broadly at Kathy and the TV studio. “I was pretty sure her secret would come out if she helped in public, and... well... here we are.”

“Yes,” laughed Kathy, “here we are.” She turned to Kara. “And what do you think, Kara? Do you think your parents will

approve?"

"I hope so," said Kara. "Emily has been a great foster mom, and it's been fun having Caitlin for an older sister. I hope my parents like them. I hope they understand why Emily is letting me help people.

"I know my brother Jordan doesn't do any rescues, even though he's fourteen and I'm pretty sure he has at least some superpowers. If Dad was here to be Superman, I wouldn't feel bad not helping if something happened and he told me he'd take care of it. I think he's already doing that with Jordy."

"Do you mind if I ask you more about your family, and about Metropolis? I'm sure our viewers are very curious."

Kara smiled and shook her head. "I don't mind."

"That wasn't too bad," said Kara. "Ms. Morris was nice."

They were on their way by armored SUV to Andrews Air Force Base, to catch a helicopter back to Dover. DHS was considering installing a helipad at their home in Milford, but that was a large expenditure they didn't want to make just yet. No one wanted to discuss the conditions in Kara's hearing: they would build it if it became obvious she was staying indefinitely.

"I guess," said Caitlin. She rolled her eyes. "It sure helped that we practiced answering questions about a bajillion times yesterday. I could've done it in my sleep."

Kara giggled. "Me too."

Caitlin looked at Emily. "You're kind of quiet, Em. What are you thinking about?"

Emily showed a tired smile. "I'm just hoping this helps take a little of the pressure off. I hope all the details Kara gave about her family and life will convince some people she's not making it up." She sighed. "I don't know."

"I'm sorry I couldn't answer all the questions."

Emily smiled and stroked her hair. "It's OK, honey. I don't think many sixth graders would know the answers to all those questions about the city they live in. I'm sure I didn't know who the mayor of Seattle was when I was your age."

"They have his picture in the hallway at school, but I couldn't remember his name."

They pulled up to their helicopter and got out. They stopped short when they saw Fred Douglas waiting for them.

"Mr. Douglas?" asked Emily. "What are you doing here?"

He looked tired. "There's been a change in plans. We didn't think they'd do it, but Munroe and his people found Caitlin's aunt and persuaded her to press for custody. Since she's a blood relative, they managed to get an order from Children's Services to grant it temporarily. Luckily, we have our own sources who tipped us off before the order was issued."

Emily felt faint, and Kara and Caitlin both clung to her.

"What... what are we going to do?"

"You can't return to Delaware; if you do, they'll be waiting, and we have nothing to stop them with at the moment. Instead, we're taking you to an undisclosed location, saying it's a security issue due to a threat. That should hold them off long enough to get our plan together."

"What plan?" asked Emily weakly. Caitlin was weeping silently.

"Well, we'd been looking at more extreme options, like having Caitlin declared an emancipated minor, but—"

"Wait... what exactly does that mean?" asked Caitlin, sniffing.

"You'd be released from the control of your legal guardian. Since your sister never adopted you, your guardian is the state of Delaware. At that point, legally you'd be an adult."

Caitlin looked very uncertain. "I don't feel ready to be an adult."

"It's not the best option, but we were looking at it in case they tried to get Dr. Jordan declared unfit. That would be unlikely

to fly in family court since the President has expressed his confidence in her, so instead they're approaching it from the angle that it would be better for Caitlin to be with her aunt."

"The only person Aunt Aislyn cares about is herself — if she's asking for me it's because she expects to get something out of it."

"Be that as it may, she has a strong claim. Anyway, as I was saying—"

"Sorry," said Caitlin meekly.

"As I was saying, we need some time to respond to this. First, we're going to investigate your aunt. If she's like you say, we may be able to dig up some unflattering evidence. Second, we're going to put together a request to the family court to stay this order and resolve the matter in a hearing."

"Why are they doing this?" asked Emily. "What do they hope to get out of it? I thought you'd blocked them from getting Kara?"

"If they can't get Kara, they obviously think getting Caitlin is the next best thing. They probably feel it will enable them to influence you, and Kara as well." He thinned his lips, frowning.

"What happens if the judge rules against us?"

"Based on what you say, I'd guess the aunt doesn't really want custody. If Caitlin is taken away from you they could transfer her again, maybe even out of state."

"I don't want to go," cried Caitlin. "Em is the only mom I've ever had! I'm not leaving her!"

Emily hugged her tightly, "Oh, sweetheart, I don't want to lose you either." She looked to Douglas. "What are our chances?"

"It all depends on the judge, and what we can dig up on the aunt. The longer we can stall the better our case will be."

"And what happens if we win? What do they throw at us next?"

"If this fails we don't think they'll get any further trying to break up your family; they'll likely turn to a completely different approach. After all, they're still working on the SMPA. On the other hand we didn't think they'd try this, either."

Emily closed her eyes. "Very well, Mr. Douglas, we'll follow your recommendation. What happens next?"

"We have to do some homework, including trying to get a favorable judge. Fortunately, they're not the only ones with sympathetic friends in the state government of Delaware, and we have both senators on our side. We need to do everything very quietly, though, so as not to tip them off before the judge orders a hearing. So you folks need to be elsewhere."

"Where are we going?" asked Kara.

"We're taking you back to Camp David. It's on a military base, it's top secret and inaccessible, and there's nothing planned there for the next few days that might leak your location. That should be long enough to get this mess straightened out. I hope."

Chapter 35: Best Laid Plans

"How are they doing, Pete?"

Pete Lamb scratched his head. "Well enough, considering. Assuming we can shoot this latest attempt down, they should get a breather unless the SMPA passes. Since they'll have to override our veto, it'll take a while for support to reach that level. If we're lucky, it won't ever."

The President rubbed his eyes. "We need to step up our messaging game. We're not getting through to the public on this."

Pete sighed. "The other side can be blunt, but we don't have that luxury. We can't be explicit on why ours is the best approach for aligning her with American interests, without inflaming the Chinese and the Russians. Not to mention our allies.

"For all their blustering about the SMPA the Chinese and the Russians are pretty happy about it. It gives them ammunition at the U.N., and if it passes and makes things too hot for her, they know she'll run. They'd like nothing better."

“Well, keep working on it. I want to give an address on this soon, in prime time, and I want a kick-ass speech. The public has to understand why we’re doing it this way.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll meet with the speechwriters tomorrow. Was there anything else?”

“No, Pete. Why don’t you go home? Say Hi to Dennis for me.” The President smiled. “And it’s been too long since you’ve brought him here for dinner.”

Pete offered a crooked grin. “I’ll let him know, Mr. President. Have a good evening.”

The President rose from his desk as his Chief of Staff left, then turned to look out the window, his jaw clenched with frustration. Munroe and the others were jeopardizing something of great strategic importance to the United States.

People like him saw what they wanted and grabbed for it directly; they had the patience of a toddler. That wouldn’t work. You couldn’t boss a goddess around and expect anything good to come of it. Especially if the goddess’s father should come calling.

Your friend, on the other hand, would gladly help you out. Your friend would take your side, watch out for your interests. Having a goddess for a friend could be a very good thing.

But friendships took time and care. They were an investment.

Kara was bored.

She didn’t think she’d miss school, but she did. At Thanksgiving, they’d all needed a break, a chance to come to terms with their public exposure. But Kara had gotten used to the new rhythm of her life, and this was a big disruption. Again.

They didn’t even know when they’d be able to leave. Camp David was nice and all, but she’d rather have been back with her friends, or even better, her family. Caitlin and Emily weren’t happy either.

Supergirl wasn’t needed on Monday so there wasn’t that to keep her busy. They were sending some schoolwork along but it hadn’t arrived yet, so she had the whole day free. She did some reading, careful to do it at normal speed to make it last longer. Sometimes if she was really excited about a book she’d drop into super-speed without noticing.

She pattered around on the Internet for a while, but she wasn’t supposed to chat with her friends and you could only watch silly videos on Youtube for so long.

She spent an hour just running around Camp David at normal speed like a normal kid, trying to see where all the trails went. Unlike a normal kid, she wasn’t any more tired afterward than when she started. She was surprised that she missed that tired feeling — it was a kind of medal of accomplishment that let you know you’d done something. The Secret Service agent who’d been trailing her was tired enough for both of them, though.

She went flying, but was cautioned not to let anyone off the base see her coming or going, or to go anywhere near Delaware. The base was large enough, surrounded by an even larger state park, that she could head straight up before starting to travel. That was enough to keep anyone from seeing where she was coming from.

She was very, very tempted to visit the Moon, but was too worried about running out of air to try it before talking to her father. She thought she could make it there, walk around a bit, and make it back before having to take another breath, but she wasn’t sure. Besides, she kind of wanted to visit her own Moon, back home. Even though this one looked exactly the same, as far as she could tell.

She was kind of impatient to go back into space again, period. The view was amazing and the sun felt *so* nice. Too bad even she needed to breathe, even if only every twenty minutes or so.

Huh. Maybe she could visit the space station, the one she’d saved? They’d have air. That might be fun! She could even take

them some things from the ground they might miss. Like flowers; she bet they didn’t have fresh flowers there. Or burritos, or pizza.

It was getting too late today, though, and she thought she’d better ask permission first anyway. She didn’t think she should just show up and knock on the door. Did it have a door?

She checked her smartphone, this time making sure it had the right time zone, since she was currently two thousand feet above Hollywood. She’d wanted to see the sign.

She’d been tempted by Disneyland too, but didn’t have much money with her. Also, they had a sign saying children had to be accompanied by an adult. Maybe Emily could take them sometime?

She decided it was getting close to dinner time and started back to Maryland. She hadn’t been on her way more than a few moments when her attention was caught by the sound of gunfire.

She looked down, and her vision zoomed in on two groups of young men facing off with each other in a residential neighborhood; many on both sides had guns. No one appeared to have been hurt yet. In the small houses around them, Kara could see the residents cowering as far away from the windows as they could.

Without stopping to think she went into a steep power dive; moments later she landed abruptly between the two gangs, causing them all to jump in surprise.

“Stop shooting!” she shouted.

One of the men scowled and fired his gun at her. Kara was caught by surprise and the bullet ricocheted off her head.

He blinked, and fired off several rounds in rapid succession; Kara was prepared this time and easily caught them all.

She let the bullets slide off her open palm onto the ground like so many pebbles. The men all gaped and lowered their weapons.

“Stop shooting!” she repeated, stamping her foot for good measure. She was angry.

The men all looked at each other. “Whatcha gonna do, *chica*? Arrest us?” A laugh ran through both gangs.

Kara frowned. “No,” she admitted. “The government people told me I shouldn’t try to arrest anyone.” She folded her arms and glared at them. “But they said I could stop people from getting hurt. Shooting each other is wrong, and you could hit the people in these houses! It’s stupid!”

The men seemed at a loss: with force and threats off the table their problem-solving skills were limited. One of them finally said, “Go home. This ain’t your business.”

“You’ll just start shooting again!”

Another of the men sighed, exasperated. “Just go home!”

Kara looked around at them. She knew if she left they’d just pick up from where she’d stopped them.

An idea came to her, and she started spinning and firing blasts of heat vision. Moments later all the men dropped their guns and cursed, shaking their hands. Kara blurred, then reappeared holding a ball of crushed, partially melted guns. She let it drop on the pavement, where it landed with a dull *thud*.

“Hey!” shouted one of the men. “You can’t do that!”

Another man rolled his eyes. “She just did, *tonto*. Whatcha gonna do, call the cops and file a complaint?” He walked over to Kara and knelt down in front of her, eye to eye. “You know this ain’t gonna stop nothin’, *chiquita*. There’s plenty more guns where those came from.”

Kara frowned and looked down. “I guess.” She looked back up at the man. “But I *had* to. I can’t watch people die and do nothing.”

The man nodded once in acquiescence.

“Why do you guys *do* this?”

The man opened his mouth to reply, then stopped. He knew exactly why they did this, but couldn’t begin to explain it to the innocent child looking back at him. He was used to thinking of

the good and innocent as weak and powerless, and she was anything but. She made him uncomfortable.

It didn't help that she looked like an angel.

"It's complicated. Maybe you'll understand when you're older."

Kara looked around at all of them, and shook her head. "I don't think I'll ever understand." A quick check with her vision assured her that no usable weapons remained. "I guess I can go now. But you guys are being really dumb."

She shot upwards without further preamble. Both gangs watched silently as she dwindled into the late afternoon sky. Some of the men crossed themselves.

At twenty-six minutes past ten o'clock Tuesday evening, a light snow was falling in Milford Neck Wildlife Area, though it wasn't sticking. In a clearing in a small stand of trees, a small, brightly glowing dot appeared in midair, illuminating the surroundings.

Within moments it expanded to a twelve-foot sphere, then deformed into an odd shape. Suddenly, from an impossible-seeming direction, something slid into that shape, and the glow faded, revealing a man and a woman on what looked like an old-fashioned horse-drawn sleigh.

Lois swallowed heavily. "Clark, after that trip I'd better not ever hear another crack about my driving. Wow..." She shook her head. She felt a little dizzy.

Hearing no response, she turned to find Clark slumped against the controls, his skin eerily glowing green in the darkness.

"Clark?" She reached out, hesitated, then shook him. "Clark?"

The glow faded slowly, and Lois shook him more urgently. "Clark, are you all right? Clark, what's wrong? Clark!"

Chapter 36: Things Are Seldom What They Seem

She couldn't ignore the noises any more. Why couldn't the birds just *shut up*, for pity's sake? Didn't they realize how *rude* it was?

Lois groaned and opened her eyes. She did not enjoy camping; unfortunately, she was the only one in the family who didn't. Clark had never wanted to force her to do it, but the kids had looked up at her with those big eyes, and well, what could she do? So she'd learned enough to get by.

When it had become obvious that Clark wouldn't wake up but otherwise seemed OK, she'd had to make camp by herself. She hadn't known what the local time was but it had seemed late.

She hadn't wanted to set off by herself looking for medical aid, because first, who knew if they had doctors in this world, and second, if they did, she was pretty sure Clark wouldn't want them poking at him. She'd hoped he'd sleep off whatever it was and be all right in the morning. If not, she'd reconsider her options then.

Lois had been able to pitch the tent, though by her reckoning it had taken her about ten thousand times as long as it took Clark. She'd been able to roll out the sleeping bags. She hadn't been confident enough to try building a fire, but she'd been more than warm enough after wrestling her unconscious husband out of the time machine and into the tent.

She'd been tempted to just leave him, but she'd noticed he had a small cut on his hand where it had fallen against the controls. He'd lost his powers, at least temporarily. If she left him in the time machine he'd die of exposure.

After an immense struggle that had taken forty-five minutes, Lois had gotten him inside. Getting him into his sleeping bag had been beyond her by that point, so she'd unzipped it and wrapped it around him, tucking him in as best she could. She'd finished very late and sat outside in the freezing cold for five minutes, cooling down and feeling thankful she hadn't wrenched her back. She'd crawled in with him, adding her own bag around them.

Despite her internal clock thinking it was mid-afternoon and the complaints from every muscle in her body, she'd quickly fallen into a deep sleep.

Lois peered at her husband; he was still breathing peacefully. She put her hand on his forehead. Now, as last night, his temperature seemed normal. For him, anyway.

The contact caused Clark to stir, and Lois was gratified to see his eyes flutter open. "Clark?"

Clark was groggy. "Huh? Honey?" He blinked. "What?..." "Something happened when we got here last night. You blacked out and your skin was... glowing green like Kryptonite for a minute or so. I couldn't wake you up, so I pitched the tent and got you inside."

Clark groaned and sat up. He spotted his glasses, reached over, and put them on. He winced slightly and looked at the small cut on his hand. It wasn't infected but it wasn't healed either. He frowned. "My powers are gone."

"I know. I had to drag you out of the time machine and in here. It was too cold to leave you outside."

Clark looked apologetic. "Oh honey... I'm sorry. That can't have been easy."

Lois smiled. "I did wonder at one point if you should lose some weight, but then, I like your body just fine the way it is." Her smile widened into a saucy grin.

Clark gazed at her for a long moment, then leaned down and kissed her. He sighed. "Sadly, this isn't really the time..."

"...or the place, yeah." She sighed too. "Do you think your powers will come back?"

"I don't know. It could be something about coming here, or it could be that there's something about this reality that makes it so they can't work." He shrugged. "Maybe that's why Tempus brought Kara here. I imagine we'll find out." He furrowed his brow. "Did anything happen to you?"

"I was dizzy for a few seconds, but nothing else."

"Did you notice anything about where we are?"

Lois sat up as well. "Not really. All I saw was some trees."

He nodded. "I guess our first job today is exploration, then."

They'd eaten a light breakfast then broken camp. They'd covered the time machine with a tarp to protect it from the elements. Clark, used to clearing brush on the family farm, had used some from nearby to further hide it from casual observation.

Their camping gear was the latest, very lightweight, and everything fit into two medium backpacks. Clark looked around to make sure he'd recognize the copse where they'd arrived; then they set off.

"Clark? Do you think this world could be primitive, or even uninhabited? Could there be... dinosaurs or something?"

Clark shrugged. "I don't know. If there are dinosaurs, I sure hope we don't meet them while I'm not one hundred percent. And Kara... I hope she's not on her own."

They walked along in silence for a while.

They both stopped when there was the distant sound of an engine starting up. "Well," said Clark, "by the sound of it, either the dinosaurs have tractors or... we're near a farm."

"Clark, look!" cried Lois, pointing skyward. High above them, the contrail of a jet was visible. The sound followed shortly thereafter. They looked at each other and smiled.

"At least we know there's a civilization like ours here," said Clark. "Let's hope this is still the United States."

They soon came to a cleared area, at the end of which was a dirt road. There were marks from car tires. "Better and better," said Lois.

Clark looked back the way they'd come, as he had every few minutes. Confident he knew how to get back to the time machine from here, he turned and looked up and down the road. Judging by the sun, which they could now place, it ran north-south.

“Huh,” he said. “I guess we were heading east.”

Lois looked up and down as well. “That way,” she said confidently, pointing left — to the north.

Clark raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a hunch. Have my hunches ever led us wrong?” At Clark’s look, she said, “Don’t answer that. Do you have a better idea?”

“Not really. North it is.”

They started walking, but Clark stopped abruptly. “Huh.”

“What is it?”

“The sun. Usually I feel a little tingle from it, but... nothing.”

“Maybe that’s why you lost your powers?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.” They resumed walking.

Lois’s hunch turned out to be correct; after about a quarter mile they came to a gated fence across the road. “I hope we haven’t been trespassing,” said Clark. He climbed over, then helped his wife to do the same.

They read the sign on the outside: “Wildlife Area — Official Vehicles Only.” The sign was also marked with the seal of the state of Delaware. “English, *and* we’re still in Delaware,” observed Lois, relieved. “I guess this world isn’t as different as Mr. Wells feared.”

The road on the other side of the gate was paved. After another few hundred feet they came to an intersection with what was obviously a public road. The road they’d come from was not marked with any kind of sign, so Clark again looked around the intersection, memorizing the landmarks. If they couldn’t find the time machine, they’d be stuck here. He knew how to build a time machine from scratch, assuming he got his powers back, but he had no idea how to build the three-axis device that allowed travel between realities. He’d tried looking inside it but it was opaque to his vision.

“That way?” wondered Lois, pointing right. “We were heading east to start with.”

Clark shook his head. “Since we’re in Delaware, east leads to the bay, and judging by the land we might be close already. West would be a better bet.”

Lois nodded, and they headed off. As they walked, their hands found each other. It was cold, colder than it should be in mid October, but it was a nice day and they were warm enough. It would have been a pleasant hike if they weren’t unimaginably far from home, looking for their lost daughter.

After about twenty minutes, they heard the engine noise of a truck coming from behind them. They moved to the side of the road, still holding hands, as a pickup came around the bend. It had Delaware plates and was driven by a man in his sixties; he slowed down to a stop beside them.

“Mornin’,” he called. “What’re you folks doin’ out here? There’s no campgrounds nearby.”

Clark shrugged. “I guess we’re a little lost. We were trying to head to, uh, town?”

The man nodded. “Milford? I can give you a lift, if you don’t mind ridin’ in back. I don’t think I can fit you and your packs in the cab.”

“We’d be mighty grateful if you could,” said Clark, slipping back a little into his Kansas speech patterns.

“Just open the gate yourself and climb in,” called the man.

“Thank you, sir,” called Clark, as they went around the back and climbed in. “Can you tell us what road this is?”

“You’re on Cains Landing Road. You really *did* get lost, huh?”

“We sure did.”

The truck started up again, and the combination of engine and road noise made conversation with the driver difficult. Lois and Clark watched in silence as they navigated a series of country roads, finally emerging onto a divided highway marked State

Route 1.

“Delaware Route 1? We must be south of Metropolis,” observed Lois. Clark nodded; north of Metropolis, Route 1 had become Interstate 395 in the 1950s.

They were even more surprised when they passed a sign saying, “Welcome to Milford, Home of Supergirl.” The familiar shield of the House of El adorned the sign.

“Supergirl?” echoed Lois. “Clark, do you think that... there’s a *female* version of Superman in this world?” She wrinkled her nose unconsciously.

“Well, if she’s his age I’d hope she wouldn’t still be calling herself Supergirl,” said Clark. “Though the shield implies she’s related to him somehow. But Milford... there’s no town in Delaware named Milford.”

Lois frowned. “What if there’s no Metropolis here? Are we where Metropolis would be?”

“It’s hard to tell, honey, until we can look at a map. At least we’re in Delaware.”

Lois’s eyes widened. “Clark... *Supergirl*... you don’t think...?”

Clark frowned, then glanced quickly at their driver; his attention was on the road, and Clark was sure he couldn’t hear them. Still, he leaned in closer to Lois. “She can’t have developed her powers all at once — look at Jordy, and it was the same for me. Besides, it looks like this Supergirl has been here for a while.”

“Still...” She pondered that. “Hey! Whoever Supergirl is, if she really is ‘super,’ maybe that’s good news for you getting your powers back.”

“Assuming they work the same way, yes.”

They turned off Route 1 and headed into the business district of Milford. Their driver pulled over to the side of the street when he spotted a parking space, then called out the rear window, “This a good place for you folks?”

“Yes, sir,” said Clark. “We’re much obliged. Just a moment while we get out.” He and Lois climbed out, closed the gate, and went around to the passenger window, which the driver had opened. “Thank you again, Mr. ... ?”

“Reynolds, Carl Reynolds. My pleasure.” He reached out a hand at the same time as Clark, and they shook.

“Thank you, Mr. Reynolds. I’m Clark Kent and this is my wife, Lois Lane. We really appreciate your kindness.”

Reynolds’s smile vanished in an instant, and Clark withdrew his hand uncertainly. “Sir?”

Reynolds regarded him evenly for a moment, then sighed. “Son, you look like good folks, so take some advice from an old man. Just give this fool scheme up and find an honest way to make a living. I know times are tough, but this ain’t the answer.”

Without further ceremony, he drove off. They both stared after the truck as it turned a corner.

They looked at each other. Lois opened her mouth, then closed it again. They both looked back to the corner the truck had turned.

“Clark, what just happened?”

“Beats me.”

Chapter 37: Failing Grade

They looked around; Milford was a city, but it didn’t seem much bigger than a town like Smallville. Clark folded his arms. “Maybe we should scout around a little? Get the lay of the land, like Mr. Wells said?”

“Clark, can’t we go straight to the police? Maybe they know where Kara is. Maybe we could see her right away?”

“I thought we could see if there’s a library, find out a bit more about this world...”

Lois closed her eyes. “Please, Clark. Now that we know we haven’t landed in Jurassic Park, I want to find her. I want to see

her. Can't we start with that?" She ended in a whisper.

Clark grasped Lois's arms gently and pulled her into his embrace. "I understand, honey. Believe me, I want to see her too! Sure, we can try the police first. But we need to be careful; we don't know what they're like here, or how they'll react to us — look at what just happened with Mr. Reynolds. OK?"

"OK," she replied, with a teary smile.

Clark kissed her gently and released her. "Now all we have to do is figure out where the police station is. I hope we don't need a car."

There was a kind of bakery/coffee shop further down the block, and Lois pointed it out. "Maybe we could ask there?"

Clark nodded, so they set off again, hand in hand. It was a few seconds' walk.

Inside there was a short line of people waiting to be served. Clark didn't want to cut, so he waited a minute or two in line while Lois stayed outside.

"What can I get you, sir?" asked the woman behind the counter.

Clark smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, I'm just looking for directions. Could you tell me how to find the police station here in town?"

The woman nodded. "Sure, just head out the door, turn left, and in a few steps you'll be at Front Street. Turn right onto that, and it's about a half mile to the police station, on the right. You can't miss it."

"Got it," said Clark. "Thank you!"

"No problem." She smiled. "If you find yourself in the mood for coffee or a pastry later, come on back, OK?"

"Sure thing," agreed Clark. "Thanks again." He nodded to the woman, and they were off.

Ten minutes later they were walking up the steps of Milford Police headquarters. Clark held the door open for Lois, and they went straight to the reception desk.

"Excuse me," said Clark politely, "is there anyone we could talk to about finding a missing child?"

The receptionist, a civilian woman, answered, "If you would have a seat, sir, ma'am, I'll see if one of the detectives can talk to you." She waved at a small waiting area to one side.

"Thank you, ma'am."

The woman smiled; then her eyes settled on Lois. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"Has anyone ever told you you look a bit like that actress on *Desperate Housewives*? She plays Susan."

Lois frowned. "Desperate *what*? Who?"

"The TV show?"

Lois and Clark looked at each other.

"Anyway, you look enough like her to be her sister, but...

Huh. No one's ever mentioned it?"

Lois shook her head.

"Maybe the resemblance isn't as strong as I thought. Sorry..." The woman blushed.

Lois laughed nervously. "Um, don't worry about it." They went to sit down.

Lois looked around. The room was empty at the moment, save for a man dressed in dirty clothes, holding an ice bag to his head. He looked to be around thirty. Lois had been in enough police stations that her gaze traveled over him almost without stopping.

After about ten minutes' time, a young man with close-shaved hair, wearing a leather jacket and sporting a single earring, came out from the office area of the station. He looked around the lobby, spotted them, and came over.

"Are you the folks looking for a missing child? I'm Detective Leo Maury."

Lois and Clark stood, and Clark reached out to shake the detective's hand. "Thank you, Detective. I'm Clark Kent and this is my wife, Lois Lane."

The man with the ice bag laughed once, then winced and went silent again.

Maury was eyeing them coolly. "Well, most folks have been going straight to DHS these days, but Detective Spalding usually handles the ones who come here. He's out at the moment, so I guess I can talk to you." He sighed. "Follow me; I think the conference room is open."

He turned and walked away; Lois and Clark followed him. Lois looked at Clark questioningly, and Clark shrugged back.

Lois and Clark took their packs off and took seats across the conference table from Detective Maury. He had a notepad, and looked rather more uninterested than Lois thought a public servant ought to in a situation like this.

"So, who is the child who's missing?"

Clark and Lois exchanged glances. "She's our daughter," answered Lois. "Her name is Kara, Kara Zoe Kent."

"Of course," replied the detective. "Can you give me a physical description?"

Clark nodded. "She's eleven and a few months; her birthday's at the end of June. Blonde hair, down about to her shoulder blades, blue eyes, height about..." He looked to Lois. "When was the last time her height was measured?"

"When she saw Bernie in August. It was four feet nine and a quarter then. Weight, around eighty-four pounds. Right about fiftieth percentile for both." Lois thought a moment. "Oh, and she was wearing a pale blue turtleneck and jeans."

"We have a photo," offered Clark. He rummaged in a pocket of his pack, and pulled out a color photocopy of Kara's fifth grade graduation photo. She had a huge smile on her face.

"Here; it's a copy, you can keep it." Clark slid it across the table to the detective, who picked it up, looking not the slightest bit interested.

"Uh-huh." He slid it under his notepad. "Can you tell me when the last time you saw her was?"

"It's been nine days," replied Lois immediately. "She was on her way home from school when she was seen being taken by a man in a car. We, uh," she hesitated, "we think she might be in this area, based on some things the man left behind."

"What was the exact date?"

"Umm, October 19..." replied Lois. She'd forgotten that the date might not be the same here; she had no idea what it was. She looked to Clark nervously.

"I see. Just got here from Metropolis, then?"

Lois and Clark relaxed somewhat and smiled at each other. "Yes, as a matter of fact. We just now arrived in town," replied Clark.

"OK. What's your home address?"

"348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis," replied Clark confidently. It seemed this world wasn't that different after all. Of course, they didn't live at that address in Metropolis *here*, but Clark liked to be truthful if he could.

"Uh-huh. Is there somewhere I can reach you locally?"

"Um, not yet," replied Clark. "We just got here, and, uh, we haven't found a place to stay yet. We wanted to come right here and get things rolling."

Lois asked, "Detective? Has anyone seen her? Do you think you can help us find her?"

"Oh, plenty of folks have seen her."

Lois burst into a smile so radiant that Clark thought it might restore his powers on the spot. "Oh Clark!" she said emotionally, "They know where she is!"

She turned back to the detective. "Can you take us to her?"

"Well, that depends on whether the glass slipper fits."

Lois's and Clark's smiles vanished. "Excuse me?" replied Clark. "Glass slipper? I'm not sure I follow, Detective."

Maurly smirked; it wasn't a kind expression. "You're Clark Kent, right?"

"Uh... yes?" replied Clark uncertainly.

"OK, let's see it, then. Come on, Superman. Show me something."

The response was automatic, honed by years of practice. "I'm sorry... Superman? What makes you think I'm Superman, Detective?"

"If you want to prove you're Clark Kent, show me a superpower. Come on, fly, lift the table, whatever."

Clark frowned. "Detective, I don't know what you're getting at but this isn't a joke. We're just trying to find our missing child and I don't see what Superman has to do with it. As you can see," he showed off the cut on his hand, "I'm clearly not invulnerable, so how could I be Superman? Can we please get back to finding our daughter?"

"Well, that's pretty conclusive, I agree."

Clark and Lois looked at each other.

"We'll be in touch if anything comes up. If you get local contact information you can leave it to my attention at the front desk." He got up and walked over to the door, opened it, and motioned for them to leave.

"Good day."

"That rat bastard knows where she is and *he won't tell us!*" Lois strained against Clark's grasp as she struggled to head back the way they'd come. "Just let me get back there and I'll show *him* who's not invulnerable!"

"Honey," soothed Clark, "I don't think assaulting a police officer is the best way to get them to cooperate."

"I'll *kill* him!"

"Or that, either."

Lois sagged, the fight leaving her. Suddenly she burst into tears.

Clark wrapped her in his embrace. "Oh, honey..."

Lois pulled back to look up at him, and Clark saw she was smiling broadly as she cried. "Oh Clark... she's alive! She's all right! She's *here!*" She hugged him tightly. "*We found her!* Oh *God*, I was so worried..."

They gazed at each other for a long moment. Then, they locked lips in a passionate kiss.

After a few seconds a passing teen girl called out, "Geez, you guys! Get a room!"

They pulled away from each other, blushing lightly. "Clark, do you think this is like that other alternate universe, where that other Clark's secret was exposed? Maybe that's why Detective Jerkface said what he did?" Her face fell. "What if that other you has a daughter Kara too, and that's who he's talking about? Maybe it's not our Kara?"

"I don't know, honey. But let's go to the library and do some research. There's obviously something going on here we don't understand, and we need to find out what it is."

Lois sighed and nodded. "We need to find a place to stay, too. We can't camp out in town, and we both could use a shower."

"Hey, Leo, anything come up while I was out?" Malcolm Spalding threw his jacket over the back of his chair.

"Not really. Just another Mr. and Mrs. Kent."

"Huh. I thought they were all going to the house now, and talking directly to DHS. I haven't seen one here in weeks."

"Well, maybe these folks didn't get the memo. They looked like they'd been camping. Had packs and everything." He snorted. "I mean, at least most of the rest knew to come in dressed like professional people, not like an ad for L. L. Bean."

Spalding frowned. Something was tickling the back of his

mind. "Anything else about them?"

"This was the first guy who's ever been in who denied being Superman. All the rest have always been, like, 'oh, my powers are on the fritz today' or 'it's cloudy so they don't work.'" He shook his head. "They did have the address right. And they had a photo, but they all have a photo." He rummaged on his desk, pulled out the photocopy from a stack, and passed it to Spalding.

"They went into this whole shtick about a doctor's visit, too, and how much she weighed and her height. They were good actors, I'll give them that. Man, that woman was *pissed* when she left."

Spalding looked over the photo. It was Kara, no doubt about that; it looked like a typical posed school photo. He frowned. Kara hadn't had any such photo with her when she was found, and he doubted she'd posed for a photo like this since she'd arrived. She wasn't wearing glasses.

He supposed it could be Photoshopped, but there was something about the picture... He couldn't put his finger on it. Maybe it was that he'd never seen her smile quite so broadly since she'd shown up here. It was certainly not the same as any of the photos that previous couples had brought in, all of which had been obviously Photoshopped from news sources, and usually badly.

Was it his imagination, or did she look slightly younger?

"When did they come in?"

"Oh, about two hours ago."

Spalding frowned. The tickling was getting stronger. "Leo, hypothetically..."

"Yeah?"

"Say you were her real parents..."

"Do you really believe her story? I mean, Congressman Munroe... what he says makes a lot of sense, even if I don't like what he's doing to the Jordan sisters."

Spalding sighed. "Humor me?"

"Yeah, yeah, OK..."

"You're going to some parallel Earth. You have no idea what it'll be like when you get there. Maybe the Nazis won World War II. Maybe it's all post-apocalyptic, Mad Max. Maybe there's no human life at all. How would you dress? What would you take with you?"

"Well, I'd... umm... Hmm."

"You wouldn't dress in a business suit, that's for sure."

Spalding felt a chill. "And say you're Clark Kent and you've been Superman for... what did Kara say? Eighteen years. You've kept your secret identity a secret for that whole time. And then someone accuses you of being Superman. How do you react?"

"Huh. But he did have a cut on his hand. In fact, he made a big deal about it: 'Look, I'm not invulnerable, so I can't be Superman.' ... Oh. *Oh!* You think...?"

"Kara didn't have powers when she got here, either. Maybe something about the travel drains their powers, like Kryptonite?" He rubbed his eyes. "Two hours ago, you said?"

"Uh, yeah. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know if they're the real deal, but they're the first ones to show up who could be." He got up and grabbed his jacket. "I need to talk to them."

He walked out to the front desk. "Marcie?"

Marcie looked up from her desk. "Yes, Detective?"

"Do you remember a couple that was in here about two hours ago? They had backpacks, talked to Leo..."

"Oh yeah, them. I remember them. The woman looked like an actress on a TV show I watch."

Spalding frowned. Could they be professional actors? It seemed unlikely; someone who worked in Hollywood wouldn't get involved in a scam, would they? Then again, people did all sorts of stupid things or he wouldn't have a job. "Did they say anything when they left? Like, where they were going?"

Marcie frowned. “Not really, no. They did ask for directions to the library.”

Spalding felt that mental tickle again. That’s exactly where he’d expect them to go. “Thanks. I just hope they’re still there.”

Chapter 38: A.K.A. Superman

Malcolm Spalding pretended to read a book as he surreptitiously watched the couple from across the room. They appeared to be in their late thirties, a bit younger than he was expecting. The man was handsome, muscular but not overly so; not a body-builder type at all. He had black, slightly wavy hair, a slight Asian look to his brown eyes, and wore glasses. He had a day’s worth of beard stubble.

The woman also had black hair in a bob, dark eyes, and a beauty that shone through the slightly disheveled look they both sported. The way they interacted spoke of long partnership. They certainly looked the parts.

At the moment, they were sitting in front of one of the library’s public computers with a web browser open and a stunned expression on their faces.

They’d click to a new page, lean in to read it, then look at each other, gobsmacked. They’d converse urgently in a low whisper for a while, then click again. He’d been watching for fifteen minutes, which meant they’d been at it for over two hours. If they were whom he suspected, he wasn’t surprised.

He didn’t really need to observe them any further. He was just a little intimidated by the idea of walking up and talking to them if they were really... them.

He had one test, one piece of information very few people knew: just himself and a few others. He hadn’t put it in any reports because he hadn’t thought it was real. It was possible a scammer might have this information, but very unlikely.

Finally, he sighed, put the book down, and got to his feet. *Might as well get this over with.* He walked over to the couple and spoke in a low tone. “Ms. Lane, Mr. Kent?”

The two of them looked up at him, appearing more than a little bewildered. “Yes...?” said the woman, tentatively.

“I’m Detective Malcolm Spalding, Milford Police.” He showed his badge. “Do you mind if I talk to you?”

The man and woman looked at each other, to the screen of the computer, then back to him. “Umm, I suppose not,” said the man. “I thought...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“I think Detective Maury was a little too hasty when he spoke to you. But before we continue, I’d like to check a few things. First, do you have any identification?”

The couple exchanged glances again, seeming to communicate without speaking. The man reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet. He flipped through it, then held it out with a driver’s license showing.

The license was from the Delaware Division of Motor Vehicles, in the name Clark Jerome Kent, address 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis, Delaware. It looked very official, with the proper anti-tampering seals and an unflattering photo of the man holding it.

If it was a fake, it was a very, very good one; Spalding nodded. “Ms. Lane, I have one question for you.” He leaned in close and spoke in a near whisper. “Can you tell me your cell phone number?”

She frowned and replied equally quietly. “I didn’t bring it with me... we didn’t think they’d work here.”

“I don’t need to call you. Just tell me the number.”

She replied without hesitation. “It’s 668-555-2049.”

Spalding closed his eyes, his heart pounding. He was nearly certain he was talking to Lois Lane and Clark Kent. *Superman and his wife!* He opened his eyes again and stood up straight. “I take it you’ve been... catching up?” He nodded to the computer.

Lois and Clark looked at each other again. “Yes,” said Lois

glumly. “It’s all so hard to believe. I mean... discovering that...” She looked to Clark.

“Discovering that we’re fictional characters here. That all our friends and family are, too, and even the city we live in,” finished Clark, shaking his head. “I know Lois and I have had a lot of strange things happen in our lives, beginning with...” Even knowing his secret was anything but here, Clark had trouble saying it plainly. “Beginning with where I come from and what I can do, but this...” He shrugged. “This is beyond strange.” He looked at Lois. “This is definitely the weirdest thing that’s ever happened to us. And believe me, that’s saying something.” Lois nodded.

“It’s just as strange for us here, Mr. Kent, I assure you.”

Clark looked to Lois again, then back to Spalding. “But even with all that, we’re just relieved to have found her and to see she’s all right. It’s been a difficult nine days for us.” His expression turned sorrowful. “Though it looks like it’s been eight weeks for her. Mr. Wells warned us that this kind of time displacement might happen when we traveled here.”

“I’m sorry, did you say Mr. Wells?”

“Yes, H. G. Wells, the writer. At least in our world, he really did build a time machine. He’s the one who helped us to travel here.”

Spalding just shook his head. “So how come she arrived on the same day here that she was kidnapped there?”

“It’s complicated, but there’s a kind of navigational beacon you can use if you’ve left it beforehand — it makes it easier to hit the target, as it were. The man who kidnapped her must have left one here. We have one back home to help us return there.” Clark didn’t mention that they’d also brought one with them in case they needed to return to this reality.

Lois was focused on other things. “Kara must have wondered if we’d given up on her,” she said mournfully. “The longest she’s ever been away from us before was two weeks for Girl Scout camp.”

“She’s doing all right from what I hear, and with any luck you’ll see her within a few days.” He paused. “I don’t know if you came across this, but hundreds of people have been claiming to be you.” A flash of anger crossed Lois’s face. “That’s why Detective Maury responded the way he did. After he told me about you, I felt he missed some things.

“That phone number you just gave me is known to very few people, so I think you’re probably the real deal. I’d like to talk to you some more to make sure, but this is not the place for it.”

“You still don’t believe us?” asked Lois, her eyes flashing.

“Honey,” said Clark, “look at it from his perspective.

There’ve been a lot of fakers trying to cash in on Kara.”

“I guess...”

“Detective, I have one more thing I can show you, though I don’t know if it’ll convince you either. We have better proof back home, but we didn’t bring it with us. We never imagined we’d need it.” Clark unzipped the main pocket in his pack and dug inside. He pulled out a photo in a rigid waterproof sleeve. “Our family is spread out all over space and time right now, so we wanted to bring this with us.” He handed the photo to Spalding.

It was a five-by-seven family portrait, taken sitting on the steps of what appeared to be a brownstone. Lois and Clark sat together on a back step, with three children in front of them: in front of Lois, a young teen boy who looked very much like his father, glasses and all; in front of Clark, a solemn-eyed little girl who looked like a mix of the two of them; and between her siblings, Kara.

The family had been caught in a relaxed, happy, unposed moment, and you could tell they were close. Spalding noticed that despite her blonde hair and blue eyes, Kara bore a definite resemblance to her brother, sister, and father. It was more obvious when you saw them all together.

“Our friend Jim Olsen took that recently. He was a photographer for the Planet for a long time. He’s a senior editor now but he still does a lot of photography. He’s really gifted.”

Spalding stared at the photo, and could tell it was unlikely to be a fake, purely from the family resemblance and the composition. The way the members of the family were in contact with one another, the expressions on their faces... Kent was right, his friend had a gift. Kara had not been Photoshopped into this picture. He looked back at Kent, and could see the family resemblance directly now.

He handed the photo back. “I believe you... Mr. Kent.” He looked around the library. “We should probably get you folks out of here and someplace more private.”

Lois and Clark looked at each other and stood, then picked up their packs and shouldered them. Clark leaned over and cleared the browser history.

“Where did you have in mind, Detective?” asked Lois.

Spalding rubbed his eyes and didn’t quite answer. “I don’t know if you saw from the news, but there’s a huge political fight going on over your daughter right now. And some of the players are not playing very nice.”

Clark put an arm around Lois, a grim look on his face. “We saw.”

“Given that, I don’t want to talk with you back at the station, because I don’t want this news to get out to *anyone* until you’re... back up to speed, let’s say. Not even DHS, which is protecting her. I told your daughter I was on her side and I was going to look out for her, and I mean to keep that promise; I want to help you. Do you have a place to stay?”

“No, not yet.”

“I know another friend to your daughter who might be able to arrange something.”

Kevin, Megan, and Bailey walked in the front door of the Tong home and stopped short at the array of adults.

“Mom? Aunt Penny? Detective Spalding?” asked Megan uncertainly. “Is something going on? Is that why you texted me to bring Bailey with us from school?”

“Close the door, sweetheart,” said Mrs. Tong urgently. Megan blinked, and turned to do so.

After turning back Megan tilted her head and listened. “Is someone using the blow dryer upstairs?”

“About that,” said Mrs. Tong. “We have some houseguests for a few days.”

“Are Grandma and Grandpa here from Florida already?” asked Kevin. “I thought they weren’t coming for a couple of weeks yet.”

“Um, it’s not Grandma and Grandpa,” said Mrs. Tong nervously.

Before she could elaborate, there were footsteps on the stairs and a pair of legs appeared, shortly followed by the rest of a man. He was dressed in a flannel shirt, blue jeans, and hiking boots, and wore glasses; his hair was damp. His eyes fell on the three kids and he smiled.

Megan noticed the slight Asian cast to his eyes and wondered if he was related. Her dad had a lot of cousins they’d never met.

The man turned to their mother and said, “Thank you for letting us stay here, Mrs. Tong. My wife and I really appreciate your hospitality. She’s just finishing up and should be down in a minute.” As if on cue, the blow dryer stopped.

Mrs. Tong giggled nervously, a sound Kevin and Megan did not hear very often. “Please, call me Alice. Um, you’re very welcome... anything we can do...” She seemed flustered.

The man smiled and nodded, and turned back to the kids.

“Hi! You must be Kevin, Megan, and Bailey?”

“Yes?” offered Bailey uncertainly.

The man came forward, his hand extended. “I’ve heard what

great friends you’ve been to Kara. I’m her dad, Clark Kent.”

All three kids gaped as Clark’s hand hovered in the air, unmet.

Kevin looked to Detective Spalding. “Is... is he really... ?” Spalding nodded.

“Kids,” chided Penny gently.

Kevin reached out first, tentatively, and shook Clark’s hand. When they were done, Kevin stared at his own hand in wonder. “Wow...”

Clark shook the girls’ hands; they too seemed in a daze.

“I really appreciate everything you’ve done for her; thank you.”

There were footsteps on the stairs again, and everyone turned to watch as a woman descended. She too was wearing hiking boots and blue jeans, with a turtleneck sweater.

Clark made introduction. “Kids, this is Kara’s mom, Lois Lane.” He smiled at Lois, and she smiled back.

After fourteen years of raising her own children, school field trips, parent days, play dates, Cub Scouts, Brownies, Girl Scouts, and Boy Scouts, Lois was long over her awkwardness around children. “Hi!” she said, coming over. “You must be Kara’s friends?”

“Yes,” croaked Megan.

“It’s nice to meet you all. Your mom has been telling us all about you and Kara. I’m really happy that she’s had friends like you here.”

“Does this mean Kara is going home?” blurted Bailey.

Clark and Lois looked at each other. “We certainly hope so, at least soon,” replied Clark. “That’s why we’re here.”

“You’re... you’re Superman? You’re really Superman?” Kevin finally managed.

Clark smiled; being around awestruck kids was familiar ground. “Well, that’s a name I use when I’m helping out. Like Kara calls herself Supergirl.”

“Can you do everything she can do?”

Clark laughed. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard it that way. But actually...” he trailed off and looked to the other adults.

“Kids, remember how we told you you had to keep Kara’s secret? Before it all came out?” said Penny.

“Yes...” said Bailey, confused.

“This is just as important, OK? You can’t tell *anyone* about our visitors. At least, not until they say it’s OK.”

“Why not?” asked Kevin. “Why can’t Superman... Mr. Kent... just fly off and find Kara? Why are they staying here?”

“That’s why you can’t tell anyone,” said Spalding. “Mr. Kent doesn’t have his powers at the moment. Like Kara, he lost them when he got here.” He paused. “Since he and his wife are vulnerable right now we don’t want anyone to know they’re here, or they may get caught up in the bad things that’ve been going on for Kara’s foster family. I wouldn’t put it past some people to take them hostage, like they tried with Emily Jordan.”

“Couldn’t Kara rescue them if they were in trouble?”

“It’s better if we just don’t go there to begin with, because she can’t rescue them if she doesn’t know where they are.”

“Isn’t there any way to get a message to her?” asked Megan. “They could just go home together, even if Mr. Kent doesn’t have his powers.”

“Unfortunately,” said Spalding, “we don’t know where she is, and we don’t have any way to contact her directly at the moment. The government says it’s for security, but it’s obvious they’re hiding Kara and the Jordans because of the custody issue.”

“Couldn’t we just call or text her?” asked Megan.

“I’m betting the government would find out if you did, and I don’t know how they’d react to Mr. Kent being vulnerable; I’d rather play it safe. If he doesn’t get his powers back in a week or so the way Kara did, then we’ll rethink our plan. If Kara does come back to Milford, they’ll be in range of her hearing and can

just call to her.”

“Get them back? She said she didn’t have powers back home,” said Kevin.

Clark scratched his head. “That’s something we don’t understand yet. Before this all started, we’d just noticed she was invulnerable because she’d stopped getting scrapes and bruises. I don’t think she’d noticed that herself.”

“She said she had no idea about any of it when she got here,” confirmed Megan.

“Anyway, that’s the way it was with me when I was her age, and with our son Jordan. I was invulnerable first, and then got my hearing, then the other powers followed gradually. That’s why we were planning to tell her, uh, the family secret soon. We don’t know why she got her powers all at once here. I didn’t fly till I was eighteen.”

“Clark,” said Lois, “Jesse Stipanovic was flying, and he was three and a half.”

“True,” admitted Clark. “But he borrowed *my* powers; maybe that was it. Still, I guess we don’t really know everything about this. We’ll have to talk to Bernie when we get back, see if he has any ideas.” He turned to the others. “Dr. Bernard Klein is a scientist at STAR Labs. He’s also the family doctor.”

“I wish you could see Kara sooner,” said Bailey. “She really misses you, and I know she has like a billion questions for you.”

The Kents turned somber. “We want to see her too,” said Lois. “What kind of questions?”

“Well, there’s the whole thing about Mr. Kent being Superman…”

Lois smirked at Clark. “You’re three for eight now, Flyboy. You’re not improving your average.” She looked to the others. “I figured it out before he told me. So did Perry White, Jim Olsen, and my dad. And now Kara. We did tell our son, my mom, and Dr. Klein.”

Clark coughed, embarrassed. “My dad really drilled it into me when I was a kid to keep it a secret, so it’s hard for me to talk about.” He looked askance at Lois. “But we would have told Kara first if she hadn’t been kidnapped.”

“There’s always an excuse,” teased Lois. She turned back to Bailey. “What other questions?”

“Well,” said Bailey timidly, “she thinks she might be adopted because of what she read in Kevin’s comics. She felt kind of hurt that you didn’t tell her sooner.”

Lois turned to Clark, all traces of humor gone. “Oh, Clark…”

Clark sighed and put an arm around his wife.

“So *is* she adopted?” asked Bailey.

“I think we’d rather talk to Kara first about that, before we discuss it with anyone else,” said Clark. “Can you understand? I promise we’ll tell you the whole story after that, as long as she’s OK with it.”

“I guess that’s fair,” admitted Bailey.

“So… so…” stuttered Kevin, “you’re going to be staying here for a few days?”

“Yes,” said Clark, nodding. “We hope to be out of your guest room before your grandparents arrive for Christmas. I hope you don’t mind?”

“*Mind?*” shouted Kevin, incredulous. “*Superman* is staying at *my house!* Of course I don’t mind!”

“What do we tell everyone?” asked Megan. “I mean, if they find out we have guests?”

Lois and Clark looked to Mrs. Tong, who said, “The Kents have already discussed it with me, sweetheart. We’ll be telling anyone who asks that they’re Charlie King, your father’s second cousin, and his wife Lorraine.”

“Oh… those are the first names Kara gave for you when she started at school,” said Bailey.

“We use those names sometimes when we go undercover,” explained Lois. “Kara knows that.”

“What about Dad?” asked Kevin.

Mrs. Tong looked uncomfortable. “Detective Spalding didn’t think it was a good idea to discuss all this over the phone. I just told your father that we have guests from out of town on a surprise visit, and we’re hosting them for a few days. He was OK with it. He can get the details when he gets home in a few hours.”

“So now what?” asked Megan.

“Well,” said Detective Spalding, “I have to get back to the station.” He looked to the Kents. “I’ll put Leo off — somehow.” They nodded. “And you have my number?”

Clark nodded and pulled out a disposable cell phone the detective had gotten for them. “I have it on speed dial.” He waved the device, then stuck it back in his pocket.

“OK, then. Sit tight for now, and if you need anything let me know.”

Clark reached out a hand. “Thank you very much for your help, Detective. We appreciate it.” He shook Spalding’s hand. “Without you, we’d still be wandering around lost, looking for a place to camp, and worrying about getting arrested for vagrancy.” He smiled.

“Yes, thank you,” added Lois, doing the same. “I’m not a big fan of camping out.” She grinned.

“It’s my pleasure, Ms. Lane, Mr. Kent.” He nodded. “I’ll be in touch.” He let himself out.

“I need to get back to the hospital, Alice,” said Penny. “Let me know if you need anything.” The sisters-in-law embraced. Penny turned to the kids and said, “Remember… it’s an important secret.”

“We *know*,” said Kevin, rolling his eyes. He brightened suddenly. “Wow, this is just like being in a Superman movie!”

Everyone laughed. Penny hugged her niece, then her nephew — over his objections — and was on her way.

“Bailey, do you need to get home?” asked Mrs. Tong.

“Umm, my parents said it was OK to hang out here until dinnertime.”

“Do you kids have any homework?”

“A bit,” admitted Bailey, reluctantly.

“Well, why don’t you three go upstairs and get that out of the way? You can come down and visit more when it’s finished.”

“But…” objected Kevin, “I mean… we have a chance to talk to *Superman!* That doesn’t happen every day. Can’t the homework wait?”

“Kevin,” said Mrs. Tong in a warning tone. “Homework first.”

“Oookayyy,” he grouched, and the three kids trudged up the staircase, turning back once to look at the Kents before disappearing upstairs. “Man!” Kevin could be heard complaining.

“Well, *that* was familiar,” observed Lois.

Chapter 39: Ruthless

“Clark?”

“Mmm?”

“Are you awake?”

“I am now,” he replied. He wrapped his arm a little tighter around Lois. “What’s on your mind, honey?”

“I’ve just been thinking about Kara… those videos we watched earlier.”

By the time the kids had finished their “little bit” of homework, it had been dinnertime. Bailey had gone home reluctantly, promising not to tell her parents about the Kents. Mr. Tong had come home and though he’d been shocked, having met Kara earlier he’d been somewhat prepared.

After dinner, Kevin had asked if they would be willing to talk about their world. Lois had asked if they could find out more about Kara instead. Anxious as they were to find out what their daughter had been doing for the last eight weeks — an idea they were still coming to grips with — they hadn’t had enough time at

the library. They'd promised they'd answer Kevin's flood of questions the next day after school.

The Tongs' TV could connect to video sources on the Internet and they'd been able to find all sorts of clips with Kara in action. They'd seen video from her mine rescue in China, from her rescue at Heathrow, the school hostage crisis in Fort Collins, and many others. They'd seen the news report about the Russian plane crash. Lois and Clark had absorbed it all silently.

Finally, they'd watched the interview with Kathy Morris. Lois had noted the way that Kara leaned casually into Emily Jordan, the trust she was showing in her foster mother. Lois was simultaneously happy that Kara had found someone to take care of her, and upset at the sight of another woman playing *her* role with *her* child.

Clark knew what Lois was thinking about. "Honey, there is no way anyone could ever replace you as her mother."

Lois nodded uncertainly. "When Mr. Wells said there could be some kind of time offset I never expected it to be this much. She's been through a *lot*, Clark, some of it nasty. I can tell she's matured a little. We've missed a part of her growing up."

She bit her lip. "I was sure if something like this happened I'd want to go back in time and make it *un*-happen, but if we do that... it feels like we'd be erasing a piece of her. Her memories, her experiences, the friends she's made. And all those lives she saved... It doesn't feel right." She shivered. "I don't want to play God."

Clark sighed. "I think you're right." He thought for a while. "But it's not so bad. It's not that different from a kid going off to camp for the whole summer. She hasn't forgotten us — you heard the way she talked about us in that interview."

"Most kids at summer camp don't start a career as a superhero."

Clark blew his breath out. "Yeah." He paused. "What do you think about that, by the way? I mean, Supergirl?"

"I don't know. I was ready to rip that woman's spleen out for letting her do it, but after I heard her explain her reasoning, and what Kara had to say, now I'm not sure. I remember what it was like being Ultra Woman, hearing people in trouble all the time. I know how hard it's been on Jordy. Even with you there he wants so badly to help... How did you ever survive growing up?"

"It was easier in Smallville in that era. No Internet or satellite TV at our house until after I left home, so no 24 hour news. There were only a few local radio stations, and what news there was tended to be crop prices, weather, and the like. I could hear things in town and at the surrounding farms, but... there wasn't really a need for me to do much.

"I did save a kid from drowning at the quarry once when I was fifteen; he went there alone and fell in. Dad was very unhappy when I told him about it, even though no one saw me. I got the frog lecture again. But..." He paused. "If we'd been immersed in instant news then the way we are now? I don't know. I might've been Superboy. Even with Dad's misgivings."

Clark felt Lois nod; she was silent for a while. "It's hard to wait. Now that I know she's here and she's OK, it's hard to wait to see her, to hold her. To take her home. She's our baby and I want her back." She elbowed him gently. "You better hurry up and get back to normal, buster."

Clark smiled, glad she was feeling better. "Yes, ma'am."

"... and, maybe I won't rip that woman's spleen out."

"You are the soul of kindness, honey."

They closed their eyes and drifted off to sleep, their hearts and minds focused on Kara.

In her bed at Camp David, Kara shifted in her sleep, and a peaceful smile stole onto her face.

Kara made her way to the dining room in the morning, feeling inexplicably upbeat. She started skipping on the way. She

found Caitlin and Emily already there, both looking a little downcast.

"Good morning!" chirped Kara as she entered.

Emily smiled at her. "Well, this is unusual. You haven't slept in since you got your powers."

"I slept really well last night."

Caitlin eyed her suspiciously. "You're awfully cheery, considering it's Day Three of the hostage crisis."

Kara pondered that as she grabbed a package of Cap'n Crunch from the sideboard and emptied it into a bowl. "I guess I am. I have a feeling things are going to get better."

Caitlin sat up a little straighter. "Can you... you know... see into the future?"

Kara giggled. "I don't think so. Superman can't, so I don't think I can either. It's just... a feeling."

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Jarrod Gardiner stuck his head into the room. "Dr. Jordan?"

"Yes?"

"There's a call from Mr. Douglas. You can take it on the video screen here." He withdrew, closing the door behind him.

Emily went over to the video screen and pushed a blinking button. The screen came on, showing Fred Douglas. He looked rather somber.

"Mr. Douglas?" said Emily. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I have some news for you. First, we've gotten the family court hearing scheduled for tomorrow in Wilmington, at two o'clock. It's with Judge Quinn, and we feel she'll be sympathetic."

"That sounds promising," said Emily.

"Well, that brings us to the other piece of news, and it's not good. Dr. Jordan, I'm afraid the board of Milford Memorial has decided to terminate your employment."

Emily drifted backwards until she bumped into the table, and sagged onto the edge. "What?" she said faintly.

"Someone got to the board of the parent corporation. Over the strenuous objections of your immediate management, the board decided that, quote, 'the media circus around Dr. Jordan is a liability to the hospital and detrimental to the well-being of our patients,' unquote." He sighed, and added compassionately, "I'm sorry."

"But why?" asked Emily in a small voice.

"If I had to guess, it has something to do with the hearing tomorrow. You're now unemployed, and the judge will know that. However, we're confident she'll see what's going on here and put a stop to it."

Caitlin was furious. "What is *wrong* with these people?"

Mr. Douglas shook his head. "What's wrong is that there are powerful interests who are desperate to get their hands on Kara, and they don't care how many lives they ruin in the process. I don't think I've ever seen so many usually cautious politicians be so ruthless."

"Can't the President do something?" pleaded Kara.

"The President can't do anything because so far, technically, no laws have been broken, though personally I think extortion is being committed. The President has to tread very carefully where a Member of Congress is concerned, and there's more than one of them in on this, including in his own party. He can't just clap them in irons; it would cause a huge crisis. He plans to speak out and condemn this, though, and reiterate his support for Dr. Jordan."

"So there's no way to stop them?" asked Caitlin.

"The only thing that would stop them is if public opinion were so negative, their concerns about being reelected overwhelmed their desire to control Kara's power. So far that hasn't happened, because a good chunk of the public is with them."

“Even if they do things like *this*?” asked Kara, incredulous. “They’ll never let something like this get pinned on them. They’ll just express their regrets that it happened.”

“My job,” whispered Emily. Kara and Caitlin hurried to hug her.

“Dr. Jordan,” said Douglas. “I’m very sorry for this. Once we’ve got the whole custody issue settled, the President has assured me that we’ll help you find another position as a doctor, one that’ll be to your liking and with an employer these people won’t be able to influence. You don’t need to worry about supporting your family or completing your residency.” He hesitated. “It may not be in Delaware, however.”

Emily nodded, distracted. A tear trickled down her nose, and Kara realized this was the first time she’d ever seen Emily cry. She didn’t notice the tears starting to trickle down her own cheeks.

There was an awkward pause. Douglas finally said, “I can’t be at the hearing in Wilmington tomorrow, but you’ll be represented by some of D.O.J.’s top attorneys; you’re in good hands. Please don’t let their machinations get to you. We’re confident we have enough negative information on Caitlin’s aunt to stop this.”

Emily nodded again, but didn’t reply.

“Goodbye, Dr. Jordan.”

“Goodbye,” she murmured, and the call ended.

“Oh Em,” said Caitlin, hugging her more tightly.

Kara wanted to be strong for Emily, not needy, but her guilt overwhelmed her. “Oh Emily,” she cried, “it’s my fault! Your lives are all messed up, and it’s my fault! I’m so sorry...” She hugged Emily as well.

Emily shook her head and replied hoarsely, “Don’t blame yourself for what they’re doing, honey. It’s not *your* fault.”

Kara shook her own head, unconvinced. Emily had shown her nothing but love and care, and her reward was losing her job and maybe her sister too. If she hadn’t insisted on being Supergirl, none of this would have happened.

Chapter 40: Comics Can Be Educational

After breakfast, Clark insisted on doing the dishes, leaving Mrs. Tong somewhat nonplussed. Kevin and Megan were used to being waved off to school by their mother, but it felt strange having Lois Lane and Superman waving too.

Clark felt the rays of the rising sun on him as he stood in the doorway, but it still felt kind of... dead. It was a little warm, but that was it. Was this what the sun felt like to normal humans?

Lois read his expression. “Still nothing?”

Clark nodded. “Nothing. It took Kara a week, so I guess we’ll just have to be patient.”

Lois hated waiting — they both did — but there wasn’t much they could do. Unless they could determine where Kara was, there was no way to contact her without going through the government. She tended to agree with Detective Spalding’s take on that.

They helped Mrs. Tong around the house, and did their own laundry. They spent the rest of their time trying to learn more about the world they were in. They spent hours on the Internet, reading the sites of the major national and international news organizations, among others. They came to two conclusions.

The first was that this world was in an even bigger mess than their own. Political institutions, slow-moving back home, were downright dysfunctional here. Critical problems festered for lack of attention while enormous energy was spent arguing over manufactured controversies. Moneyed voices spread disinformation, practically unchallenged.

As cynical as Lois was, the extent of corruption among politicians here astounded her.

The news media seemed to have abandoned their role of

helping the public cut through the spin and learn the truth, opting instead to cover politics as a blood sport. Lois found herself itching to write some editorials.

The second conclusion was that their daughter was at the center of a hurricane of raw political power that would have given Machiavelli pause, and they needed to extract her without delay.

Unfortunately, the day dragged on with no change in Clark’s condition. He went outside and sunbathed a bit, but his powers showed no sign of returning.

Kevin consulted his checklist. “Spiderman?”

“Fictional.”

“The Hulk?”

“Likewise.”

“Thor?”

“The same.”

Lois and Clark weren’t particularly into comics, but since they were playing a waiting game they didn’t have much else to do. Given the generous hospitality of the Tong family, they couldn’t begrudge Kevin the opportunity to satisfy his enthusiastic curiosity.

“Lex Luthor?”

Lois and Clark looked at each other. Lois lowered her eyes.

Clark replied, “He died about seventeen years ago. Well, the first time.”

“The *first* time?”

“Somehow, one of his cronies managed to resurrect him. He died for good three years after that.” He paused. “At least, we haven’t seen him since. He was the third richest man in the world, businessman, philanthropist... and the biggest crime boss Metropolis has ever seen.” He looked to Lois, who shook her head, her cheeks flushed; he nodded slightly in understanding.

“He bought the Daily Planet and shut it down, but we managed to collect enough evidence to indict him, and the paper got back on its feet.”

Kevin was typing furiously on his laptop. “Batman?”

“Oh, him,” said Lois. “The elusive masked vigilante of Gotham City.”

“So he’s real? Cool!”

“He’s real enough, but you’d never know it by how often he shows himself.”

“It sounds like you don’t like him,” said Kevin.

“It’s more that I don’t trust him. He sometimes takes the law into his own hands, though he seems to be on the right side. He and the Gotham PD aren’t on great terms, but these days they tolerate him. He doesn’t give interviews, and I think he’s hiding something.”

Clark smiled. “Superman is hiding something too, honey.”

“I don’t mean just his other identity.” She folded her arms.

“Like I said, I don’t trust him.”

Clark shrugged. “I have to admit, I don’t always approve of the way he goes about things, but he does seem to be trying to help, and I think he has. I’d give him the benefit of the doubt.”

Lois smiled. “That’s your job, not mine.”

“He doesn’t have superpowers, right?” asked Kevin.

“That’s what he says, but I wonder sometimes. He must be in his forties by now, like Lois and me. I don’t see how he can keep up at the physical level he does if he’s a normal human.”

“Robin?”

“He worked with Batman for a while, but hasn’t been heard from in years.”

“Maybe Batman is a vampire after all, and Robin wound up being a ‘donor,’” suggested Lois, tongue in cheek.

“Bruce Wayne?”

“The orphaned multibillionaire? Majority owner of Wayne Enterprises. Since Luthor died, Wayne is now the third richest

man in the world. He does a lot of humanitarian work, and even fosters disadvantaged kids. Lois and I have interviewed him, both before and after he got into politics.”

Kevin paused. “Politics?”

“Yes, when he was younger, he was very private and didn’t seem to take much interest in anything outside his charities and society circles. Then he had a terrible riding accident, which put him in a wheelchair temporarily. It took him a year of physical therapy to recover.

“After that, he developed an interest in making Gotham a better place to live for the less fortunate, and became a campaigner against corruption. A few years later he entered politics as an independent, running on a reform platform. He’s currently serving his third term as mayor. I have to say I think he’s doing a pretty good job.”

Kevin seemed to agonize over something. “If I show you something, do you promise not to, umm, tell any secrets?”

Lois perked up. “OK, now you’ve got my attention.”

“As long as keeping the secret won’t hurt anyone else,” promised Clark. He looked to Lois, who nodded reluctantly.

Kevin got up and went to his comic collection, rummaging through it. He pulled out an issue of *Detective Comics* and handed it to Clark.

Clark flipped through it slowly, not saying a word until he was finished.

“Huh,” he said. He handed the comic to his wife. “So maybe the riding accident...”

“...wasn’t a riding accident?” finished Kevin.

“Oh, isn’t *this* interesting,” said Lois, flipping the pages. “Robin did disappear about the same time as Bruce Wayne’s accident — but Batman didn’t.”

Clark nodded. “So I guess he took over the family business, so to speak...”

“...just like the Dread Pirate Roberts,” finished Lois. “Very clever. That explains the mystery.”

“You promised, right?” said Kevin. “You won’t expose him?”

“We promised,” agreed Clark. He looked to Lois, who was biting her lip. “Lo-is...”

“All right, all right,” she conceded.

“I don’t think we’d be doing Gotham or Mayor Wayne any favors by exposing him anyway.” Clark paused. “But maybe Superman should have a chat with him.”

“Do you always talk about Superman like he’s a different person?” asked Kevin.

“Tell me about it,” said Lois.

“It helps those of us who know keep the secret, because we’re less likely to say the wrong thing.”

Kevin nodded and went back to his list. “Justice League?”

“Sounds interesting, but I’ve never heard of it.”

“Legion of Superheroes?”

“Not that, either.”

“Mr. Mxyzptlk?”

“Don’t say his name!” said Lois and Clark simultaneously. They looked around warily.

“Umm, I guess you’ve met him,” said Kevin. “Are you really that worried? He’s been in Superman stories here for like forever, but he’s never shown up here for real.”

“I wouldn’t put anything past that little...” Lois abruptly censored herself.

“We haven’t seen him since the nineties, honey,” said Clark. “Maybe he got tired of us. If there are as many realities as Mr. Wells says, he’s got plenty of other worlds to go be a pest in.”

“OK, I already know about Supergirl...” Kevin paused. “Hey wait... your cat is named Streaky?”

Clark nodded. “That’s right.”

“Does he have superpowers? Does he fly?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “The only time that cat flies is when he

hears the can opener in the kitchen.”

“He’s just an ordinary cat, I’m afraid,” said Clark.

“Oh,” said Kevin, disappointed. “How about...” Just then there was a knock on the door.

Alice stuck her head in. “Kevin, it’s a school night...”

“But Mom...”

“...and I think you’ve interrogated our guests enough for tonight.”

“We didn’t mind, Alice,” said Lois. “It was... educational.”

Kevin looked around at the adults. “I guess we can do this some more tomorrow night,” he sighed. He saved his document and shut the lid on his laptop.

When the first ray of sunlight hit Clark the next morning he knew immediately, and smiled.

“What?” asked Lois, excited.

“The sun.”

Lois grinned too. “Time to go out back and recharge, Flyboy.”

“Yep. Give me a few hours, and Superman should be back in business. Looks like we won’t have to wait a week.”

The Tongs had a pool, which was covered for the winter. Clark found a chaise lounge; he laid back and tried to soak up some sunshine. It was still fairly cold with the sun so low, so he had to wear his jacket and couldn’t expose much skin. He fell asleep.

He’d promised Alice that he’d make lunch, so Lois woke him around eleven-thirty. He checked his hand; the cut still wasn’t healed.

He searched through the refrigerator to see what ingredients were available and decided to make a vegetable frittata, which they all enjoyed. After cleaning up he went back to lounging in the sun, this time reading the news on Kevin’s laptop. It was warm enough now for him to roll up his sleeves.

He was just finishing an article about the upcoming custody hearing for Caitlin Jordan when he felt the cut on the back of his hand start to itch. He closed the laptop and watched the injury rapidly knit itself together, disappearing in seconds.

He barely had time to process that when his ears were assaulted by a furious burst of sound. He clutched at them in agony, but the sensation had already passed and he heard the familiar noises of the world rush back in. He tried levitating a little and was pleased to see he was fully back. He stood up from the chaise and headed inside.

Lois was inside in the family room, talking to Alice. She took one look at Clark’s face and smiled. “Is Superman back?”

Clark grinned, lifting off the floor to answer. Alice, who’d never seen a demonstration from Kara in person, shrieked a little.

Clark dropped quickly back to the floor. “Sorry about that, Alice.”

“It’s... it’s OK,” she assured him. “It’s one thing to see it on TV and another to see it in person, that’s all.”

Clark turned to his wife. “Honey, their backyard is pretty secluded. I think I’m going to head up into space and get the sun full on. It should only take about five minutes.”

Lois nodded. “Are you going to change?”

“Might as well. It’s in the bottom of my pack.”

“Change into what?” asked Alice, but her question was answered as Clark blurred upstairs, to reappear a second later as Superman.

“Oh, my,” she breathed.

“Have a nice time in outer space, honey,” said Lois cheekily, waving him off.

Clark just smiled and shook his head. He slid the glass door to the backyard open, then shut it behind him. He looked around carefully, then vanished, a swirl of leaves left behind.

“Is it like this all the time?” asked Alice.

“Pretty much.”

About twenty miles up, out of curiosity Clark looked back down at the land below him. Instead of Metropolis he saw the small city of Milford, surrounded by rural countryside.

He focused on the area where Metropolis should be and saw that it was mostly low wetlands. He looked west, and noticed that the larger rivers draining the hills all flowed west to Chesapeake Bay; back home, one flowed eastward. Due to those differences in topography, there was no New Troy Island, no harbor suitable for shipping. No wonder no city had been founded on the site.

He shook his head. It was hard to imagine a Delaware or United States without Metropolis. To him, it seemed as if the state had a gaping wound in the middle of it.

He looked across the bay to New Jersey and found a similar situation: low wetlands where Gotham City should be, rather than the rocky archipelago that had led to the founding of a port, later to grow into a city. He wondered if there'd been some kind of ancient event that had flattened the land in this way, or if it had just been a natural variation in the geological development of the region.

As he rose higher and higher the unfiltered sunlight shone brightly, and Clark felt power flooding into him. So much power that he was surprised. He felt far stronger than he ever had before; control of his powers felt much easier.

Clark knew that though he broke the laws of physics as current human science understood them, there must be *some* natural laws that governed how his powers worked. It seemed as though those principles were different in this reality.

Was that why Kara had gotten all her powers at once, and mastered them with relative ease? What would happen when they took her home? Or when he went home, for that matter?

In far less time than he would have thought Clark felt fully charged. He dove back down towards the ground, then stopped abruptly fifteen miles up as a thought occurred to him. He traced back the route they'd taken two days earlier, zooming in with his vision. He found the gated road, the clearing, and worked his way back to where they'd come from.

His vision peeled back the tree canopy, and there it was: the time machine, still camouflaged, the three-axis device still in place. He let go the breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He hesitated, then decided to talk to Lois first.

On a hunch, he glanced into the Tongs' garage. It was full of junk, so much junk that there wasn't enough room for the cars, which were parked in the driveway. But there was enough room for something else.

Lois and Alice looked up as Superman slid the glass door open and stepped inside, closing it behind him. He spun in a tornado of colors, which resolved into Clark Kent.

“Wow,” whispered Alice.

“Did you bring me a souvenir?” asked Lois, grinning.

“Sorry honey,” said Clark comically. “I forgot.”

He turned to their hostess in a more serious tone. “Alice, I noticed you park your cars outside. Do you ever put them in the garage?”

She shook her head. “No, the garage is too full of... um, stuff.”

He turned to Lois. “Honey, I'm thinking that if Alice is OK with it, it would be better to keep the time machine here than in the middle of the woods. I'd still cover it up in case anyone looks in there. What do you think?”

Lois considered that. “It's probably safer here, as long as no one thinks to search their garage. And if we need to leave in a hurry, it's a lot easier to get to.”

Clark turned back to Alice. “Is that OK with you, Alice? If we put our time machine in your garage?”

Alice blinked. “Umm... feel free?”

Alice had wondered how Clark could possibly get something as large as the time machine into her garage without someone noticing, but Clark had pointed out that it could travel in space as well as time. They wouldn't even have to open the garage door.

Working at super-speed, Clark had spent about two minutes clearing an area of the right size to fit the machine, tidying up the Tongs' garage a bit in the process. He'd then fetched their beacon and put it at one corner of the space. Mr. Wells had assured them the time machine had safeguards against materializing inside a solid object, but Clark wanted to be sure.

Then Clark had slipped out to the backyard. Now, Alice and Lois were waiting for him to return.

Alice goggled as she watched a point of light appear in her garage, rapidly expanding to a glow. When the glow faded the time machine was there, with Clark in the driver's seat. He turned the machine off, got out, and pocketed the electronic key.

He grinned. “It gets great mileage, too.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Did you get that corn from Kansas, Farmboy?”

“Of course,” replied Clark, beaming. “Nothing but the finest.”

“So you think she'll be at this custody hearing in Wilmington?”

Clark nodded. “They should be there now, if the article was right. I'll try there first. If she's not there I'll just start doing rescues and she'll see me on the news.”

Lois was practically giddy with anticipation. “And you'll bring her straight back here?”

“Or I'll come get you and take you to wherever she is.” He smiled. “I'm sure we'll see her today, honey. And then we can start getting ready to go home.”

They embraced and kissed; Alice averted her eyes, smiling. Then Clark stepped back, spun, and was Superman again. He waved, slipped out the sliding door to the backyard, and was gone.

Chapter 41: Found

Kara was bored out of her mind.

She sat quietly at the table with Emily and Caitlin, while the lawyers argued about evidence, and whether it could be introduced, and witnesses, and other stuff.

Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. How could anyone stay awake through this? They wouldn't even let her read a book! She desperately wished she had anti-super-speed so she could fast forward through it all.

The judge seemed nice, but she just sat back and listened as the lawyers talked about how they were *going* to talk about things.

Kara tried not to pout. It was the least she could do after what had happened to Emily because of taking her in. She fiddled with the dress they'd asked her to wear. She'd started playing with balancing a pencil on her finger, but their lawyer had given her a stern glance.

She stole a glance at Caitlin's Aunt Aislyn. She didn't seem nice at all.

Kara pondered what she would do if the judge took Caitlin away from Emily. She hadn't decided on a course of action yet, but she knew Emily would be heartbroken, and Caitlin too.

She was not going to allow that to happen.

At the moment her best plan was to grab both of them and fly off somewhere. The question was, where? If only she had an awesome crystal palace in the Arctic, where they could all hide out...

She was daydreaming fantasies about crystal palaces when

her hearing picked up a radio. “This just in: a fire has broken out in a midtown Manhattan skyscraper, on the twenty-third floor. Due to a failure in the fire suppression system the flames are out of control, far too high for firefighters to reach from the outside, and too intense to combat from the inside. Thousands of people are trapped...”

She sat up straight and came back to the courtroom. The lawyers were still talking. Tentatively, she put her hand up. No one paid any attention.

She raised her hand higher. “Um, excuse me?”

The lawyer for Caitlin’s aunt stopped speaking, annoyed, and turned to the judge. “Your Honor, can we prevent further interruptions?”

Judge Quinn frowned at Kara. “What is it, young lady? You were told not to speak out of turn.”

“I’m sorry, um, Your Honor? But there’s a huge fire in Manhattan and it’s on the twenty-third floor and lots of people are trapped and... um... I need to go?” She looked at Emily, who nodded.

The judge nodded thoughtfully. “I think we can spare you for an hour or so.” She glanced at the lawyers, frowning. “At the rate things are going.” She made a shooing motion with her hand. “Go ahead.”

“Is there anywhere I can, um, change?”

The judge smiled. “Madame Clerk, will you show Miss Kent into my chambers?”

The clerk opened the door to the judge’s chambers; Kara blurred into it, emerging a moment later as Supergirl. “Thank you!” she said, and lifted off, only to buzz around the windows like a trapped housefly. “Umm...”

“They don’t open,” said the judge, whose mouth might have twitched. She pointed towards the door. “You’ll have to go out that way.”

“Right. Thanks,” said Kara, and blurred out the door.

Clark hovered above Wilmington, perplexed. He’d neglected to look up the location of the family court building before coming, and was having trouble finding it. Ten years ago he would have just looked in a phone book, but he wasn’t having any luck finding one of those, either.

He heard the news report about the fire in Manhattan and paused his search. Then he shook his head; he *had* to find Kara first.

He was just about to land and ask for directions when he heard a sonic boom and stopped. His vision found the shock wave, pointed northeast. He zoomed in on the tip and there was his daughter, looking very determined. She struck a classic Superman pose, left arm held tight against her side and right fist thrust forward, accelerating through Mach 10 as she climbed.

He watched her for a moment, a strange mixture of joy, relief, love, pride, worry, and nostalgia washing over him. “They grow up so fast,” he murmured. Then he took off after her.

Kara hadn’t had any trouble finding the building — there was a plume of thick, black smoke that had been easy to spot as she approached Manhattan. The problem was figuring out what to do.

She’d tried blowing but could see that would take a while. Her rain cloud trick wouldn’t work here, because she didn’t think she could make it rain horizontally. She glanced down at the fire trucks gathered below; the firefighters looked up expectantly, waiting for her to do something.

She looked back to the flames roaring from the shattered windows of the twenty-third floor. All she could do was blow, and hope she could put the fire out faster than it spread.

She was huffing and puffing as fast as she could when a voice came from behind her. “Hey there, Supergirl. Would you like some help?”

Kara froze. That voice... she *knew* that voice. She rotated slowly in place, afraid to look. Afraid it was her imagination, or a dream, or something.

It wasn’t. There he was, hovering, his cape billowing in the draft from the fire. Superman.

But not *just* Superman.

“Daddy?” she asked tremulously, still worried he wasn’t real.

He nodded, smiling.

“Is it really you?” Her voice broke.

“It’s really me, sweetheart.” He held his arms open.

“*Daddy!*” she cried, her voice echoing up and down the steel canyon. She literally flew into his embrace, hugging him tightly. “Oh, Daddy!” She started to sob.

Her father hugged her while rubbing her back, and shed some tears of his own, his voice husky. “Kara mia, you are a sight for sore eyes. We’ve been so worried about you.” He kissed the top of her head.

She pulled back and looked up at him, smiling through her tears. “Daddy, I missed you... all of you... *so much*,” she said, then burst out sobbing again. She clung to him, crying and shaking in relief, eight weeks of anxiety starting to drain out of her. “I was so suh... scared I’d never see you again! But you’re here, you’re really here... you’re really here...” After that she simply cried.

Twenty stories below them, no one could hear what they were saying, but no one needed to. The news spread outward at the speed of light. On the upper floors of the building, those trapped by the flames had their noses and phone cameras pressed to the windows, the fire temporarily forgotten.

Kara was oblivious. She was aware only of her father, his loving embrace, and the reassuring words he murmured in her ear as she wept. She thought she could bask in that feeling forever.

After a while, though, her tears subsided, and she sniffled and looked up at him. “Dad, what—”

She was interrupted by the building, which emitted a belch of flame that engulfed them both before dissipating. She blinked at her father in surprise.

He smiled and used his thumb to wipe the tears from her cheeks. “I’m sure you have a ton of questions, sweetheart — I know I do — but maybe we better do something about this fire first, huh?”

She looked around, aware of her surroundings again, and nodded. “I’ve been blowing but it’s way too big.”

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll show you some other tricks to try. But first let’s take our capes off and leave them on that flagpole across the street.”

Kara squinted. “Why do we need to do that?”

Kara hesitated when her father floated calmly into the inferno, then turned and beckoned her to follow. It didn’t seem to be hurting him, so she floated in behind him.

They stood in the midst of the superheated, toxic gasses and thick black smoke, but that wasn’t an obstacle to their vision. Kara goggled at the sight of office furniture and equipment charred and glowing like the logs in a fireplace. Computers melted and sagged like that painting she’d seen once with the melting clocks. Thankfully, no people had been trapped on this floor.

Her father was looking around, then seemed to spot something. “This way,” he said, and she floated dutifully behind him — the floor was too littered with debris to walk easily.

He pointed. “See inside that wall?”

Her vision peeled its surface away, revealing a bunch of pipes. “Uh-huh.”

“See the second biggest pipe, the metal one? That’s usually the water. You can look inside it to make sure. See?”

Kara could see the water inside. It was boiling hot from the

heat of the fire, even through the wall. She nodded. “What’s the biggest one?” She looked inside it. “Oh... *gross*.” She made a face.

Her father nodded emphatically. “Yeah, stay away from that one. OK, the fire’s too big now to use the sprinklers even if they were working. We’re going to use that water pipe as a hose instead.” He did exactly that, smashing through the wall and tearing the pipe. He moved the thick main around as if it were a cloth hose, the metal creaking as he did so.

At first only steam came out, but soon the pipe was gushing water, and her father played it over the flames, starting to quench them. He turned and smiled at her. “Now you try it.”

Kara gingerly took the water main from her father and moved it from side to side, inundating the flames. After about five minutes, the fire was greatly reduced.

“What do we do now, Dad?” asked Kara. “The water can’t reach everywhere.”

“Now it’s time for another trick. Luckily, this building is separated from its neighbors. Follow me.” He crushed the water main closed and flew out through the window. Kara was right behind him.

“What we’re going to do is fly around and around the building. The wind we generate will pull the air out through the broken windows, and that’ll starve the flames of oxygen. What I want you to do is keep an eye on me, and stay on the opposite side of the building from me. Fly the same way I do, OK?”

She nodded. “OK.”

“Wait until you see me on the other side. I’ll start slow so you can sync up with me.”

Her dad zipped to the other side of the building, and counted down. “Ready? 3... 2... 1... Let’s go!”

They started flying faster and faster in a tight circle around the twenty-third floor; to those watching, they blended into a blurred purple ring. Kara alternated between tracking her father on the other side, and watching as the wind of their passage sucked all the air out of the floor that was on fire. Soon the flames were out, but they kept going at it until the glow of hot embers inside faded.

She pulled up next to her father as they stopped. “How did you learn how to do all that stuff, Dad?”

He grinned. “The hard way, sweetheart, through trial and error. I’ve helped at a lot of fires over the years. I’ve made my share of mistakes.”

“Really? *You* make mistakes, too?”

He laughed and ruffled her hair. “Of course I make mistakes! Everyone does. I made a lot of them to start with, and I still make them sometimes.” He shook his head. “The next step is to get the people off the upper floors.”

“How do we do that?”

“Look at the stairs first. You see?” He pointed, and Kara looked through the building.

“They look OK to me...”

“Look closer. You see some of the supports have buckled and pulled away from the walls? They wouldn’t hold people’s weight. But that’s easy to fix; come on.”

Her father zipped back into the building, Kara right behind him. Now that the fire was out it was safe to open the stairwell door. He had to rip it open: it was welded to the frame. They floated into the stairwell.

“Here’s the only damaged section. See here?” He pointed at a section of stairway that had separated from the mounts in the wall.

“Uh-huh.”

He grabbed onto the stringer that had buckled, twisted it back into shape, then pulled it near its mount again. “OK, use your heat vision, right here.” He used his own at first, heating the joint to show her. “Hotter... hotter... that’s great! Watch for the metal

starting to flow... then stop. Now blow on it gently to cool it. Perfect! Now the rest.” Under his tutelage, she welded the stairway back to its supports.

“Are we done?”

“Almost. We have to test it before people can walk on it.” With that he floated up onto the stairs, Kara right behind him.

“How do we test it?”

“Well, it’s a secret superhero technique. Do you promise not to tell anyone?”

Kara folded her arms and tilted her head skeptically. “Dad...”

“OK, it’s not really secret, just silly. You test it like this.” He started jumping up and down. “If anyone saw me doing this they’d never take Superman seriously again.”

After staring for a moment, Kara giggled and followed suit. They kept at it for a half minute or so.

“It looks safe,” he announced, and offered her a fist bump, which she returned. “Let’s go get our capes and talk to the fire chief.”

Chapter 42: Truth, Justice, All That Stuff

“Superman! Superman!”

The fire chief had listened, somewhat dazed, as Superman had detailed what they’d done, the condition of the damaged floor, and the fact that the stairwell was now sound enough to evacuate the people who’d been trapped above the fire. Firefighters and EMTs were already on their way up to assist.

Kara had watched her dad in awe. He was so practiced at dealing with emergency personnel, at speaking their language. He radiated confidence and authority. She felt proud and hoped that someday, she’d be as good a superhero as he was.

Once he was done with the fire chief, the press had surged forward, eager to question them, but her father was holding them off, his hands raised.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I’m truly sorry, but Supergirl and I don’t have time for questions right now. We’ll try to hold a press conference in the next day or two. For now all I’ll say is that we’re both very happy to have found each other again.” He waved and lifted into the air; Kara followed suit.

As they headed out over the Hudson River, her father pointed out the heavy air traffic around Newark International Airport; they swerved to avoid it. Soon they were above the air traffic lanes and heading back to Wilmington.

In the quiet above the clouds, all of Kara’s questions came flooding back. “Dad, I was so worried when it took so long for you to get here. What happened?”

He reached over and gave her a one-armed hug. “It has to do with time travel, honey. I’ll explain later, but it’s only been a bit over one week for Mom and me, not eight. We’ve been doing nothing else but look for you.”

Kara tried to understand all that, but focused on one part.

“Wait, Mom is here too?”

He smiled. “Yes, she is. We’ve been staying with your friend Megan’s family.”

“You didn’t just get here?”

“No sweetheart, I lost my powers when we got here Tuesday night. I had to wait a couple of days to get them back before I could come looking for you.”

Kara mulled that over. “Dad...”

“Yes, Kara?”

“Why didn’t you and Mom tell me about Superman?”

He sighed. “We were getting ready to, honey. We told Jordy when he started to get his powers, and since you were starting to get yours we were going to tell you too. Then you were kidnapped.”

“Wait. I was getting powers?” She frowned.

“I guess you hadn’t noticed, but we had. You’d stopped

getting scrapes, bumps, and bruises.”

“Huh.” Kara thought it over, and realized she couldn’t remember the last time she’d needed a bandage.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to tell you before you found out yourself.”

They flew in silence for a while.

“Dad?”

“What, honey?”

She hesitated, then blurted it out. “Am I adopted? Was I born on Krypton?”

Her dad coasted to a stop, and Kara stopped with him. They hovered fifteen miles above Princeton, New Jersey.

He put his hands on her shoulders. “Sweetheart, this is very important, so listen to everything I have to say, OK?”

She nodded tentatively. “OK...”

“I don’t want to get into all the details now but I promise we’ll tell you the whole story later today. Yes, you are adopted, at least according to Earth law. Yes, you were born on Krypton. Your Kryptonian parents were my aunt and uncle, so by birth we’re cousins.

“But the most important thing for you to know is that Mom and I don’t feel any differently about you than we do about Jordy or Laura.” He put one hand on his chest. “In our hearts, you are our daughter. You came to us as a baby, and we have loved you as our own child from that moment on. We don’t care that Mom didn’t give birth to you; that’s an unimportant detail. Just like my parents don’t care that I’m adopted.”

He gathered her into his arms and hugged her. “Do you understand, Kara mia? Your Mom and I love you. You’re our daughter. Jordy and Laura love you too; you’re their sister.”

She nodded, and whispered, “Uh-huh.” She relaxed in his arms.

“If we were a more... typical family, we would have told you you were adopted when you were younger. But we didn’t want to lie to you about how you came to us, and since you came to us in a spaceship we couldn’t tell you about that until we told you about Superman. Does that make sense?”

“I guess.”

He put his palm to her cheek. “Are you OK?”

Kara offered a fragile smile. “I think so.”

“Then how about we go see if we can help your foster family?”

Somewhere in Maryland, someone was making an encrypted phone call.

“Yes, he was flying... Yes, she called him ‘Daddy’... It was the highest-probability scenario, after all...”

The caller paused to listen.

“I understand. Continue Aviary, initiate Defoe.”

Since court was still in session in Wilmington, no one had been listening to the news. When the doors opened and Superman followed Supergirl into the courtroom there was an abrupt silence.

Anyone could wear a Superman costume, but Emily saw his hand on Kara’s shoulder and the easy, comfortable manner between them. She knew in an instant he was Kara’s father. He’d finally found her.

Emily felt overjoyed and crushed at the same time.

When Kara had come into her life Emily had thought it would be a short-term foster care placement. But Kara had needed more than just foster care to make it through their eight tumultuous weeks together: she’d needed all the love Emily had to give. Emily had given it freely, but once given, there was no taking it back.

She’d come into the courtroom today afraid of losing one child, only to lose the other.

“Excuse me,” said Judge Quinn. “Are you...?”

Superman stopped at the bar. He seemed to hesitate before replying, “Clark Kent, Your Honor. I’m Kara’s father.” He paused. “Would it be possible to sit in on the proceedings?”

The judge sat back and considered that. “I have no objection to your sitting with your daughter, Mister, um, Kent. In fact, given some of the issues that have been raised I may call on you to testify.”

“Your Honor,” interjected Aunt Aislyn’s attorney. “I have to question whether it’s appropriate for this person to enter the proceedings. Besides, do we even know that he really is her father?”

Aunt Aislyn herself was eyeing Mr. Kent in a manner more appropriate to a singles bar than a courtroom. He studiously ignored her.

Judge Quinn turned back. “Mr. Kent? Can you verify your identity?”

“Certainly, Your Honor.” He floated up, his head nearly touching the high ceiling. He drifted back down to the floor.

Judge Quinn smiled. “I’m satisfied. You may sit with Dr. Jordan’s party.” She paused. “Do you wish to, er, change clothes?”

“Your Honor, my uniform is probably more appropriate courtroom attire than my civilian clothes at the moment.”

She nodded. “Miss Kent?”

“Oh. Yes, please, um, Your Honor.” Again, the clerk opened the door to the judge’s chambers, and again Kara blurred in and out, back to wearing the dress she’d had on earlier.

Mr. Kent smiled at her, and they went to take their seats at the table. Kara reached over and put her hand in her father’s. He squeezed it gently and held on.

Emily smiled at both of them, then turned back before they could see the sheen of unshed tears in her eyes.

The case against Emily had fallen apart rapidly, and not because of Clark.

The government had managed to dig up a fair amount of dirt on Caitlin’s aunt, including a drug habit. That was the end of her bid for custody. Caitlin had broken down and cried in relief when the specter of being taken from Emily had been laid to rest.

The government counsel had also persuaded the judge to examine the process that had led to the custody hearing. The other side had objected strenuously, claiming irrelevance, but had been overruled. Once that rock had been turned over the government had been able to introduce into evidence internal emails from Delaware Children’s Services. Clark wasn’t sure he wanted to know how that evidence had been obtained, but was glad it had been.

This internal correspondence made it clear that the action was a result of political pressure, not any genuine concern for Caitlin. Consequently Judge Quinn had ordered Caitlin permanently removed from legal guardianship by the State of Delaware and had promised to recommend that the state Attorney General open an investigation into the case.

The judge had said she was still concerned about the “consequences of celebrity” for Caitlin but agreed to award Emily provisional custody, subject to review in six months. She’d added that barring any problems she was prepared to award Emily permanent custody of her stepsister then.

Aunt Aislyn had sworn to appeal, but had been informed by her lawyer that he’d received a phone call during a break and the financial support for his services had been withdrawn. If she wanted to appeal she’d have to pay his fees herself. That had been the end of that.

At the moment, the Kent-Jordan party stood on the courthouse steps. A crowd had gathered since Clark and Kara had returned from Manhattan, and was watching from behind police

barriers. The press was there, too, clamoring for a statement, but the Administration was issuing that from the White House press office, not here. A D.O.J. spokesman was telling the reporters to go back to their offices and read it.

To one side, a small group of protesters had signs opposing Emily and supporting the SMPA. Clark heard them making derogatory comments about him and how he was obviously an actor hired by the government. He didn't care about that, but they were using language he'd rather Kara not hear.

"Dr. Jordan," said Jarrod, "I've received word from Mr. Douglas. He says you're free to return to the house in Milford if you like."

Emily and Caitlin exchanged glances. "We'd like that very much," said Emily. "We want to go home."

"Mr. Kent," added Jarrod, "Mr. Douglas would like to invite you and Ms. Lane to stay at the house as well while you're here. It's a converted B&B and there's plenty of room. He also says that the President would very much like to speak with you and hold a press conference, but is unavailable until tomorrow."

Clark considered that. "I'll need to ask Lois, but I think we'll take you up on that. I don't want to impose on our current hosts any further if we can avoid it."

"I guess we'll take the car while you two fly?" said Emily. "We can... talk when we all get there."

Clark nodded; that was why he hadn't changed out of his uniform and had asked Kara to change into hers. "That sounds about right. I need to take Kara to see her mother straight from here. Lois is *very* anxious to see her again, and Kara feels the same way. But we definitely want to talk."

He wondered why Emily looked nervous.

"Can we go home, Em?" asked Caitlin. "I'm totally wiped." Emily hesitated, then nodded, and they turned to walk to their armored SUV.

"Wait!" called Kara, then went to hug both of them. She looked up at Emily. "It... it feels weird not going with you guys."

"Go see your mom, sweetie," said Emily quietly, as she stroked Kara's hair. "I'm sure she's missing you. We'll both see you again soon." Kara nodded uncertainly. Emily looked at her for a long moment, then continued on her way.

Kara watched as the Jordans climbed into the SUV. Jarrod hopped in the front, and they drove off, escorted by motorcycle police.

Kara walked back to her father and stood next to him, as they watched the Jordans' motorcade turn the corner. "Daddy?"

"What, honey?"

"What are we going to do about Emily and Caitlin?"

Clark frowned. "What do you mean?"

"They took such good care of me, but it totally messed up their lives. Emily lost her job, and her house, and they need bodyguards, and reporters are always bugging us. We get to go home and have our secret again, but they're stuck like this. I want to fix it, but I don't know how." She looked up at her father, her eyes shining. "What can we do?"

Clark sighed. "I don't know, sweetheart. I don't know. But they took care of you, and I promise you we'll take care of them."

The reporters were shouting "Superman! Supergirl!" and gesturing for them to come over. Clark just smiled and waved.

He squeezed Kara's shoulder. "Come on, let's go see Mom."

He and Kara both shot into the sky as the crowd watched.

The protesters gaped, and one of them dropped his sign.

Chapter 43: Spatial Delivery

Lois, Alice, and the kids had kept up with Clark and Kara by watching CNN, so Lois knew the moment they left Wilmington. CNN didn't know where they were heading, but she thought they'd better be heading her way if they knew what was good for

them.

She'd waited far too long, through the fire in Manhattan and then the custody hearing. Enough was enough.

She paced the Tongs' living room like a caged tiger. Though it felt like three hours, it was three minutes later when two figures wearing red and blue appeared suddenly in the backyard, a small whirlwind of leaves heralding their arrival.

Lois could barely wait for her husband to slide the door open before she was running towards it, her daughter running in to meet her. "Kara!" cried Lois.

"Mom! Mom!" cried Kara as her mother swept her up in her arms.

Lois clung tightly to her daughter, their cheeks pressed together. "Oh honey," she whispered. "My baby." Both of them were crying quietly, alternately sniffing and hiccuping. Lois kissed Kara's cheek.

Clark slid the door closed behind him and gently laid one hand each on their backs. Kara's friends, seeing him as Superman for the first time, marveled at the scene. They goggled when Clark spun back into his civilian clothes.

After a time Lois reluctantly released Kara, but left a hand on each shoulder. "Oh, sweetheart, let me look at you. You've grown! Clark, hasn't she grown a bit?"

"I think so."

"I've missed you so much! I'm *so* sorry you had to wait so long. Has school been OK? Have you been eating all right? I mean, not that you *need* to... Did that bas... jerk hurt you when he kidnapped you? Aside from the Kryptonite? Has your foster family been good to you? Oh, your uniform is *adorable*..."

Normally Kara would have been squirming in embarrassment at her mother fussing over her like this in front of friends, but this time she just basked in it. She savored her mother's touch, the sound of her voice, the way she ran on and on when she was nervous.

Her mother finally ran down, and Kara said, "I'm fine, Mom. I'm just fine, now that you and Dad are here." She put her left hand on top of her mother's hand on her right shoulder, and squeezed. She and her mother couldn't stop smiling at each other. They laughed and embraced again, crying a little.

After a while, Kara and her mother separated again. She looked over to her father and announced, "I'm going to change, too." She blurred out of the room and back, now wearing the dress she'd put on for court.

"That's right, you're wearing glasses now," exclaimed Lois.

"Do you mind?" asked Kara, anxious.

"No, of course not," said Lois, moving her head from side to side to take in her daughter's new look. "We would have been getting you some soon anyway. They're cute frames. I like that dress, too."

"The government people got it for me for court today."

Lois turned to her husband suddenly. "Clark, why don't we go home tonight?"

Kara and her friends held their breath.

Clark sighed. "I'm afraid we've got promises to keep and miles to go, as the poet said. There are some loose ends..."

"Like what?"

"The biggest is Kara's foster family. They need help getting back on their feet."

Lois frowned. "Can't the government do that?"

"Honey, the Jordans risked everything to take care of our daughter. Not just feed her and clothe her, but give her love, guidance, and a home. Because of that their lives have been completely upended. The least we can do is help them pick up the pieces."

Lois saw the worry in her daughter's eyes, and sighed. "You're right." She thumped Clark on the shoulder. "How come you're always right about things like this? Boy Scout..."

Clark shrugged modestly. “Eagle Scout, actually.”

“Ha ha. What else?”

“Well, I promised Kara and her friends a more detailed explanation of where she came from.”

It had all started with a phone call.

“Son?”

“Hey Dad, what’s up?” Clark held the cordless phone in one hand as he closed his laptop and set it aside with the other. He leaned back on the sofa, his free arm on the back, and watched Jordy play with his blocks on the living room floor.

“Do you think you can come out to the farm?”

Clark frowned. “Right now’s not the best time, Dad; I’m taking care of Jordy. The daycare’s closed today and Lois is out tracking down a story, so I’m working from home till she’s back.”

“It’s closed?”

“Just today — plumbing problem. They’ll be open again tomorrow.”

“Ah.” There was a pause. “Still, this is kind of important, I think.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I was out checking the back twenty... you know, where your treehouse is?”

“Yes?”

“There’s a spaceship there, Son. It looks just like yours. It’s floating right next to your ‘Fortress.’”

“Uhhh... OK. I’d better call Lois.”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Kevin. “Your *treehouse* is the ‘Fortress of Solitude’?!”

“Yeah. I guess I used to brood a lot when I was young, about being different from all the other kids.” Clark smiled. “I liked the sound of it at the time.”

“But—”

“Can we get on with the story, Kevin?” asked Megan, rolling her eyes.

Kara sighed. No crystal palace in the Arctic.

Clark landed next to the tree holding his “Fortress”; his parents were there waiting. Sure enough, a tiny spaceship exactly like his own hovered right next to the entrance to the treehouse. Its navigation globe was glowing with a slow pulse, like breathing; his own globe inside the treehouse pulsed in synchrony.

As he approached, though, the glow went out, and the ship settled gently to the ground. A holographic message began to play, just as his father’s messages had played seven years ago.

They saw a couple dressed much like Jor-El and Lara. The man closely resembled Jor-El; so much so that at first Clark thought it was his own father. The woman had blonde hair and blue eyes.

“Greetings, Kal-El,” said the man. “I am Zor-El, your father’s brother; this is Alura In-Ze, my wife. We wish we could meet you in person, for we have a great favor to ask. Sadly, such a meeting cannot be. It is enough that this ship has been able to find its way to you.

“You will have seen Jor-El’s messages, and understood his efforts to create the prototype hyperlight drive that brought your ship to Earth. As his brother, I knew of your father’s scientific genius, and accepted his prediction of Krypton’s imminent destruction — unlike the Council of Elders, who have doomed all but a pitiful handful of our people.

“Like your parents, we recently delivered a child: our daughter, Kara. Like them, we wish to give our child a chance at life as the planet that bore her dies. I am neither a scientist nor a mathematician, and though Alura is both, interstellar travel is not her area of expertise. We are reliant entirely on Jor-El. He has

only the one hyperlight drive prototype.”

At that point they were interrupted by a tremor, of the kind Clark remembered from his father’s messages. Zor-El and Alura clung to each other for the few seconds it lasted, then straightened themselves.

“There is hope, however: an earlier prototype. Its drawback is that it is far slower, and will take nearly thirty-four Earth years to propel Kara’s ship on the same journey that yours will complete in mere hours. We could not ask Jor-El to sacrifice you to save your cousin, and so we take this chance as it is offered to us.

“No adult, let alone an infant, could survive such a lengthy journey in such a small ship, and therefore we make yet another gamble. Alura has procured a cryogenic sleep system on the pretext of using it for experimentation on animals. It should preserve Kara in unconscious, ageless suspension throughout her long journey. It is our hope that this assemblage of prototype technology will function correctly, allowing her to reach you safely. We would never wager so with our daughter’s life were the alternative not certain death.

“You may wonder why your father said nothing of this in his messages to you. Given the uncertainties, should our efforts fail he did not wish to burden you with mourning a cousin you had never met. That you view this message shows that we were successful, at least in part: her ship has crossed the gulf between our worlds and found its way to you.

“And so to our request. By Kryptonian law, as Kara’s only surviving male relative you are now her guardian. However, we are aware that you have been raised in Earth’s culture, and so we will put it to you in those terms. Should our daughter make it safely to your adopted world, Nephew, we ask that you take her in and give her the life that we could not. Raise her as your own, and give her the love that we would have. Treasure her, as we wished to.”

Zor-El and Alura bowed their heads a moment in supplication. They looked up again, and Zor-El added, “This message is at an end. There are additional messages for Kara and yourself, which will play when she is older. Kal-El... Nephew... farewell.”

The message disappeared and the ship waited, silent.

They were silent themselves for some time, sobered by the reminder of Krypton’s tragedy. “Oh, Clark,” said Martha finally. “To think this poor child has been traveling all these years. And she’s your *cousin*. Your own flesh and blood!”

Something in Clark thrilled at the idea. He knew that the Kryptonian people had survived on New Krypton, but until now he’d never met a living member of his birth family. He prayed that Kara had survived the trip.

He tried to look through the skin of the ship but his vision could not penetrate it. “Mom,” he warned, “you might want to look away when I open it. If things didn’t go as well as they’d hoped...”

“It’s all right, honey,” replied his mother. “I’m made of sterner stuff than that.”

Clark nodded, and reached out to touch the ship. Instantly the cockpit lifted open, revealing a large ovoid whose surface was a perfect mirror.

Clark examined the object, if that’s what it was; he couldn’t tell if it was material or some kind of force field. He couldn’t see inside it, either. There was no obvious control for opening it.

Here goes nothing. He reached out to touch it; it was perfectly frictionless and his hand slid off it with no effort. “Huh.”

That’s when he noticed the handprint control in back of the ovoid, much like the one that had been on his own spaceship. He reached out and placed his hand in the imprint.

The silvery ovoid vanished, revealing a baby of about five months, with wispy blonde hair. The child’s skin was blueish and

she did not move or breathe. They could feel the intense cold radiating from the tiny body.

His mother sniffled, and they bowed their heads in respect. Clark felt the sting of tears in his own eyes.

But just then a glow played over the form of the child; her skin took on a healthy pink color. She gasped, shuddered, and started to cry. As she came more awake, her crying escalated.

Clark and his parents stared in wonder; it felt like a miracle. “Oh thank goodness,” cried Martha.

Kara then took a deep breath and really started to wail, her eyes scrunched up and her face turning red.

Clark reached out and picked her up, marveling that her body temperature already felt perfectly normal. She was dressed in an odd-looking garment, which he guessed was the Kryptonian equivalent of a onesie. He put her over his shoulder and jugged her gently, murmuring soothing words in her ear. Her cries gradually lessened in volume.

“Well, Son,” asked Jonathan, “what are you going to do?”

“What *can* I do, Dad? She’s *family*. I could never abandon her. And even if she weren’t, she’s Kryptonian; we can’t take a chance on anyone else raising her.

“Besides, Lois and I *were* talking about having another child, and we were kinda hoping for a girl this time. We just thought... it would take a little longer than this.”

“Instant baby,” chuckled his father. “Just like with you.”

“I’m not sure how I’m going to break this to Lois. She wasn’t happy that I had to leave Jordy with her at the Planet. And we’re going to have to find a way to get paperwork for Kara, a birth certificate at least.”

“Young Doc Evans might be able to help, like his father helped us,” mused Jonathan. “We can come up with a story like the one we made up to explain you.”

“... which ought to give the town gossips plenty of fodder,” observed Martha.

Kara had calmed down and opened her blue-gray eyes. She’d turned from Clark’s shoulder and was watching the elder Kents silently, her eyes bright with curiosity.

“Oh Clark,” gushed his mother, “she’s absolutely adorable!”

Kara emitted a small belch, spitting up on Clark’s S shield. She smiled, and Clark’s parents burst out laughing, causing Kara to laugh in response.

“Welcome to fatherhood again, Son.”

Martha was shaking her head, smiling. “Come on into the house and let me wash that uniform for you before the stain sets. You can call Lois, too.”

“So that’s pretty much it,” said Clark. “My folks still had some diapers left over from when Jordy was a baby. Grandma drove into town that day to get you some baby formula and some clothes. Dr. Evans was able to help us through the process of making you legal.”

“What did you tell him, Dad?” Kara was still blushing slightly from the story.

“Our families have known each other for nearly sixty years now, and I grew up and went to school with him. So he trusted our word that you were a foundling with no paperwork, other than a message that you were related to me.

“We wanted him to just issue a new birth certificate so we wouldn’t have to go through adoption, but he was worried we might get into trouble with that. He said procedures had tightened since I was adopted and he wanted to do it by the book, if possible.

“Everyone in Smallville knows I’m adopted, so he said we should have a DNA test to make sure some stranger wasn’t scamming us into raising their child. We knew that wasn’t the case, but Kansas gives priority to blood relatives in adoptions so we wanted the test anyway. We got Dr. Klein at STAR Labs to

compare a genetic sample from you to one he already had from me, and he sent a report to Dr. Evans.”

“Wait...” said Kara, “wouldn’t our DNA tell Uncle Bernie we’re, like... aliens?”

“He already knew, sweetheart. That’s why he’s our family doctor. We told him when Mom became pregnant with Jordy.” Clark grinned. “He was more shocked about that than he was about me being Superman. He hadn’t thought it was possible.”

“Oh...” Uncle Bernie *knew*?

“Anyway, his report surprised all of us: it said you and I were as close as half siblings. Since our fathers looked so much alike Dr. Klein says they must have been identical twins.

“So Dr. Evans thought you were my half sister by the same father, and that fit in pretty well with my own story. With that close a relationship he said we shouldn’t worry, and he was right. We got custody right away, and permission to take you home to Metropolis with us. The adoption went through fairly quickly.”

“Smallville: alien baby laundering capital of the world,” observed Lois.

“What did you think, Mom?” asked Kara anxiously.

Lois smiled. “I wasn’t too happy to start with. We both had to take parental leave. I had to turn over the story I was working on to someone else, leave your brother with Grandma Ellen, and fly to Smallville with your father. I *might* have said something about Krypton using Earth as a dumping ground for refugee children.” She reached out and tucked Kara’s hair behind an ear. “But the moment I laid eyes on you, I fell in love.”

“Awwwww,” cooed Bailey.

Lois laughed. “Jordy wasn’t happy either. It turned out he thought you were a replacement and we were going to return him to the hospital as a trade-in. Once he understood about siblings, he was fine.”

Clark added, “He wasn’t the only one who got a surprise...”

“What’s goin’ on here?” barked Perry. The throng of people in the bullpen parted before him.

In the center were Lois and Clark; Lois was holding a six-month-old baby girl in a red Christmas dress with a reindeer on the front. They turned to face their boss.

“Well, well, well,” said Perry, softening his tone. “Who do we have here?”

“This is Kara Zoe. Say Hi to Uncle Perry, Kara.”

Kara looked Perry over. “Ahhh lih. Bih. Ah!”

Perry grinned. “Well, she sure is a pretty little thing.” He looked over his staff. “Come on now, folks, visiting hours are over. This is the bullpen, not the day care center. We still have the evening edition to get out.”

Lois’s and Clark’s coworkers turned away, grumbling lightly, and Perry motioned the Kents to follow him into his office. Jimmy slipped in behind them, and closed the door.

Perry sat behind his desk. “So, where’s this young lady’s brother?”

“We left him with Lois’s parents so he could run around a bit.”

“Nice to have grandparents in the area.” He paused a moment. “Now Lois, I hope you’ll forgive me for sayin’ this, but I think I woulda noticed if you folks had been expectin’. What happened?”

Clark and Lois looked at each other, as Kara stuffed her fist in her mouth and looked around Perry’s office. “She was a foundling, left on my folks’ doorstep, with a note that she was related. We had some testing done, and it looks like she’s my half-sister.”

Clark scratched his head. “She’s the only blood relation I have, so we really wanted to keep her.” He reached out and caressed Kara’s cheek, and she smiled and gurgled. “We were talking about having another child anyway.”

Perry didn't say anything at first. He and Jimmy exchanged glances and seemed to communicate something; Jimmy shrugged.

Perry turned back to the Kents. "Uh-huh. Is that the official story?"

"Excuse me?" replied Lois, offended.

"I'm not sure exactly what you mean, Perry," added Clark.

Perry sighed. "Is she *really* a blood relation?"

"Of course she is!"

Perry ignored Lois. "Clark?"

"Yes, sir, she is. I'm... not quite sure what you're getting at."

Perry and Jimmy looked at each other again. "So... how did she get here?"

Lois and Clark exchanged glances. "'Get here?'" echoed Lois.

"You know... from Krypton. Or New Krypton."

Lois and Clark stood stock still. Kara offered, "Ehhh. Rrrr. Ba ba ba ba!"

Lois and Clark looked between Perry and Jimmy, and took in their expressions. "You..." Lois tried, but couldn't figure out how to continue.

"I don't know how many times I've had to say this, but I did not get to be editor of this newspaper because I can yodel. Jimmy and I have been workin' with Clark for over seven years now. We're not completely oblivious, you know."

"Oh," said Lois, as she and Clark sank into chairs.

"How long..." croaked Clark.

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "A couple of years now, CK."

"At least," added Perry.

Uncle Perry and Uncle Jimmy knew *too*? Kara wasn't sure what to think about that; she wasn't sure what to think about any of it. Had *everyone* known she was from Krypton before she did? Did it even matter?

It was so abstract and remote; she didn't feel any attachment to her home planet or birth parents. That made her feel guilty and sad. They'd worked so hard to save her, and she didn't even remember them. She felt a vague desire to apologize to someone.

"Mr. Kent," asked Megan, "is Kara, like, a Kryptonian princess?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"There was a story on the news about how you were King of New Krypton or something."

"First Lord," corrected Kara.

"How did they hear about that here?" wondered Dad.

Kara rolled her eyes. "From *me*, Dad. We learned about the New Kryptonian invasion in fourth grade history. The government people wanted to know everything about Superman, so I told them about that. They used it to give me, uh, dip... something..."

"A diplomatic visa?" suggested Mom.

"That's it. It kept the bad guys from taking me away from Emily."

"Well, well," said Mom. "I guess there's intelligent life in Washington after all."

Dad shot her a look before answering Megan's question. "Krypton didn't use titles like King or Princess. Who I really am is the son of a Kansas farmer, but I guess technically, I'm Lord Kal-El, and she's Lady Kara Zor-El. Come to think of it, she would have been next in line to rule if I hadn't abdicated to Lady Zara." He shrugged. "None of that helps pay the mortgage, though."

"Wow, Lady Kara," said Megan, poking her, "you're a royal!"

Kara closed her eyes. Being a celebrity and an alien was bad enough.

Chapter 44: All the King's Men

The press had assembled at the Jordan house again after the government's announcement that the custody issues had been resolved. They'd seen the Jordan sisters return by car, but there'd been no press contact. There'd been no sign of Supergirl at all for a couple of hours.

Suddenly someone pointed: Supergirl was heading their way. However, she darted down to the private entrance she used without stopping to talk to the press.

One of the photographers shook her head — had Supergirl really been carrying two camping backpacks? She started to bring up the image she'd just taken on her camera's screen.

She stopped when a ripple of excitement ran through the crowd of tourists behind them, and looked up again. She swung her camera up and started firing off pictures rapidly.

Superman was approaching, carrying a woman in his arms, just like in the movies. She had her hands laced behind his neck to hold on.

"Superman and Lois Lane," someone murmured, awestruck.

They floated down to the front door, Superman smoothly transferring his passenger to an upright position, his arm around her waist. They landed lightly.

"Superman! Superman!" called the reporters cacophonously.

Superman waved, then cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, "Tomorrow! Press conference!" He smiled and waved again; then they went inside.

Kara was already waiting for them in the entryway, wearing casual clothes. Fred Douglas was there too, as was the usual retinue of Secret Service agents.

"Mr. Kent, Ms. Lane? I'm Fred Douglas, Department of Homeland Security. I'm your daughter's main liaison with the government." He reached out a hand and Clark shook it, followed by Lois.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Douglas," said Clark.

"Thank you for running interference for her while she was here."

There was no "Department of Homeland Security" back home and something about the name disturbed Lois. It was just a name, though, so she swallowed her misgivings and added, "Yes, thank you."

Mr. Douglas nodded. "Our pleasure. We have a room ready for you, for as long as you're planning to stay. I believe we got word to you that the President would like to meet with you tomorrow, and hold a press conference afterwards?"

"Yes, we heard. Where is that going to be?"

"If you could make it to the White House that would be a big help to his schedule."

Clark looked to Lois, who shrugged. "I think we can manage that."

"We'll be serving dinner in a little while, and this evening is open for any discussions you want to have with us. Feel free to relax until then."

Clark nodded. "Thank you. I think we could use a little break." He spun into his civilian clothes; even though they were used to Kara, the staff gaped at the display.

Kara, her cheeks crimson, exclaimed, "*Dad!* How can you do that in front of *everyone*? And in front of *me*?"

Clark blushed lightly himself. "Sorry, sweetheart. I forgot you could see." Lois's eyes were twinkling at his embarrassment.

"Just... just don't *do* that again while I'm watching! And..." She trailed off. "Wait a minute. What was that place where you put your boots? And your cape? And were your other clothes...?"

"Oh, that? It's pretty handy. I'll show you later."

Just then Caitlin came bounding down the stairs. "Kara?"

"Hi, Caitlin."

Caitlin looked between Lois and Clark. "Who... Oh, wait. Is

this your mom and dad?”

“Uh-huh. But you already met my dad in Wilmington.”

Caitlin shook her head. “Oh, right. Sorry, Mr. Kent.” She smirked. “This secret identity thing works better than I thought.” She turned to Lois. “Um, Ms. Lane? Mrs. Kent?”

“Either is fine,” said Lois, smiling. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Caitlin. Thank you for being Kara’s sister.”

“Umm, it’s nice to meet you too,” said Caitlin, turning uncharacteristically shy. “And I, umm, had fun with Kara. It’s been nice having a sister. I mean, I *have* a sister — Emily’s my sister... well, she’s my stepsister... but she’s more like my mom than my sister. She mostly does mom things with me instead of sister things. So Kara is a *sister-sister* instead of a *mom-sister*.” She looked between the Kents. “You know what I mean?”

“I think we got the gist,” said Lois dryly. “And I’m looking forward to meeting Emily.”

Kara looked around. “I want to see her too. Where is she?”

Emily lay on her side, staring at the wall. *You knew the odds were they would find her.* No matter how many times she told herself that, she couldn’t quite grasp the reality. She was no longer Kara’s foster mother, and sometime soon, Kara would be gone from her life forever. She was happy for Kara and her family, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. The three of them had been through too much together.

On top of that, now that Kara’s parents were here, all of Emily’s doubts about whether Supergirl had been a good idea were back in full force. She hoped the Kents wouldn’t be too hard on her.

It was funny: she knew they were Superman and Lois Lane, but somehow she could only think of them as “Kara’s parents.”

And after they left, what were she and Caitlin going to do? How were they going to live?

There was a knock on her door, and she sat up on her bed. “Yes?”

The door opened and Kara poked her head around. “Emily?”

Emily tried to keep her heart under control; this was temporary, no matter how long it lasted. “Hey, sweetie. Come on in.”

Kara came in, followed by Caitlin. “My parents are here too. Do you mind if they...?”

Emily shook her head. She’d love some alone time with Kara and Caitlin, but that part of her life was behind her now. “Of course not.”

Mr. Kent she’d already met, though she hadn’t seen him out of uniform and he looked quite different — no surprise. He came in with his wife, hand in hand. “Hello, Mr. Kent.”

“Clark, please.”

Emily smiled faintly. “OK, Clark.” She turned to Lois. “It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Lane.”

The older woman looked her over carefully. “I’m glad to meet you too, Emily. Kara has been telling us a lot about you.” Emily was unsure how to take that until Ms. Lane’s face relaxed into a smile. “Please call me Lois.”

Emily nodded, relieved. “She’s told us a lot about you, too.” She looked between the two of them. “So... I expect you’ll be going home soon?” She managed to keep her voice from wavering.

Lois and Clark looked at each other, and came over to sit on the bed. “We will, but we have some things to take care of first,” said Lois.

Emily frowned. “Like what?”

“Well... like you,” Clark said.

“Me?”

Clark nodded. “And Caitlin. We’re very grateful for what you did for Kara. You gave up a lot to take care of her and protect her.”

“How could I not? I was responsible for her.”

Lois shook her head. “You’d be surprised. Many people would have washed their hands of her the minute things turned difficult. You stuck with her.”

“So we want to help figure out a way for you to get your lives back together,” finished Clark.

Humpty Dumpty, thought Emily. “Do you really think that’s possible?”

“As Mr. Wells likes to say, nothing is impossible.”

Emily nodded, then blinked. “Mr. *Wells*?”

“What do you mean, ‘indefinitely’?” asked Emily, shocked.

Fred Douglas leaned forward. “Dr. Jordan, the public is very interested in you and your sister.” He nodded at Lois and Clark. “Now that the Kents are here, the SMPA contingent’s plan has backfired. They look like they were trying to break up Superman’s family, while you were defending Kara as a surrogate for her parents.

“So your favorables, and the public’s interest, are only going to increase. We don’t see that ending any time soon, and that means you’ll need security.”

“But with Kara and her family going home,” objected Emily, “aren’t people going to lose interest in us after a while?”

Caitlin nodded. “That’s what Becca Hunter said. She said people lose interest in celebrities if they don’t do anything ‘interesting.’” She made air quotes.

Mr. Douglas shook his head. “Becca is a bright young lady, but she doesn’t understand. You are not just celebrities. It’s ironic, considering we had a revolution to get rid of a king, but Americans have a fascination with royalty. Sometimes it’s the real thing, like the British royal family, but we have our own, home-grown variety too.

“The President and his family for one, but there are others who go beyond mere celebrity. Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Elvis, the Beatles, Neil Armstrong.” He nodded at Kara. “Kara is in that category. She is this world’s first superhero. *Billions* of people love her.” He spread his hands. “And on top of that, based on what we said about her father and New Krypton, many people believe she’s a Kryptonian princess.”

Kara hid her face in her hands while her parents smiled affectionately and Caitlin smirked.

Lois added, “It’s the same with Superman. He’s been around for eighteen years, but the world still watches everything he does.” She squeezed Kara’s shoulder.

Emily frowned. “Even if that’s true, what does it have to do with Caitlin and me? We’re not superheroes.”

“Dr. Jordan, you and your sister may not be superheroes but you’re in that special category too. You’re members of the family, like Martha Kent or Alfred Pennyworth. And like Grace Kelly, you’re not commoners any more.” He shrugged. “I’m afraid the magic has rubbed off on you; you’re part of the story, now. Once the Kents go home, you’ll be all that’s left.”

Emily just sat there for a few moments, slack-jawed, then shook herself. “Then what do we do? How are we going to live? I can’t afford to pay for the kind of security you’re talking about, even assuming I can find another job. Is the government going to continue protecting us?”

“The President can direct the Secret Service to protect anyone by executive order, and he plans to do so, at least in the short term. Long term, we believe we can work out a way to keep you two safe. As for a job, we believe we can find something, though it probably won’t be in Milford.”

“But we’ll have to live like this, right?” asked Caitlin. “With the press watching us, and bodyguards and everything?”

“For the foreseeable future, I’m afraid so.”

Emily looked to Kara’s parents. “What we really need are secret identities, like Clark.” She half-laughed.

Caitlin buried her face in her arms on the conference table. “I don’t *want* to live like this. I don’t want to leave Milford, either!” “Honey,” said Emily. “We may not have a choice.”

“I’ll never see any of my friends again!” sulked Caitlin, muffled. Emily rubbed her back.

“Could they maybe come home with us?” asked Kara quietly. “What?” asked Lois.

“Why don’t they come home with us? No one knows them back home, just like no one knows Dad is Superman.”

“Well...” began Clark. “Huh.”

“A completely different world?” asked Emily. “How is that better?”

“You said you need a secret identity,” reasoned Kara. “It would be kind of like that.” She looked down. “Plus I’d still get to see you,” she admitted.

Emily opened her mouth, then closed it and thought. She shook her head. “We couldn’t just pop over there. We’d have no documentation, nothing. We’d be non-persons. I wouldn’t have my medical credentials; Caitlin wouldn’t have any school records.”

“Actually...” said Clark.

“What?”

Lois and Clark exchanged looks. “We know guys who know guys,” offered Lois.

Mr. Douglas frowned. “What, you mean forged documents? That can be dangerous if someone researches them in depth.”

“Not quite,” said Clark. “Superman saved the heads of all the U.S. intelligence agencies about fifteen years ago, when their plane was about to crash. And then about six years ago, he... well, I’m not supposed to talk about that.” He shrugged. “They said if he ever needed a favor... I’ve never called that in.” He looked to Emily. “It’s the least I can do after what you’ve done for Kara.”

“Hmm,” said Douglas. He didn’t elaborate.

You wouldn’t have to say goodbye to Kara. Emily chastised herself; she had to do what was best for Caitlin and herself, not make a decision based on emotion. “It still seems like too much of a risk. Suppose we can’t make it work there? Suppose it’s too strange, too different? We’d be stuck. It’s a one-way trip, isn’t it?”

“Well, no,” said Clark. “It’s not exactly a trip to Bakerline on MARTA, but we could bring you back here if it wasn’t working out. We know how to get here now, and we plan to keep the time machine.”

Emily and Caitlin looked at each other. “I’d rather stay here in Milford, Em, but if we have to leave everyone we know behind, anyway...” Caitlin looked over to Kara. “And we’d still get to see squirt here.”

Emily nodded slowly. A thought struck her. “What about... Dad?”

Caitlin’s face fell. “We’d have to leave him behind too, wouldn’t we?”

“I thought...” began Kara, but she didn’t know how to finish the sentence.

“Yes, he’s gone,” said Emily. “But we still visit him twice a year.”

There was a heavy silence.

“Dr. Jordan,” offered Douglas compassionately, “it’s entirely your decision, but if you decide to move to that other world, we’ll make sure your father’s grave is tended.” He spread his hands. “Even if I have to pay for it myself.”

Emily just stared at the table for a while, her thoughts seething. “As kind as the government has been to us, I don’t like living this way; I don’t like Caitlin having to live this way. But moving to Metropolis is a huge leap, even if we could come back. I don’t know if we can do that. As much as I dislike the public spotlight, that may be the better option. I have to think about

this.”

“Honey?”

Kara looked up from the copy of *People* she’d been perusing with Becca Hunter; the President’s daughter had wanted to see which movie stars existed in Kara’s world. Kara had recognized about half of them, but then she hadn’t seen as many movies as Becca, so there might have been more in common. Sophie was trying to peer over her sister’s shoulder.

Her mom was standing in the doorway with Becca’s mom. “Yes, Mom?”

“Your father and I are finished meeting with the President. We’re going to go downstairs for the press conference now.” The President had asked to meet with Dad alone, but he’d responded that Superman was a partnership of himself and Mom, and she was in on everything.

“Oh. OK.” Kara got up off the bed, taking care with her dress, and turned to Becca and Sophie. “It was fun visiting; thanks for having me over. I don’t know if I’ll see you guys again.”

Becca smiled. “It was fun hanging out with you, Kara. If I don’t see you again, have a safe trip home.” She got up, and the two girls hugged lightly.

“I want to say goodbye too!” said Sophie, bouncing off the bed. She ran over to collect a hug from Kara.

Kara followed her mother out to the central area of the living quarters. Her father was in his Superman uniform, talking quietly with the President. The two men were regarding each other with a calm, steady gaze.

“Mrs. Hunter, thank you for having us here,” said Mom.

“It was my pleasure.”

Dad and the President shook hands, and the President gestured towards the elevator. “Shall we?”

“Bye,” said Kara, waving, as she trailed behind her parents. The President’s family waved back.

Soon they were in the White House elevator, accompanied by the President’s Secret Service detail. Kara had the distinct impression there was some topic hanging in the air that her parents and the President would have liked to discuss, but couldn’t since she was present. They kept looking at each other. She resisted the temptation to roll her eyes.

Her dad was in uniform, but she wasn’t. Her parents had explained that they wanted the press to focus on him and give her some space. She was OK with that.

Mom took her hand as they followed Dad and the President into the press room. “This feels weird,” whispered her mother. “I’m usually on the other side of that podium.”

Kara nodded.

“These people are in serious trouble,” said Mom. “How did this version of Earth get so screwed up?”

Kara glanced over at her parents; they were all flying back to Milford together, her mom in her dad’s arms as before. She liked seeing them like that. She liked being together with them again. It felt like a missing piece of herself had been restored.

She’d changed to her Supergirl uniform, and used that spin trick Dad had shown her to store her civilian clothes. It was great not to have to carry them around!

“There’s so many things going wrong it’s hard to know where to start,” agreed Dad.

“And that press conference,” fumed Mom. “Nothing but softball questions! What happened to the adversarial press here? I wanted to go out in the audience and ask President Hunter some tough questions myself. These people are stenographers, not reporters!”

“I noticed that myself the other day when I was reading the news on the web.”

“Perry would never stand for this kind of reporting in his newsroom. What this world needs is the Daily Planet. And the President is right, this world needs Superman, too.”

“That’s funny,” giggled Kara.

“What’s funny, sweetie?”

“In Kevin’s movie, that version of you wrote an editorial called ‘Why the World *Doesn’t* Need Superman.’”

“That version of me was an idiot. Every world needs Superman.” Mom hesitated. “That’s why the President asked us to stay.”

“What?” squeaked Kara.

“Of course we said no, sweetheart,” added Dad immediately. “Don’t worry, we’re going home.”

“He said this world desperately needs Superman, and he’s right. Just not *this* Superman. Or Supergirl.” Mom smiled at her.

“No way!” said Kara. “I want to go home.”

“Maybe Mr. Wells can help them,” mused Dad. “We can talk to him about it when we get back.”

“So when *are* we going home?” asked Kara.

“Not till Monday at the earliest, honey,” said Mom.

“Monday? Why?”

“Well, we’re still waiting to see what happens with your foster family. And your father and I remembered one other thing we have to take care of.”

“What’s that?”

“We realized you’ve been in school here for eight weeks. We need to go to school with you and meet with your teachers.”

“*What?*”

Chapter 45: All Good Things

“Why the gloomy face, sis?”

Megan looked up from her phone. Kevin was standing in the door to the family room, munching on a cookie.

“I just got a call from Kara.”

“So?” asked Kevin. He headed towards the TV to turn on his Xbox.

“She and her parents plan to head back to their dimension, or whatever it is, this week. Maybe on Monday.”

Kevin stopped and stood still for a moment. “Oh.” He stared at the cookie as if he weren’t sure what to do with it.

“I wish she could stay longer. I mean, I wish she could stay forever, but I know she wants to go home to the rest of her family and her friends, and not have everyone know she’s Supergirl. I just wish...”

Kevin was subdued. “Yeah.”

Megan looked sorrowfully at her brother. “Kevin... I’m sorry.”

He looked back, surprised. “You figured it out?”

Megan rolled her eyes. “Duh.” She sighed. “I’m sorry she doesn’t like you that way. At least we all got to be friends with her while she was here.”

“I guess.” He’d known, but kind of hoped he was wrong.

“Anyway, she’s going into school on Monday with her parents, and they have to get Emily and Caitlin straightened out. But after that they’re going home. From our garage, I guess, unless Mr. Kent moves their time machine thingy.”

Kevin nodded.

“You know, it’s exciting that she’s a real live superhero and comes from another planet in another dimension and everything, but,” Megan’s face clouded, “I think I’d miss her just as much if she was just a normal girl who grew up in Milford and moved away.” Tears started to trickle down her cheeks. “We won’t even be able to call each other, or write.”

Kevin sat down heavily in a chair. He sat in silence as his sister wept quietly.

“We have to leave Delaware?” asked Caitlin plaintively. “I’ve

lived here my whole *life*.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” sighed Emily. “There are a very limited number of places we can go. It has to be a city able to handle the press and the security, and there has to be a hospital willing to hire me.”

“Can’t we live in Wilmington? I liked Wilmington!”

Emily shook her head. “Unfortunately not. There isn’t a job there for me, and the police department says they don’t have the budget to deal with us.” She shrugged. “Apparently we’re ‘high profile VIPs.’” She made air quotes.

Caitlin folded her arms. “So where *can* we live?”

“Mr. Douglas says they have situations lined up in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington. Boston is a possibility; they’re still looking into it.”

Caitlin looked doubtful. “New York and L.A. are *huge*, aren’t they?”

Emily nodded. “Yes, but large cities can be lots of fun. Seattle isn’t as big as New York or L.A., but I liked it there. New York, L.A., and D.C. all have tons of things to do. The weather in California is really nice, too.”

Caitlin looked to Lois and Clark. “How about Metropolis? Is it a big city, too?”

Clark nodded. “Yes, it’s only a little smaller than New York or L.A. Nearly eleven million people.”

“But is it... weird?” asked Caitlin.

“Weird?” echoed Lois.

“You know... giant robots rampaging and destroying buildings, mutant creatures running through the streets, supervillains poisoning the water supply?” She shivered.

Lois raised an eyebrow. “You have a vivid imagination.”

Clark shook his head. “Nothing like that, though I won’t deny that once in a while... unusual things might happen,” he admitted. “Crazy people do come after Superman occasionally. And the first few years, there were threats to the city as a whole, but the last incident like that was years and years ago.”

Lois spread her hands. “If Metropolis were that dangerous people would be leaving in droves. No one would want to raise their kids there. It’s actually considered one of the nicest places to live on the East Coast.”

Caitlin tilted her head and thought about that.

“I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else,” agreed Clark, “but if you come with us you don’t have to live in Metropolis. There’s New York, L.A., San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, and lots of other cities and towns. Even Wilmington.”

Lois added, “Though if you’re worried about Metropolis, I’d steer clear of Gotham City.”

Clark protested, “It’s gotten a lot better, honey.” Lois just smirked.

“I wish we were just anonymous again; then we could live anywhere,” said Caitlin wistfully. “I hate people watching every single thing we do. I hate feeling like a zoo exhibit.”

“Some celebrities manage to lead pretty private lives,” argued Emily. “Look at Neil Armstrong.”

“Neil Armstrong doesn’t have to go to school,” countered Caitlin. “And I want to have friends, and not worry whether the things I tell them will wind up on TV, like what Sandy did. I don’t want to feel like a prisoner in my own home. I don’t want to have a bodyguard with me everywhere I go, even if they’re really nice like ours. I don’t want to have a bodyguard on my first date!” She was sniffing. “I really don’t want to live like this. And we will, won’t we? No matter where we move, we’ll have to live like this?” Lois and Clark looked on sympathetically.

“Yes,” sighed Emily as she put her arms around Caitlin. “Yes. Things may calm down some in a few years, but we’ll need security for the rest of our lives.”

“Maybe we should go with Kara and her parents?” wondered Caitlin. “Maybe that would be easier?”

"If we do, we'll be anonymous again, but... it's not our world. I don't know how different it is. I worry we'd have trouble adjusting." She looked to Lois and Clark. "Does it seem different to you? Our world? Does it seem weird, uncomfortable? Could you live here?"

Clark squinted in thought. "Aside from the fictional person thing, nothing stands out, but we've only been here a few days and we haven't done much research." He turned to Lois. "Honey?"

"Well, your political situation is worse, the press has serious issues, and I've noticed a few other minor differences." She folded her arms. "But as Clark said, we've only been here a few days. What about Kara? She's been here almost two months."

Emily frowned. "She was homesick, of course, but she didn't mention anything else. Then again, kids are pretty adaptable."

"Is there anything in particular you're worried about?" asked Clark.

Emily hesitated. "Well... maybe I'm just being silly, but I'm really worried about... history. Culture. Kara says we have things in common, but I'm wondering if we'll get there, then realize we've lost some part of ourselves forever. I don't know, like... what if I realized I could never read Steinbeck again... or Jane Austen... or Tolkien? Or watch Shakespeare, or *Singin' in the Rain*, or hear Beethoven's symphonies or the Beatles? I'd be heartbroken." Lois was nodding thoughtfully.

Clark leaned forward. "No... I don't think that's silly at all. There's a book... *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee. I'd feel the same way if I could never read it again."

"We have it, and a movie version with Gregory Peck."

"Us too. And everything else you mentioned; we've got all ten Beethoven symphonies—"

Emily blinked. "Ten?"

"—but you're right, there could well be things you love that we don't have." Clark shrugged. "After all, we don't have Superman movies or comics. At least not the kind you have here."

Emily nodded, deep in thought. She hoped that was all, but there was only one way to find out. "You really think you can set us up with new lives in Metropolis? You think we'll be all right?"

"I think so," said Clark. "Regardless, I promise we'll bring you back here if that's what you want. I wouldn't feel right taking you with us otherwise."

Emily put an arm around Caitlin again, and pulled her close. She thought about all the stress they'd been under, especially Caitlin. She thought about living the rest of their lives this way. Though lots of celebrities did it, lots of celebrities self-destructed, too.

Moving to Metropolis would be like emigrating to a new country as a refugee. That was a story as old as humanity. Often, though, refugees had to leave things behind in exchange for a better life. Sometimes that was painful.

Emily didn't know how hard it would be for her, but she was pretty sure Caitlin would be fine. It would be far better for her little sister than staying here. And they did have a way back if it didn't work out. "What do you think, sweetie?"

Caitlin bit her lip. "I think... Wait!" She sat up straight. "Do you guys have baseball?"

"Of course we have baseball," said Lois. "Though with the Meteors and the Monarchs both eliminated from the playoffs this year, some people in Metropolis might dispute that."

Caitlin nodded uncertainly. "Then... I think... I'd like to go. At least try it out?" She looked up at Emily, questioning.

Emily stared off into space for a minute, then nodded slowly. "Yes... I think so. If you're sure you don't mind, Lois, Clark, I think we'd like to take you up on your offer." She closed her eyes momentarily. "We'll give Metropolis a try."

Kara looked up as her parents entered her room. She'd wanted to be in on the discussion, but Mom had gently explained that the Jordans were already going to have a hard enough time deciding without her in the room influencing them.

So she'd sat upstairs and waited, and cried for the good friends she already knew would be left behind. Emily and Caitlin weren't friends: they were family, and saying goodbye to them forever would break her heart.

Mom smiled sadly. "Emily and Caitlin are coming home with us, honey."

"Oh," said Kara, and looked down, overwhelmed by her feelings.

Her parents looked at each other, then sat on either side of her on the bed. Mom stroked her hair. "I thought you'd be happy about that."

Kara looked up. "I guess. I mean I *am*. I mean, I'm really glad I'll get to see them, but I feel like I totally wrecked their lives. It's my fault they *have* to come with us."

Mom pulled Kara into her embrace. "It isn't your fault, sweetheart."

"But if I hadn't become Supergirl..."

"You all did what you had to. As much as I hate to admit it, Emily did what I would have done."

Dad reached over and put his hand on Kara's shoulder. "I don't think anyone's happy with how it turned out, sweetie, but they don't regret taking you in, or letting you do what you needed to."

Kara pondered that. "Do you think they'll be happy back home?"

"I don't know," admitted Dad, "but we'll do our best to help them adapt. And we'll bring them back here if that's what they want." He hesitated. "About going home..."

Kara looked up, questioning.

"The reason they're coming with us is to get away from the public attention. You know that when we go home, the family secret is a secret again, right? Not even Laura can know."

Kara *hadn't* thought about that, but rolled her eyes anyway. "I *know*, Dad. I won't tell *anyone*, or give it away." A thought struck her. "What are we going to do about Supergirl?"

Mom exchanged glances with Dad. "Sweetheart, we don't know what's going to happen to your powers when we go home. You may keep them, or you may be like Jordy and your father and get them back gradually. Even if you keep them Dad and I would rather you spend your time being yourself instead of Supergirl. You need to focus on school, and making friends, and having fun, and growing up."

"Yeah," said Kara, crestfallen. "I just got to like helping people, is all."

Her mother smiled knowingly at her father.

Dad squeezed Kara's shoulder. "We know it's hard to turn your back on that. We're just not sure how you can do it in a way that's good for you. And there's your brother, too; if we allowed you to be Supergirl, we'd have to allow him to help. He's been asking us to let him help since... well... since he was your age. We *are* thinking about it."

"OK." At least they were thinking about it.

Kara was silent for a while, and her thoughts drifted back to where they were before her parents came in. "Dad?"

"Yes, Kara?"

"Am I ever going to see Bailey, Megan, or Kevin again?"

"Is that why I heard you crying earlier?" Kara nodded. "I don't know, sweetheart. Traveling here is dangerous, but not impossible. We can't come here very often, that's for sure. It's like having friends on the other side of the world. You can get there but it's hard."

"Not for you, Flyboy. Two minutes, tops."

"OK, it's a bad analogy for those of us who can fly. You

know what I mean.”

“And there’s no way to talk to them or email or anything, either?”

“Not that I know of. We can ask Mr. Wells when we get home.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” said Mom, hugging Kara tight.

“I’ll miss them so much,” sniffled Kara. “Why do all my friends have to go away? First Jessica Loeb moved and now I’m losing my friends here. At least I can *talk* to Jessica.”

“You’ve had bad luck, sweetie,” said Mom. “I’m so sorry. I’m sure you’ll make friends at Larson. You’ve only been there a couple of months.”

Kara realized with a start that the time that had passed here hadn’t passed back home. She’d be returning right to when she left, or nearly. Speaking of which. . . “Not if Paige has anything to say about it.”

Mom pulled back and smiled. “Does Supergirl really need to worry about the likes of Paige McArthur?”

Kara thought that over. “Supergirl doesn’t, but I might have to.”

Kara ended her tenure at Milford Middle School by doing something she hadn’t done in weeks: walking to school. This time it was with her parents.

Mr. Douglas had officially released her back into their custody. The government felt that with Superman there, Secret Service protection was no longer needed.

Even though it was on the outskirts of town the government house was only about a mile from the school. They slipped out the back door and under the noses of the press, zipping past them too fast to be spotted.

Her parents had borrowed some slightly nicer clothes, feeling that visiting her school in outdoor clothing was inappropriate. Her dad had on a sports jacket but no tie, and her mom slacks and a nice blouse.

The walk gave Kara plenty of time to reflect on the weekend just past. There hadn’t been much needed in the way of preparation to go home, as Kara wasn’t planning to take any of the things the government had given her. She didn’t have any idea what they were going to do with all of it.

Emily and Caitlin had paid a last visit to their father’s grave, and returned quiet and red-eyed. They weren’t bringing much either, since they hadn’t had much to begin with and there was little room in the time machine for luggage. The most important cargo was their small collection of memorabilia.

Mom had spent Sunday writing an editorial about the problems she and Dad saw in this world’s press. She had no idea if it would do any good, but as always if she saw something she felt was wrong she had to write about it. It was to be published in several major papers worldwide after they left.

Dad had spent part of Sunday helping out as Superman. The flooding in Thailand was mostly under control already but they were grateful for his assistance. He’d traveled around the globe, looking for opportunities to help, performing rescues and stopping crimes.

He’d asked Kara if she wanted to come with him and observe, but she’d passed on her last chance to be Supergirl in this world to spend the day with her friends.

To her surprise, there’d been laughter to go with the tears: they’d managed to have some fun, reminiscing over the nine weeks they’d spent together. Megan in particular had been upbeat. Kara would see them one last time after school when they left in the time machine, though no one else knew that. They hadn’t shared its location with anyone, including the government.

By the time they arrived at school the press had found them out; cameras flashed as they walked up the school steps. They were early, so the school was mostly empty as they walked the

halls to the office.

Kara would miss this place. She had no second thoughts about going home, but still wished she could go to school here instead of Larson. Wizard Howl’s magic door would be just the ticket.

Chapter 46: It’s Hard to Say Goodbye

Kara waited in the office while her parents spent forty-five minutes in the conference room with her teachers. She tried hard not to listen in, but it was difficult with her name being mentioned so often — it drew her attention every time. As did the occasional laughter.

The office was a dull place to wait. She’d looked for something to read but there wasn’t anything to be found. She’d spent twenty minutes bored stiff before it occurred to her that something didn’t have to be in the same room for her to read it.

After that she’d started browsing books and magazines in the school library, and had been surprised to discover an issue of *Current Events* with herself on the cover. Twice: the cover was split, with the left side showing Supergirl and the right side Kara as herself. The headline read, “Sixth Grade Superhero.”

She was still reading the article — it was a bit tricky figuring out how to read the back sides of pages — when she heard the parent-teacher conference breaking up; she pulled her vision back to the office. A moment later the door to the conference room opened and her parents came out, followed by her teachers. Everyone was smiling; she hoped that was a good sign.

“Am I going to class now?” she asked.

Her parents looked to Mr. Kroum, who shook his head. “No, Kara, we have a special assembly this morning.”

Everyone was grinning. *That* couldn’t be a good sign.

Kara’s suspicions were confirmed when Ms. Frye led her family up onto the stage of the auditorium instead of seating them with her classmates. Kara sat on a folding chair between her parents. The other students filed into the auditorium and took their seats; it seemed to take forever. Kara’s eyes widened when she noticed that many of the kids were wearing Superman T-shirts.

Ms. Frye stepped to the podium. “Students and staff of Milford Middle School, we’re here this morning for two reasons. We have a distinguished guest speaker today, a world leader of the kind who doesn’t often pass through our town. We’re very fortunate that he’s willing to give a talk to all of you, one that I think you’ll find interesting. He’s also agreed to answer questions at the end.

“But before we get to that, we’re also here to say goodbye to someone.”

Oh no, thought Kara, and her heart began to pound. Her father put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it.

“She has a fast arm and an equally quick wit, and has led the eighth grade girls’ fast-pitch team to many a victory. Caitlin Jordan, would you please stand up?”

Kara sighed slightly in relief, as Caitlin stood up in the first row, her face a solemn mask.

“We’re all sorry to see you go, Caitlin, especially since we know it’s under unfortunate circumstances. We’ve had students move away before, but never quite this far. It really is where no one has gone before, at least not from this world. We all wish you and Emily every happiness in your new home. Everyone, please give a big Milford Middle School farewell to Caitlin Jordan. We will miss you.”

The kids all applauded and cheered, and Kara applauded and cheered right along with them. Caitlin’s face screwed up as she tried, unsuccessfully, not to cry.

After a time, the applause died down, and Caitlin took her seat again. Ms. Frye continued, “Oh that’s right, there is *another*

student we have to say goodbye to..."

All the kids laughed, and Kara ducked her head.

"She's only been a student here for nine weeks, but I trust you'll agree with me that she's had an impact on this school. And I'm not talking about the bodyguards and the swarms of reporters."

The kids laughed again, while Kara's face reddened.

"Even before we knew that Supergirl was a student here, she was setting an example for all of us. She selflessly gives of her time and abilities to help where she can. I think it's clear that she's following in her father's footsteps in showing how great power can be used to serve humanity rather than oppress it."

Kara was staring at her shoes.

"We usually wait until the end of the school year for this, but the teachers are unanimous that this year's Hugh Everett Award for Student Compassion and Community Service can go to only one student." Ms. Frye smiled. "Kara Kent, would you please join me at the podium?"

Kara got to her feet as everyone applauded; her parents looked on, beaming. She walked over to join the Principal.

Ms. Frye pulled a plaque out of the lectern, and held it so Kara could see. It was engraved with the school insignia, the title of the award, and her name; beneath, it read "For Service to All Humankind."

"This award is not just a symbol of the good you've done for humanity. We also hope that when you're far, far away from Milford, it will serve as a reminder of your time here. We hope you will not forget us. We will certainly never forget you."

Ms. Frye handed her the plaque, and Kara's eyes started to leak. "Thank you, Ms. Frye," she said, her voice thick. "I won't forget."

Ms. Frye smiled fondly. "You're very welcome, dear." She turned to the audience again. "Everyone, please join me in letting Kara know how we feel."

There was a thunderous cheer, and all the students jumped to their feet, applauding and whistling. Kara wanted to run and hide, and her face was bright red, but she forced herself to look out over the audience as tears streamed down her cheeks. Her hearing led her to three heartbeats in particular, and she saw Bailey, Megan, and Kevin standing and applauding with the rest of them. Their eyes met, and they communicated without words.

Ms. Frye let the applause continue for a minute, then motioned for everyone to be seated. She shook Kara's hand. "Thank you, Kara. We all wish you the best of luck at your own school."

Kara nodded uncertainly; she was sure she'd need it.

"Could you please take your seat again?"

Kara nodded again, and went back to sit between her parents. Her mother put an arm around her and hugged her lightly.

"We're so proud of you," whispered her mom, so quietly that only she and her father could hear. Kara's face continued to burn.

"And now, I'd like to introduce our speaker. Through a very strange series of events he's a Milford Middle School parent, though one we certainly never expected to have in our community. I asked him if he would be willing to speak to you all about some of the things he's learned in life, and he's agreed. Please join me in welcoming Kara's father, Mr. Clark Kent, also known as Superman."

"Thank you very much for speaking today... umm... Superman? Mr. Kent?"

They were standing in the otherwise empty auditorium, the rest of the students and staff having returned to class. Clark was currently in his Superman uniform, simply because one of the first questions after his talk had come from a skeptical eighth grader: "Are you *really* Superman?"

After an apologetic glance at Kara, who'd closed her eyes,

Clark had answered by demonstration, spinning into his uniform to the enthusiastic cheers and whistles of all the students. He hadn't changed back.

"Either is fine, Ms. Frye, and you're very welcome. Your students asked some really good questions."

"It was fascinating to hear your perspective. From the Superman stories here, I would have thought you spent all your time fighting outlandish villains of one kind or another. I was surprised to hear how much international diplomacy and charitable work you do."

Clark and Lois looked at each other. Lois answered, "Superman is a symbol who's come to mean a lot to the people of our world. And the trust he's built has allowed him to help in ways that don't involve superpowers." She smiled.

"I know you inspired some young minds today," said Ms. Frye. She sighed. "I wish we had a symbol like that here." She looked to Kara and smiled. "Though your daughter was doing a good job while she was here. Even with all the horrible politics, no one ever dared to attack her personally."

Kara's smile turned to a blush, and she looked down.

Lois smiled. "We're very proud of her and of our other children." She turned somber. "And we have a friend who likes to help worlds that could use it. We'll be sure to tell him about this one. Speaking of which..." she looked between Clark and Kara, "I think it's high time we went home, don't you?"

Ms. Frye nodded. "Kara, do you want to say goodbye to your friends?"

Kara shook her head. "I already said goodbye to them earlier, Ms. Frye." She did not mention that she'd see them again when they left in the time machine. "Ms. Frye?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Thank you for letting me come to school here even with all the crazy stuff. I really liked it." She hesitated, but Ms. Frye held her arms open, and they hugged.

"You're very welcome, Kara. Good luck to you."

Clark smiled. "Sweetheart, why don't you change into your uniform since we'll be flying back to the house with Caitlin?"

Kara nodded; she blurred backstage and out again dressed as Supergirl. They filed up the aisle and out the doors, intending to head to Caitlin's classroom, but stopped in the hall.

Every classroom doorway was open, and students crowded the hall. They started cheering, whistling, and clapping again.

Kara blushed profusely, but tried to keep her head high as they resumed walking. Student after student called out goodbyes as they passed. Kara's eyes grew wet, but she had a smile on her face, and called out her goodbyes in return.

They stopped by Caitlin's classroom, and she joined them as they walked down the hallway towards the front door, the students still cheering them on. Robin Gilbert walked with Caitlin for the last time.

They emerged on the front steps of the school to a wall of reporters and cameras. The reporters were shouting questions, but they were ignored.

Lois moved into Clark's embrace. "Are you ready, girls?" she asked.

"Just a second," replied Caitlin, and she and Kara looked back into the school for a long moment. She turned to Robin. "Thank you, Robin, for watching over me."

Robin smiled sadly. "You're welcome, Miss Jordan. Best of luck to you."

Caitlin and Kara put an arm around each other, and the four of them lifted quietly into the air, leaving Milford Middle School behind.

After saying their goodbyes to Fred Douglas and his staff, they'd moved back to the Tongs' home in secret.

Clark and Kara had brought Emily and Caitlin to Wilmington

for a prearranged meeting with Judge Quinn. Clark and Emily both felt that the judge needed to give approval for what they were planning to do.

After a short, impromptu hearing, Judge Quinn had agreed to grant custody of Caitlin to Emily, provided Clark kept an eye on them for the next six months and made sure they were thriving in their new home. He was to bring them back if there was a problem during that time. Clark had readily agreed as he intended to watch over them anyway.

Now they were all back from Wilmington, and all that remained was to load up the time machine and wait for Kara's friends to arrive home to say goodbye.

Kara's feelings were an unsettling mixture of anguish at leaving her friends behind and longing to see home again. Her parents were with her now, but she missed her brother and sister and the rest of her extended family terribly. She hoped she could see them all right away. At the same time, she didn't want to leave her friends here. She felt all jumbled up.

Emily sat with Caitlin and Lois on the Tongs' sofa. She felt strange, almost like she was adrift between worlds. Now that they were leaving this one she surprised herself by being impatient to go. She was impatient to see what the two of them were getting themselves into. Most of all, she was impatient to get their lives back to a semblance of normality, even though it was ironic that she had to live in Superman's world to lead a normal life.

Clark had all their belongings collected. He put his hand on Kara's arm. "Sweetheart, can you give me a hand carrying all this stuff out to the garage? I think we can make it in one trip if you help."

Lois grinned. "Is it too heavy for Superman?"

Clark laughed. "Even Superman has only two hands, and some of this stuff is loose."

Kara laughed too. "Sure, Dad."

They carried the backpacks and other items down the hallway to the Tongs' garage; Caitlin trailed along out of curiosity. "There's not really enough room to set all this down inside, so let's put it down in the hallway. Once I have the tarp off you can pass stuff in to me while I load up. OK?"

"OK!"

Kara followed her dad into the garage and watched expectantly as he pulled off the tarp. She hadn't seen it yet, and thought a real time machine *had* to be awesome.

What they found was a collection of cardboard boxes.

Kara squinted at her dad. "The time machine... it's not like the one in *Calvin and Hobbes*, is it?"

He sighed. "No, it's not."

Chapter 47: One of Our Time Machines is Missing

"We're stuck here, aren't we?" asked Kara, dejected.

"Oh, honey," said Mom, giving her a one-armed hug. "I know things look bad, but we've been in worse scrapes than this."

"Really?"

"Really. The last time we fought Tempus your father got sucked into a time window and trapped inside a moment of time. I almost lost him, but Mr. Wells and I were able to rescue him. We'll get out of this."

"The problem is," said Dad, "I can build another time machine, but just the kind that can travel in time and space. I can't reconstruct the device that allowed us to travel between realities. Mr. Wells never described how it works. I'm not sure even he knows."

Just then the front door opened, and Mrs. Tong walked in, closing it quietly behind her.

"Did you find out anything?" asked Mom.

She nodded as she came into the living room. "Yes. It happened this morning, while I was out running errands. My

neighbor says a truck was here. The men said they were here to replace the water heater in the garage. The truck looked legitimate and the men had a garage door opener, so she didn't think anything of it." She smiled faintly. "There was nothing wrong with our water heater, but they actually replaced it."

"For cover," said Mom. "It *has* to be the government. This smells like an intelligence operation to me."

Dad considered that. "You're probably right. The question is, who ordered it? And how do we get our time machine back?"

Caitlin observed, "We're not even in Metropolis yet and it already sounds like we're living in a comic book."

"People who live in children's novels shouldn't throw stones," teased Mom.

Dad held his hands up. "Guys, does it really matter whose world comes from a more mature story?"

Mom and Caitlin looked at each other. "Sorry," they said at the same time.

"So," said Dad, "who are the suspects?"

"The President," said Mom. "He wanted us to stay. Why else would someone steal the machine but to strand us here?"

"I agree," said Dad. "Whoever did this wants us to stay. But it wasn't necessarily the President. The people behind the SMPA also have a motive."

"Could a bunch of whiny politicians order up a covert operation like this?"

"There might be sympathizers inside the agencies. They don't always follow orders. Remember Trask?"

"How could I forget?"

"What happened?" asked Emily, curious.

"Jason Trask was a nut case who headed a rogue government agency, and was convinced Superman was the advance man for an alien invasion. He was the first one to use Kryptonite on Clark. He almost killed him."

Everyone was quiet for a moment. "Anyway," Dad eventually continued, "we've had other run-ins as well, so we know first hand that government agents don't always follow the party line. Yes, this could easily be without the President's knowledge."

"Can't you just go ask Mr. Douglas or the President to help you get it back?" asked Kara.

Mom shook her head. "I don't trust any of them."

Kara was surprised. She thought they both seemed like nice people.

"We may not have a choice, honey," said Dad.

"True," admitted Mom, "but I think we should play it close for now. If we disappear as if we went home, whoever did it may expose themselves trying to figure out what went wrong. If we make a big noise about being stuck here, they'll know they succeeded."

Dad smiled. "Have I told you recently how brilliant you are?"

"Not recently enough, no."

"You're brilliant."

Mom smiled back, and patted Dad on the cheek. "Nice of you to notice."

Kara didn't know what was going to happen, but her parents' joking convinced her they weren't too worried. She relaxed.

Caitlin asked tentatively, "If you build a new time machine, can't you go back and get the thingy that'll take us to Metropolis *before* the bad guys take it?"

Dad thought for a moment, then shook his head. "That would cause a paradox, I think. The time machine wouldn't be there for them to take, and we know *we* didn't take it, so someone else must have." He closed his eyes and rubbed them. "I think. Assuming that made any sense whatsoever."

"No, not the time machine. The... the... whatchamacallit you need. How would the bad guys know it was supposed to be there if they'd never seen a time machine before? You could steal it

before they did and they'd never know. Or at least, you could go back and *see* who stole it."

Mom and Dad exchanged a look. Mom turned to Caitlin. "You're pretty smart yourself, Caitlin. I take back the crack about children's novels." She turned back to Dad. "Honey?"

Dad was nodding slowly. "I think that might work, though it's possible they've already destroyed the time machine; that's what I would do. In which case knowing who took it is sort of moot. Still, we might be able to steal the three-axis device before they do." He stood up. "So, I think building a new time machine is the first order of business."

"No," said Mom. "The *first* order of business is for the five of us to disappear. Whoever stole the time machine *must* be watching this house."

"OK, sweetheart, you know what to do, right?"

Kara rolled her eyes. "Yes, Dad, you told me like *four times*. Keep the stones warm, but not too warm, and keep Mom, Emily, and Caitlin safe. I can do it."

Clark smiled from the seat of the time machine he'd built anew. "I'm sure you can. I should only be gone a few moments from your point of view, anyway. I'll come right back to this time and place."

He looked to Lois, and she nodded slightly. She knew what to do if Clark didn't return. They hadn't shared that with Kara, not wanting to worry her.

The time machine sat in a clearing in the Milford Neck Wildlife Area — not the same one they'd arrived in. They'd considered checking into a motel in disguise, but given how well-known they all were thought that was unlikely to work. So Clark had set up a small campsite, with logs for seating and stones heated with his vision to keep them warm, all hidden from aerial surveillance under the tree canopy. With any luck they wouldn't be here long.

Clark activated the machine, and the others were obscured by a glow, which shortly faded to reveal the same clearing a few hours earlier that day.

He carefully hid the machine as he had when they'd first arrived. He wondered if their old machine would've been safer here all along. It certainly hadn't been in the Tongs' garage.

Moments later he was hovering 15 miles above Milford, focusing his vision on that same garage. His vision peeled back the tarp, revealing their original time machine; it was still there.

What was not there was the three-axis device. Someone else had taken it before the time machine had been stolen.

Clark turned his vision away; he'd seen enough.

He'd waited patiently for the men in the disguised van to arrive and steal the time machine. He'd listened in on their conversation; it had been guarded and unilluminating. It was obvious they were government agents but he couldn't tell who they were working for.

He'd followed the truck all the way to Wilmington, where the entire vehicle had been loaded onto a cargo ship that soon set off downriver. The men had dispersed in ones and twos, in separate cars, and he'd realized he could either follow the ship or them; he'd chosen to follow the ship.

Shortly after its departure, he'd seen other men inside the ship take sledgehammers to the time machine, reducing it to wreckage. Clark had no doubt they'd take the remains out to sea and dump it. He'd used his vision to search the entire ship, but it, too, was maddeningly free of identifying information other than the mundane sort. He suspected whoever had planned this had had his abilities in mind.

He was sure that he and Lois could eventually dig up who was behind this, but like any of their investigations it might take days or weeks; the forces trying to keep them here had covered

their tracks well. And if they conducted that investigation, it gave the other side more time to find more ways to trap them here. Their first priority *had* to be to get Kara home safely.

He could follow the ship and see where it went, but that would take days as well. It could only move so far in the few hours between now and the time he'd left — there was no need to stay and watch it. He headed back to the new time machine to see if he could figure out who had taken the three-axis device. He'd have to hop back further into the past, possibly multiple times.

Kara had just finished heating up the stones again when she noticed a glowing dot appear in the clearing. It grew rapidly in size, then faded to reveal her dad sitting in the new time machine. They all blinked at his expression: he looked amused.

"What is it?" asked Lois, excited. "Did you see who took it?" She frowned. "Where's the inter-reality gizmo?"

"I know where it is, so don't worry about that. It's well-hidden and safe. As for our time machine, I wasn't able to figure out anything about the guys who stole it; they're pros. There was no identifying documentation at all, and they never said anything incriminating. I think they were expecting that I'd try to find and identify them."

"So what happened to it, Clark?" asked Emily.

"It was loaded onto a freighter in Wilmington, and they smashed it to bits. I'm sure they're taking it out to sea to dump the remains."

"But we have this one, right? Can we go home?" asked Kara.

"Yes we can, and I think the sooner the better. It's obvious we're up against an extremely determined, well-organized force trying to keep us here. I think you're right, Lois; it has to be one or more of the intelligence agencies, and they're going all out on this.

"This time we really lucked out. I don't want to count on us being so lucky in the future. The longer we stay here, the more time we give them to come up with ways to trap us. If we come back to this world we're going to have to be very careful." He got out of the time machine.

"Dad?"

"What, sweetheart?"

"Are we going to be able to say goodbye to my friends?"

Clark smiled. "Oh, I think so."

Emily and Caitlin started at a noise in the brush. "Who is it?" asked Caitlin. "Who's coming?"

"It's OK," said Kara, peeking over her glasses. "It's Dad with my friends."

Clark ushered Bailey, Megan, Kevin, and Alice into the clearing. He was also carrying the three-axis device.

"We have a little time," said Clark. "I tried my best to be stealthy, but two cars followed Kara's friends when they came this way. I blew out their tires with my heat vision, but that's only going to hold them for so long. I don't want any of us to still be here when they arrive, because I don't want them to try using someone to make us stay. We need to leave as soon as I get this hooked up. It's a good thing Mr. Wells showed me how." He set about doing just that; the time machine was already loaded with their belongings.

"Where was it?" asked Lois.

Clark smiled and looked at Kevin, who scratched the back of his head. "That was kinda my fault."

"What happened?" asked Kara, surprised. "Did you steal it to keep us here?"

"No!" said Kevin forcefully. "It was a mistake. I didn't even know what it was!"

Alice added, "It's partly my fault, too. I was working on a project and asked Kevin to get my sewing machine out of the garage..."

“...and it looks like a sewing machine,” finished Lois. “But didn’t you notice it wasn’t?” She frowned. “Don’t tell me it really works as a sewing machine, too.”

“I didn’t get that far,” said Alice. “I didn’t even look at it. Right after he brought it to me, someone called on the phone. I got distracted, and I haven’t had time to get back to my project.” She shrugged, embarrassed. “It’s been sitting by my crafts table ever since.”

“Don’t apologize,” said Clark. “If that hadn’t happened it might be sitting in pieces at the bottom of Delaware Bay right now, and we’d be stuck here unless we could figure out how to get another one or Mr. Wells tried to rescue us.” He stood up, finished with his work on the time machine. “So it turned out to be a stroke of luck for us.”

Suddenly both Clark and Kara got a look on their faces, one Lois was intimately familiar with. “What?” she asked.

“Something’s coming...” said Kara.

Just as they heard a buzzing noise in the middle distance, Clark lowered his glasses; a second later, there was a noisy explosion in mid-air a few hundred feet away. They all flinched involuntarily.

Clark was grim. “That was some kind of remotely piloted mini-helicopter. I was just trying to disable its cameras, but it had a missile on board with an explosive payload. They’re trying to find and destroy our time machine.”

He looked around in a circle. “There’s three others at varying distances, and they all just turned in this direction; they know we’re here now. We have a few minutes but we need to go.” He turned to Kara. “Honey, it’s time to say goodbye.”

Kara stared at her friends. She’d known this moment was coming, but hadn’t wanted to think too hard about it. Now, it was finally here. She knew she might not ever see or talk to them again, and they knew it too.

She ran to Bailey and Megan, and the three of them hugged. “I love you guys,” said Kara through her tears. “I’ll never, ever forget you.”

“I love you too, Kara,” whispered Bailey hoarsely.

“Oh, Kara...” began Megan, but she couldn’t finish. The three of them cried together.

Dad waited for a while, but finally said, “Sweetheart, they need to go too. They need to get back to their car and leave. It’s dangerous for them to stay here.”

Kara broke the hug. She looked to her parents and the Jordans, already seated in the time machine, then back at her friends.

“Dad...” she asked uncertainly, “will they be OK after we leave?”

“President Hunter promised me he’d make sure they’re OK. And as long as we’re *all* gone before those drones get here, there’s no reason to harm them. If we’re already gone, your friends can’t be used against us.”

Kara nodded, and looked to Kevin, who’d been standing on his own watching the group hug. She didn’t know what possessed her, but she dashed over to him, stood on tiptoe, threw her arms around him, and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Kevin,” she said. “Thank you for everything.” She hugged him briefly.

She ran to the time machine to hop in next to her mother, who put an arm around her. Her parents shared a brief look.

Kevin touched his cheek gingerly and whispered, “Wow.”

She had a moment to share one last look with her friends through her tear-flecked glasses. Their eyes met, but there was nothing more to say. Her father did something to the controls, and a glowing bubble formed around them, partly obscuring their surroundings.

Then the world turned inside out.

Chapter 48: The Devil You Know

Somehow, though they’d been inside the bubble a moment ago they were now outside it, and the world they’d left was inside instead. Kara got one last glimpse of her friends as the bubble shrank rapidly, until it was just one of a multitude of points of light that surrounded them. They were arrayed in some kind of regular, crystalline structure that stretched as far as the eye could see. She couldn’t figure it out: it seemed to change as she looked at it. It was beautiful, but she wasn’t in a mood to appreciate it.

Her heart sank as she realized there were so many she couldn’t even pick out the one they’d just left. Her friends were already lost in a single grain in an infinity of sand. Her eyes started to tear up all over again.

Her attention was diverted when the time machine began to make its way... through? past? along? the structure of light, lurching at random intervals. Kara and her father were unaffected, but her mother and the Jordan sisters looked ill.

She looked up at her father but he was focused on the controls, watching as numbers on a display changed. One was counting up and the other down; both were headed towards zero.

It took about twenty minutes of moving through whatever it was, but the machine finally came to a halt, or at least it ceased to feel like it was moving. Her father touched a control, and a light began to blink on the console; the machine jostled a tiny bit, as if making a fine adjustment.

Suddenly, one of the points around them began to grow rapidly, becoming a bubble. Kara glimpsed an unfamiliar room inside it, just before the bubble did the crazy inside-out thing it had before.

“I see... You’re sure they’re gone? ... Yes. Thanks.”

Alone in his private office, President Roger Hunter hung up the phone, leaned back in his desk chair, and sighed.

“That is despicable.”

“Why thank you, Herb,” replied Tempus. “Coming from you that means a lot. A little involved, I admit, but very final. Lois and Clark just took a one-way trip to oblivion.”

Just then, something in Tempus’s pocket began to beep, and a similar beeping noise grew from behind the wall hiding the secret room.

Tempus frowned and pulled a small device from his pocket; a light on it flashed in time with the beeping. “Or not,” he admitted.

Wells stood up and raised his gun. “Well, well, Tempus. It seems as if your plan has failed.” He moved to the wall and pressed the hidden control that opened it. Tempus joined him, and they watched a tiny dot appear in the room, rapidly growing to a large bubble. The bubble deformed into the shape of the time machine that slid into it a moment later, coming from an impossible-seeming direction.

The glow faded, and Wells noted that Lois and Clark had brought not only their daughter, but a woman and girl he didn’t know. All thoughts of the strangers vanished when Clark and Kara slumped, Kara crying out in pain. Lois was pinned between the two of them, unable to move.

Wells gasped and turned to face Tempus, only to find him holding a small chunk of Kryptonite and Wells’s own gun. “Herb, didn’t they teach you to be aware of where your weapon is at all times? It’s Gun Safety 101. Of course I never took Gun Safety 101 either, so don’t feel too bad.”

He sighed. “I don’t know how they beat this but I suppose I can finish them off the old-fashioned way. Not as much fun but hey,” he shrugged, “sometimes you have to accept second best.”

“Is that... Kryptonite?” asked the woman in the back of the time machine.

“Oh, is this the support group for ‘Oblivious Women

Anonymous? I thought I came to the wrong room,” deadpanned Tempus. “*Duh!* Of *course* it’s Kryptonite! What did you think it was, a Christmas decoration?” He grinned. “In fact, why don’t you hold it for me while I take care of some unfinished business?” He tossed it to the girl, who caught it easily. Kara’s cries increased in volume, and Clark moaned in pain from the proximity.

Tempus motioned Wells with the gun. “Over there with them, Herb.” Wells reluctantly moved to the time machine and stood next to Kara.

“Caitlin!” warned the woman. “It’s radioactive!”

Tempus rolled his eyes. “It can’t hurt *you*. It’s completely harmless to humans. And—”

He did not get a chance to finish, as Caitlin hurled the Kryptonite with deadly accuracy. It bounced off his head and he dropped like a sack of potatoes. Wells moved quickly to retrieve the gun.

Lois managed a smirk. “God, I love irony.” The corners of Clark’s mouth might have curled up slightly through his grimace.

“...water.”

The awful pain vanished but Kara felt too tired to move. She heard a man say, “If I may, my dear, I shall carry young Miss Kara so that you may assist Clark.” She felt arms lift and carry her, and she opened her eyes to see a man dressed in old-fashioned clothing lay her on the sofa in the living room. He smiled at her and moved away.

Kara looked around in wonder at the familiar yet strange surroundings. She was home, but it had been so long... it seemed unreal.

Mom was helping Dad out of the room Kara hadn’t known was there, but he looked like he was feeling better and stood straight on his own. “I’m fine now,” he said. “How’s Kara?”

Mom came over to sit beside her and brushed her hair back gently. “How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

Kara sat up on her own. “I think I’m OK now, but I don’t have my powers.” She frowned; the world seemed... dead, somehow, without her enhanced senses.

“The worse the Kryptonite exposure, the longer it takes them to come back,” said Dad, “but the time gets shorter with more exposures.” He winced. “My hearing just kicked in, so I think I’m back.”

“What happened? Where’s Emily and Caitlin?”

Mom put an arm around her. “Tempus was here when we got back, and he had Kryptonite. Caitlin went to get you some water, and Emily is checking on Tempus, since Caitlin beaned him with the Kryptonite.”

“Where are the glasses?” came Caitlin’s voice from the kitchen.

“The cabinet to the right of the sink,” Dad called back.

Kara looked around anxiously. “Where’d the Kryptonite go?”

“It’s in a lead box in our secret room now, thanks to Mr. Wells.”

Kara relaxed, and thought it was awesome that their house had a secret room. It wasn’t a crystal palace in the Arctic, but at least it was *something*.

Her eyes strayed to the man who’d carried her to the sofa. “Are you Mr. Wells?”

The man made a small bow. “H. G. Wells at your service, young lady. Your parents and I have had several adventures together.” Kara smiled at him.

Caitlin arrived just then with the water, which Kara received gratefully. She drank some and felt better.

Emily rose from the floor, where she’d been kneeling next to Tempus. He was curled up in a ball clutching his head. “H. G. Wells? Aren’t you... um...”

“Dead?” He smiled. “Only some of the time. One of the

advantages of time travel. But forgive me; we haven’t been introduced. I am H. G. Wells, as you’ve heard.”

“Emily Jordan, and this is my stepsister Caitlin Jordan.”

Mr. Wells looked surprised. “Emily and Caitlin *Jordan*, you say? And you came from that other world, not this one?”

“Um, yes?” said Emily. “You sound like you know who we are...”

Mr. Wells fumbled with his tie. “Forgive me, Dr. Jordan, I was merely surprised that Mr. and Mrs. Kent brought you here. May I ask why?”

Emily looked to Kara’s dad, unsure.

“Kara was in that other world for nine weeks and Emily was her foster mother. For some reason Kara got all her powers there, and she started helping people. She was exposed, like that other Clark we know. The public attention upended Emily and Caitlin’s lives, so they wanted to try coming here and starting over.”

“I see,” said Mr. Wells, seeming distracted. He shook himself. “How is Tempus?”

“He’s just stunned. I don’t think he has a concussion, though he should be watched for twenty-four hours, and he’ll have quite an egg,” replied Emily. “He should be more alert in a few minutes. It would be a kindness to get him a painkiller. Acetaminophen or ibuprofen will do.” Mom grumbled but headed for the kitchen.

Dad picked Tempus up and placed him in one of the armchairs, then blurred into the secret room and back; he bound Tempus’s hands with plastic ties. “That ought to keep him out of our hair.” He started going through Tempus’s pockets.

Kara was distracted by a plaintive *meow* from the stairs. Her face lit up and she jumped up from the couch, her energy restored. “Streaky!” she cried, and ran to the cat, kneeling and hugging him; he purred with pleasure. “Oh, I missed you too!”

It finally sank in: she was home. She was really, really home. She smiled through her tears.

“So let me get this straight — I was supposed to *explode*?” asked Dad.

“All the energy you absorb from the sun should have been released instantly. You should have gone up like an H-bomb.” Tempus scowled, then winced and adjusted the ice bag on his head. “I don’t know what went wrong. It worked fine with the rats!”

“Rats?” echoed Mom.

“I caught the rat that Luthor groupie gave superpowers, and used it to experiment on ways to get rid of you two.”

“Do you mean Gretchen Kelly? That was nearly twenty years ago!”

Tempus rolled his eyes then winced again. “Hello? *Time* machine?”

Mom frowned. “Oh, right. How did you catch a super-powered rat?”

“It wasn’t easy! And then I went and found more realities where that happened and caught the parallel rats.”

Mom massaged her temples. “My head is starting to hurt. Again.”

Tempus gave her a dirty look. “I searched everywhere for a reality where their powers wouldn’t work; I was going to strand you all there. But then I found that one, where the rats would actually *explode*. The laws of physics there weren’t compatible with your powers at *all*.” His eyes lit up with a manic gleam. “It was *glorious!* I knew I had to get you to go there — so you could go out with a bang!” He laughed, then winced in pain.

“So Kara was probably OK because she’d been exposed to Kryptonite,” guessed Mom. “But how did you not blow yourself up testing with the rats?”

“I’m not going to tell you *everything*,” snapped Tempus. “I still can’t figure out why Supermoron here didn’t blow up like he

was supposed to.”

Kara glared at him and wished *he'd* blow up. Just... not in the house. Eww.

Dad shook his head. “You must have got *something* wrong, because after a couple of days my powers worked just fine there. Kara’s did, too.”

“That shouldn’t be possible! You shouldn’t be able to *change* the laws of physics!” Tempus scowled again. “This is what I get for sleeping through class in high school.”

Mr. Wells looked thoughtful. “Now there is an interesting notion. I wonder if the capabilities of Kryptonian organelles extend as far as changing the properties of subspace...”

“Mr. Wells,” interrupted Mom, “let’s not share everything.”

Mr. Wells coughed and nodded.

“Oh come on! I told you *my* plans,” grouched Tempus.

“*We’re* not the ones trying to kill *you*,” retorted Mom.

“You’re sending me back to Utopia — it’s the same thing!”

“Speaking of which,” said Mr. Wells, “it’s time we were going, Tempus.” He stood, and picked up the gadget Dad had pulled from Tempus’s pocket.

“Mr. Wells?” asked Kara diffidently.

“Yes?”

“Do you think you’ll be able to find a way for me to talk to my friends?”

Mr. Wells’s face fell. “I don’t know, my dear child, but I shall look for one. And for a way to help that world, which sounds as if it desperately needs it.” He brightened. “Thanks to Tempus, I now know there are many more realities to explore; perhaps I will find solutions in one of them.”

“You’re not welcome,” sulked Tempus.

Mr. Wells turned to Dad. “The beacon you left in that world is well hidden?”

Dad grinned. “Very well hidden. He doesn’t know it, but I got the idea from Kara’s friend Kevin.”

Mr. Wells nodded thoughtfully. “Come along, Tempus. I’m sure the Peacekeepers would like a word with you.” He inclined his head. “Farewell to all of you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wells, for helping us get Kara home safely,” said Dad.

“Yes, thank you,” added Kara.

“As always, it was my pleasure. Even if we played into Tempus’s plans, it all worked out well in the end.”

“Damn rats,” muttered Tempus.

Kara’s stomach rumbled just then, and she blushed.

Dad smiled. “Are you hungry, sweetheart?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’m hungry too,” admitted Caitlin. “Hey, is this a pizza? How old is it?” She wrinkled her nose. “It hasn’t been here, like, a week, has it?”

“It’s quite fresh,” said Mr. Wells as he pressed a button on the gadget. “It may want heating up, however.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” protested Tempus. “That’s *my* pizza!”

“Not anymore,” observed Mom as she opened the box. “Oh, only one slice is gone. There’s enough for all of us.”

“That’s *my* pizza!” complained Tempus one last time, as he and Mr. Wells disappeared in a flash of light.

“Let me try heating it up!” said Kara. She lowered her glasses and tried to activate her heat vision.

Nothing happened.

She drooped, and Mom wrapped her in a hug. “Give it a day or two, sweetie. This is only the second time you’ve been exposed to Kryptonite.”

“Will I get *all* my powers back? Will I be able to fly?” Kara held her breath. *Please let me be able to fly...*

“We don’t know, sweetheart,” admitted Dad. “We’ll have to see when you can fly again. If you did it there, I’m sure you’ll be able to do it here, but you may have to wait till you’re older, like

Jordy.”

“Awwww...”

He reached over and ruffled her hair. “I promise I’ll take you flying until you can do it on your own, OK?” He smiled. “Now, how about some pizza?”

“OK,” agreed Kara, subdued.

Dad lowered his glasses, and a moment later the pizza was steaming slightly. “Go ahead, everyone, but be careful: it’s hot.” Kara reached for a slice.

Dad popped the top off some of the beers with his thumb, blew on them to ice them, then handed them out to Mom and, after she nodded, Emily. He kept one for himself.

“Handy, isn’t he?” observed Mom.

Dad grinned. “We run a full-service establishment.”

“Can I have some beer, Em?” asked Caitlin hopefully, as she took her own slice.

“Nice try,” said Emily. “Ask again in eight years.” Caitlin sighed.

“There’s soda in the fridge,” offered Mom, grabbing a slice.

Emily watched Dad take a slice and asked, “You like pepperoni, Clark?”

Dad nodded, his mouth full of pizza. He looked at her quizzically.

“I was just curious.”

“Speaking of which,” said Mom, “where *did* you leave the beacon, honey?”

Quttinirpaq National Park lies on the shores of the Arctic Ocean, on Ellesmere Island in the northernmost part of Canada.

Deep in the heart of one of the park’s mountains was a cavern, newly hewn from the living rock. Within the cavern sat a small box, its metatemporal transmissions and power source invisible to Twenty-first Century technology. The box had a small light that blinked at regular intervals.

Chapter 49: No Lollipop Guild

Emily’s hand reached tentatively for the front door, Caitlin right behind her.

“Go ahead,” encouraged Clark, who was behind them. “Have a look.”

Emily paused. The fight with Tempus had left her wondering what they’d gotten themselves into. “I have this weird feeling, like the picture is going to change from black and white to color, and there’ll be odd little houses and a yellow brick road.”

Clark laughed. “Nothing like that, I promise.”

Emily unlatched the Kents’ front door and stepped timidly out onto the stoop, Caitlin hanging on her arm. They looked up and down Hyperion Avenue as Clark joined them.

It looked like a regular city street, with rows of brownstones on either side. Afternoon sunlight and shadow cast patterns over the buildings. It looked a bit like the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

There were parked cars, and a woman on the opposite sidewalk was pushing a baby stroller. On both sides of the street, kids of various ages were walking home from school.

A car drove up the street, too fast, and the woman with the stroller yelled something Emily couldn’t make out. Clark winced.

There were trees lining the street but they had no leaves. Emily couldn’t tell if it was because they were dead or had merely lost their foliage for the winter. The air was crisp. “What’s the date?”

“It’s Friday, October 28, around three in the afternoon.”

“So we’ve gone back in time by, umm... ?” asked Caitlin quietly.

“About eight weeks. In a way, yes, but it’ll be a different eight weeks here.” Suddenly Clark’s eyes lost focus.

“Hear something?” whispered Emily.

“Car accident, but nothing serious. I don’t need to go,” Clark whispered back.

The street was relatively quiet for a large city, but in the near distance Emily could hear traffic noises: cars in motion with the occasional horn, a truck changing gears, the distinctive sound of the pneumatic doors closing on a city bus. She heard the distant sound of a jet and looked up, but only the contrail was visible.

She heard the flutter of wings, and looked down to find a robin perched on the bare branch of a nearby tree. It looked back at her, its head cocked, and chirped. Then, it was gone again.

Her gaze wandered over the schoolchildren on their way home, as they laughed and chattered and horsed around. She smiled.

She’d only seen one street so far, but somehow, she felt everything was going to be OK.

“Oh, Centennial Park,” said Kara. “You can ride horses there, but you have to have your own horse. And there’s a bandshell and concerts. You can bring a picnic and eat while you’re listening. We went this summer.”

She turned the page. “Oh, this is North Street Seaport. They shoot off fireworks there on the Fourth of July. It’s really hard to get in to see it there, but we get to watch from the top of the Daily Planet building and get a pretty good view.”

Emily and Caitlin were getting an armchair tour of their new hometown via a large coffee table book titled *Above Metropolis*. Kara was sitting with them and providing commentary as they flipped through it.

Caitlin was new to living in a large city, but Emily and her father had lived in Seattle for many years before moving to Wilmington. Seattle wasn’t as large as Metropolis, but she did have some experience with city living.

Of course, she didn’t have any experience living in a fictional city with a fictional superhero.

Except, flipping through the book, looking at all the neighborhoods and sights, the skyscrapers and airports and bridges and museums and stadiums, it was obvious the city was very real. The people she’d seen outside were very real. Kara and her family were very real. Even the Daily Planet building was very real.

The eleven million people who lived in this city weren’t extras in a Superman movie, twiddling their thumbs while they waited for their cues. They were living real lives in a real city, lives that just happened to include Superman.

Emily found it hard to keep both points of view in her head at the same time. Most of the time the Kents were new friends with whom she and Caitlin were staying while they got themselves situated in a new city. She loved Kara like her own child, and though Lois and Clark were older, they were turning out to be good friends. The city looked like a nice place to live and she was looking forward to getting to know it. All perfectly normal.

Then she would have the jarring realization that she was *living with Superman’s family in his house in Metropolis*. Those occasions were less and less frequent. The solidity and depth of this place and these people simply pushed aside the fictional version of Superman.

Some time in her nine weeks with Kara, her view of Superman had gotten flipped. Instead of wondering how a comic book character had come to life, she was wondering how stories had arisen in her world of the real people in this one.

“Emily?” asked Kara, shaking her out of her reverie.

“What, sweetie?”

“Where do you think you’re going to live? Do you think you’ll live nearby? Uncle Jimmy and Grandma and Grandpa Lane live in Bakerline, and Uncle Perry and Aunt Alice live here in Queensland Park, but over in North Bridge. It would be awesome if you were closer.” Kara smiled at her.

Emily smiled back. “We’d love that too, honey, but I don’t know yet. A lot of things have to happen before Caitlin and I can find a place to live. Your dad has to get us identities here, and then I have to see if I can find a job. Once I know how much money I’ll be making Caitlin and I can start looking for a place. I have to worry about finding a good school for her, too.” She smiled again. “Meanwhile, your parents say we’ll be living with you for at least a couple of weeks.”

“Where are you going to sleep?”

“I’ll be in the guest room, and we thought we’d put Caitlin in your room, if that’s OK?”

“Sure it’s OK! Is Caitlin going to come to school with me?”

“Caitlin can’t go to school until we have papers, honey. Officially, neither of us exists here yet. That’s why Superman is paying a visit to Washington right now with that disk Mr. Douglas made for us.”

“I can’t go to school yet?” deadpanned Caitlin. “I’m heartbroken.”

“The longer it takes, the more you’ll have to catch up.”

Caitlin’s smirk disappeared. “Oh.”

“Kara! Kara!” shouted Laura as she shot through the front door and straight past her parents, who exchanged a smile.

“Laura!” shrieked Kara as she ran to meet her sister. The girls hugged tightly and jumped up and down, squealing.

“I was so scared!” said Laura. “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine,” said Kara, giving her little sister another squeeze. “Did you have a good time with Grandma and Grandpa?”

“Uh-huh,” agreed Laura. “They didn’t even yell much.”

“Laura…” sighed their mother.

“Kara!” called Jordy from the doorway, his grandparents coming in behind him. He walked quickly to where his sisters were standing in the living room.

“Jordy!” Kara released Laura and accepted a hug from their big brother.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I’m so happy to see you guys again. I missed you so much…”

He said quietly in her ear, “I… heard what Dad told Grandma and Grandpa. We’ll talk later, OK?” She nodded into his shoulder.

“Don’t we get a hug too?” asked Ellen.

“Uh-huh!” Kara ran over to hug her Grandma Ellen and Grandpa Sam.

“I’m so glad you’re OK, sweetheart,” said Ellen.

“You’ve had quite the adventure, young lady,” said Sam, smiling.

“Yeah,” said Kara. “It definitely was.” She still missed her friends from Milford, but she meant every word when she added, “I’m really glad to be home, though.”

Laura noticed Emily and Caitlin, and drifted over to Lois, suddenly shy. “Mommy,” she whispered, “who are those people?”

The Lanes and Jordy already knew who Emily and Caitlin were from Lois’s and Clark’s phone call a couple of hours earlier, but for Laura’s benefit Lois introduced them. “Everyone, this is Emily Jordan and her sister Caitlin. They took care of Kara after she, uh, got away from the kidnapper.”

“Really?” exclaimed Laura. “Wow!”

“Yes, and they, um, lost their home protecting Kara from the people trying to hurt her, so they’re going to stay with us for a few weeks while they look for a new home in Metropolis.”

“Oh,” said Laura. “I’m sorry you lost your house.”

Emily smiled. “Thank you, Laura. And thank you for sharing yours.”

“You’re welcome,” responded Laura politely.

Sam came over to Emily and Caitlin, offering his hand;

Emily shook it. “Miss, I want to thank you and your sister for what you did for our granddaughter. My wife and I both deeply appreciate the sacrifice you made. There’s no way we can repay that debt, but if there’s anything you need... Do I recall Clark mentioning you’re a physician?”

“Yes I am, though I’m still a resident, Mr. ... Kent?”

Ellen laughed. “No, we’re Lois’s parents. I’m Ellen Lane, and this is my husband...”

“Sam. I’m a doctor myself, retired now. I mostly did bioengineering research, but I still have contacts in the medical community here in Metropolis. Once we get you, um,” he glanced at Laura, “licensed to practice here, I’ll help get you situated in a good hospital so you can finish your residency. And when you’re done with that I’ll help you find a position, or a fellowship if you like.”

“Th-thank you. That’s *very* generous of you, Dr. Lane. I... I don’t know what to say...”

“Nonsense! It’s the least I can do. And call me Sam, please.”

“Thank you, Sam. And Ellen.”

“Um, yes, thank you,” added Caitlin.

“So... you’re Caitlin?” asked Jordy unnecessarily.

“Um, yeah. Jordan, right?”

“Yeah. You can call me Jordy. Um, Hi.”

“Hi,” replied Caitlin.

“Hey Jordy,” teased Laura. “If you married Caitlin and took her name you’d be Jordan Jordan.”

“Laura!”

“So Kara said we were in Queensland Park?” asked Emily, drawing her borrowed jacket a little tighter. She was going to have to go clothes shopping, and soon: she and Caitlin had brought almost nothing with them. Of course, that meant borrowing money, since she didn’t have an identity yet much less a job. She hated to do that, but they had no choice. Lois had promised to take them shopping over the weekend, and Clark had repeatedly told her not to worry about paying for it until they were settled on their own.

They were out for a short walk before the daylight faded completely. Kara had wanted to see familiar sights, to reassure herself that she was really back. Emily and Caitlin had wanted to get out of the house, having had enough of feeling like prisoners in their own home. Just the opportunity to walk the streets without the Secret Service was exhilarating.

Lois’s parents had begged off, eager to return to their own home after a week away. The rest of them had set off as a group.

“That’s right; this part is called Newtown,” explained Clark. “You can look it up online when we get back. Lois and I lived closer to work when we were single, but New Troy Island is really expensive and we liked this townhouse a lot.”

They strolled down Hyperion Avenue for a couple of blocks, then turned onto a cross street. Soon there were shops and cafes; there were very few chain stores to be found. It looked like a nice, well-kept, livable neighborhood. There were apartment buildings as well as brownstones, and Emily wondered if she’d be able to afford to live around here, and whether it would be convenient to her work.

As they walked, no one pointed at her or Caitlin, or shouted their names. There were no camera flashes, no reporters hounding them.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and smiled. She and Caitlin were no longer celebrities; she loved it.

She spent some time watching the Kents, too. Laura had grabbed Kara’s hand and was not letting go; she was chattering nonstop about the time she’d spent with her Grandma and Grandpa. Emily was reminded again that Kara’s nine weeks with her had only taken a bit over a week here — it was Friday and Kara had only been kidnapped the previous Wednesday, at least

as far as everyone here knew. *One more secret to keep.*

Of course, keeping the world’s biggest secret made that one seem insignificant. Without doubt the strangest thing about living here was that *no one knew Superman was Clark Kent*. She and Caitlin knew personally just how important keeping that secret was.

Jordy was in quiet, earnest conversation with his parents about something; she tried not to eavesdrop. She looked over to Caitlin, who was taking in all the sights just as she was. She looked truly relaxed for the first time in weeks. Emily started to feel more confident that getting Caitlin away from the circus their lives had become was the right decision — even if it meant relocating to another dimension. She reached over and gave her little sister a one-armed hug.

“What was that for?”

Emily shook her head and smiled. “Nothing. Just because.” Caitlin smiled back. They kept their arms around each other.

As they passed a shop with a sign reading “Ramunajan — Greengrocer,” an older Indian man hailed them, speaking with a thick accent. “Well, well, who is this I see? Is one of my favorite customers home, safe and sound?”

Kara smiled shyly. “Hi, Mr. R.”

“I’m so glad you’re safe, child.” He turned to Lois and Clark. “We’ve all been worried since we heard the news. When did she come home?”

“Just today,” said Lois. “Superman helped find her, and rescued her.”

“Thank goodness for Superman! What would we do without him? Well, congratulations! It’s a happy day, yes?”

Lois and Clark smiled warmly. “*Very* happy, Mr. R,” responded Clark.

Mr. Ramunajan looked Kara over again. “And now you’re wearing glasses too, eh? Your eyes take after your big brother and your father?”

Kara’s eyes twinkled. “I guess.”

He turned to Laura. “And what do you think of all this?”

Laura smiled big, showing dimples. “I’m really, really happy she’s back!”

Just then a customer standing in the doorway with a large bunch of leeks cleared his throat. The greengrocer turned to him and held up a finger. “I’ll be right with you, my friend.” He turned back to the Kents. “Do you need anything for dinner?”

“No thank you, Mr. R,” said Kara politely. “We’re getting takeout tonight.”

“Well then, enjoy your evening! I’ll see you again soon, yes?” He waved them off.

Many of the neighbors and shopkeepers they passed expressed similar sentiments; they were stopped every hundred feet or so to accept congratulations. Emily liked the sense of community in the neighborhood.

Eventually they turned back towards the Kents’ townhouse. The streets, buildings, shops, and people had dispelled more of Emily’s uncertainty about coming here. As they walked back, her only disquiet was the feeling of being displaced that anyone moving to a new city would feel. She and Caitlin smiled at each other, communicating without words.

Just then something started playing “Blue Suede Shoes.” Clark pulled his smartphone from his pocket and answered it. “Hello, Perry... no, not yet. We were just out for a walk.” He listened a while longer. “Of course you’d be welcome to stop by and see her! ... No, we were going to do takeout. There’re seven of us and it was too late to make something... No, not Lois’s parents — they’re houseguests... well, it’d be easier to explain in person.” He listened some more. “You’d be welcome to join us... Oh... Well, in that case, maybe eight-thirty? You’re sure Alice won’t mind?... I see. OK, we’ll see you then.” He hung up.

“Perry is coming by?” asked Lois.

“Yay! Uncle Perry!” exclaimed Laura. Kara didn’t say anything, but she smiled.

“Jim too. I told them they were welcome to join us for dinner but they already have dinner plans.”

“Yay! Uncle Jimmy!” added Laura.

Of course, learning that Perry White and Jimmy Olsen were coming to visit reminded Emily that it wasn’t just any new city.

Chapter 50: A Life in Books

“Now that’s the darndest story I’ve ever heard in sixty years of journalism, and that’s sayin’ somethin’,” mused Perry, shaking his head. “Amelia Earhart a real person, but all of us characters in a comic book?” He smiled. “Well, at least we all have the King in common.”

Neither of the two men who’d arrived as they were clearing the remains of their Chinese takeout had been what Emily expected, despite the stories Kara had told. Perry White was in his seventies and walked with a cane. He spoke with a soft Tennessee drawl and seemed more lovable uncle than irascible editor.

Rather than being a geeky, awkward kid, Jim Olsen was in his mid-thirties, self-assured, and... handsome. The only sign of the cub reporter from the stories in her world was the boyish grin he’d flash on occasion. He was friendly, funny, and easygoing.

The conversation had stayed on safe topics until Laura had crashed around nine o’clock and Clark had carried her up to bed. Then the five time-travelers had related the entire story of Kara’s nine weeks in an alternate reality.

“So folks, how do you think we should write this story up?” asked Perry. “And I want Jim to do it; you two are too close to the story. He already wrote up a quick bulletin for the Web, but readers are going to want more details.”

“We can’t talk about the alternate reality part,” said Lois. “There’s no proof, and it’s so fantastic no one would believe it anyway.”

“You got that right,” agreed Perry.

“And it’s hard to explain without giving away the family secret. So I think we should just say Kara was kidnapped by Tempus, Superman helped us find and rescue her, and it took a week. People know we helped Superman stop Tempus when he took over the country back in ’97 so they’ll understand why he targeted us.”

“So she got away from Tempus,” continued Jim, “and the Jordans took her in, and then Superman found her there?”

“That sounds about right,” said Clark.

“Are we going to be in your story, Mr. Olsen?” asked Caitlin anxiously.

“You can call me Jimmy or Uncle Jimmy, kiddo,” said Jim. He turned to Clark. “I don’t know, but if so I think we can keep your names out of it. Right, CK?” Clark nodded. “I don’t think we need to go into the details about you losing your home and moving here; it doesn’t really play into the kidnapping story. You’ll just be anonymous Good Samaritans.”

“Uncle Perry?” asked Kara diffidently.

“Yes, darlin’?”

“I’m sorry you have to go through all this trouble to hide our secret.” She looked around nervously. “Isn’t it... well... wrong? Mom always says people have a right to know...”

“That’s my girl,” said Lois proudly.

Perry beamed too. “Darlin’, that is an admirable question.” He rubbed his eyes. “And it’s one I wrestled with many a late night when I figured out your daddy had a second job. I knew the right thing was to keep his secret, but I was troubled by it, same as you.

“Thing is, keepin’ this secret may not be the right thing for sellin’ newspapers, but it’s the right thing for Superman, and this world needs Superman.” Perry shook his head. “Still, it does stick

in my craw from time to time. For every amazin’ story your folks write there’s another one we can’t print that I’m itchin’ to tell. I sure wish we could tell this one. You still keepin’ that journal, son?”

“Of course,” replied Clark.

“Journal?” asked Caitlin.

“Some day, Lois and Clark are goin’ to put all this in a book. Probably several books. It’s a story that *has* to be told, just not yet. So they’re writin’ it all down for when the time comes.”

Kara made the mistake of yawning.

Perry smiled. “Sounds like our newest superhero needs to get some sleep.”

“Especially when she’s been exposed to Kryptonite,” agreed Lois. “Come on, honey, let’s get you to bed.”

“Awww,” complained Kara.

“Go on, now. You get to sleep in your own bed in your own home tonight. In fact,” Lois exchanged glances with Emily, who nodded, “I think all you kids should get to bed. It’s nearly midnight.”

Jordy and Caitlin opened their mouths to complain, but at the looks they received, shut them without saying a word.

“Come on, sis,” said Jordy, helping the sleepy Kara to her feet, “Tomorrow is another day.”

They both must have been exhausted, because when Caitlin woke the next morning the sun was already well up, the light coming through the thin curtains directly into her face. She turned away from it, opening her eyes and grumbling under her breath.

She was slightly disoriented at first, expecting to be in her own room at the government farmhouse in Milford. Then she remembered: she was in Kara’s room at the Kent home in Metropolis. She was lying on an air mattress much like the one Kara had used, ironically enough. Mr. Kent had inflated it in about two seconds with one breath.

Kara herself was curled up in bed, still asleep, an assortment of plush animals at her feet and her arms wrapped around a plush sea otter.

Caitlin’s eyes wandered around the room; it was an interesting mixture, like the girl who lived in it. There were nature photos of horses and other animals. There was a poster of a girl in the middle of a gymnastics floor routine at the Olympics. There was an astronomical poster of a nebula, and another poster of a mathematical shape Kara had called a fractal. In one corner sat a small telescope, its aperture covered with a cap.

There was an old-fashioned porcelain doll sitting on top of a low bookcase. There was a small steel sculpture on the desk, made of wires welded together, which Kara had said was a ballerina made by her Grandma Martha. Caitlin couldn’t quite see it as a ballerina, but it was pretty in its own way. There was an alarm clock on the desk; it read 9:17 AM.

Caitlin’s gaze was drawn to the bookcase next to her air mattress. She hadn’t looked at it too closely last night, but now the spines of the books were illuminated by the diffuse light coming through the curtains. They were a mixture of paperbacks and hardbacks, mostly fiction, with some science and math books for kids mixed in. She recognized many of them, but her eyes stopped abruptly on the hardbound title next to *The Number Devil*.

The Girl Who Flew, by Annabeth Houghton

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Quietly, she reached out and pulled the volume from the bookshelf. The book looked old: used, but in good condition. On the cover was an inset line drawing of an elfin woman in a flight suit, a flight cap and goggles on her head. Amelia Earhart.

Caitlin flipped to the colophon, and read *Copyright © 1938, Annabeth Houghton. Twenty-second Printing, 1957.*

Merriweather Press.

She was about to turn to Chapter One and start reading, but hesitated, then put the book back on the shelf. She wasn't quite ready to read this book. Not yet. She wasn't sure why; it could hardly have anything about herself or Emily, being set in the 1930's.

"Mmmm..."

Caitlin turned to look at the bed; Kara was blinking sleepily. Caitlin sat up on the air mattress and watched her roommate wake up.

Kara finally sat up and swung her feet off the bed, pulling her nightgown into a semblance of order as she did. She blinked away the last of her sleepiness and smiled at Caitlin. "Good morning."

"Good morning."

Kara closed her eyes for a moment, then frowned and sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"Still no powers." Kara smiled sadly. "It almost feels like it was a dream. If you weren't here..."

"I'm sure you'll get them back," said Caitlin. "Come on, let's go get some breakfast."

"Oh, hey, Jessica! It's good to hear from you. How are your mom and dad, and Michael? Uh-huh... Yes, she is... Yes... She's right here." Dad held out the cordless phone, and Kara was suddenly glad she'd decided not to tag along with Mom and Laura taking Emily and Caitlin to the mall.

"Jessie?" she squealed into the phone.

"You *stinker!*" came the response. "I had to find out you were OK from the *Internet* this morning!"

"I'm really sorry... things have been so busy since I got home, I forgot to call."

"I tried calling your phone, but it says it's not available."

"I don't have it. They never found it, or my backpack, and we haven't had time to replace it. Um... are you really mad, Jessie?"

"Of course I'm not mad! I've been so *worried* about you, Kara. I've been checking *dailyplanet.com*, like, every thirty minutes all week! Are you really OK? What happened?"

"Umm... like it says in the article. This Tempus guy kidnapped me to get at Mom and Dad. He took me away from Metropolis, but he wasn't there all the time so I got away from him. It was kind of scary being in a strange place by myself, but some people took good care of me till Superman found me." Dad gave her a thumbs-up.

"Your parents helped send this guy to jail a long time ago, right?"

"Yes, them and Superman."

"Your parents have sent a *lot* of people to jail, Kara. I hope someone else doesn't get the same idea. It was only ten days, but it felt like *forever!*"

"It felt that way to me, too." Kara sighed. "But it's all over now. I'm OK, but Mom says I can't walk to school by myself anymore. They're going to drive me, like Laura. At least till I'm older."

"Ouch. I guess I can understand that." There was a moderate pause. "So... school."

"Yeah. School." Kara sighed. "I wish you were still here, Jessie. I miss you."

"I miss you too, and Metropolis. Portland is OK but it rains all the time. I just wish it wasn't so far away. At least we can talk on the phone, and someday we'll get to see each other again."

"Yeah..."

"Kara, are you crying?"

"Yeah." Kara sniffled. "Jessie, I'm really happy I still get to talk to you."

Kara was just sitting on the sofa, staring at the cordless phone

but not really seeing it, when her dad came in from the kitchen drying his hands on a towel. He sat down next to her, and she looked up and smiled at him in an absent-minded way.

"Whatcha thinkin' about so hard, Kara mia?" He put an arm around her.

She sighed. "Just... my friends. My *other* friends. Bailey, Megan, and Kevin."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"I... I just wonder what they're doing. I hope they're OK."

"I didn't want to say this in front of your friends, but I told President Hunter that if anything bad happened to them I'd find out about it somehow. He told me he'd make sure they were fine. No one there wanted to make us angry, not even the bad guys. They just wanted us to stay."

"But how can you be sure they'll be OK?"

"I checked already, sweetheart, before we left that day. While I was time-traveling, after I found the device we needed to come home I traveled into that world's future a little. As far as I could tell they were fine."

Kara hadn't realized how worried she was until it faded away. "Why didn't you say anything when you got back?"

"I didn't want your friends to know I'd seen their futures." He smiled. "And before you ask, no, I'm not going to tell you what I saw. Not yet, anyway."

Kara nodded, and was quiet for a while. "Dad?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Where would their houses be, if they were here in Metropolis?" She scrunched her eyes closed. "I can't figure it out without my powers."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Well, I just thought... you know... if I went and stood there it'd be, like, 'they're standing in the same place I am, just in another world.' Does that make sense?"

Dad smiled; his eyes lost focus as he thought about the question. "Hmmm."

"What?"

Dad sighed. "That part of Milford corresponds to the middle of the West River in our world, honey. If you stood there you'd be underwater. Milford was above sea level, but the same place in our world isn't. That's one of the things I noticed when I was there — the land is a bit different."

"Oh," said Kara, downcast. She could stand there once she got her powers back, but she'd be at the bottom of a river. That would be kind of dumb. Not to mention *totally disgusting*, since the West River wasn't renowned for cleanliness. Unless... "When I can fly again, I guess I could float where they'd be..."

"There's a fair amount of boat traffic on the West River, sweetheart, and people on the shores and bridges. You'd be seen."

"Would it be OK if I was Supergirl again?" She smiled winningly at her father.

"Well, Mom and I have talked about that..."

Kara sat up straighter. "Really? *Can* I be Supergirl again?"

"We're still talking about it; it's not a simple question."

"Oh." Kara's face fell.

Dad put a hand gently on her shoulder. "You can understand, sweetheart, can't you?"

Kara sighed. "Yeah. I mean, Emily explained it all on that TV show. I get it."

"We're proud that you and your brother want to help, and we both know how you feel. I felt the same way when I was growing up, and Mom had her time as Ultra Woman—"

"Wait, Ultra Woman was *Mom*?"

Dad nodded. "Thanks to a red Kryptonite laser she borrowed my powers for a few days. So she knows what it feels like, too."

"I'll help you and your brother practice your powers and get ready. I just can't promise yet *when* we'll let you help." He hesitated. "By the way, have any of your powers come back?"

Kara looked down. “I don’t think so,” she said, crestfallen.
 “You might be invulnerable, like you were before this all started. We could check; it wouldn’t hurt at all.”

Kara looked up at her father and shook her head. “I think I just want to wait.”

Chapter 51: Extraordinary People

Kara raised her hand to knock.

“Come on in, sis.”

She opened the door and peeked around the edge. “How long have you been able to do that?”

“A couple years now. Remember when I started wearing glasses?” Jordy was pulling his shoes on.

“Oh yeah.” She watched him tie his shoelaces. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna go hang with Greg and Nick. We’re gonna try out Nick’s new game.”

She nodded.

“Why? Did you wanna talk about something?” He went to his closet and grabbed a jacket.

Kara frowned. “I don’t know. Dad and I talked about... you know... helping out?”

“Ah. You got ‘the talk,’ huh?”

“I guess.” She sat on his bed.

“I got it back when I was your age.” He shrugged. “I guess it’s like getting your learner’s permit. You don’t want to wait, but you have to.”

“It’s just...” She trailed off.

Jordy sat down carelessly in his desk chair, one leg hooked over the arm. “What?”

“I got to like helping people, is all.” She sighed. “And I miss my powers.” Before her kidnapping, like every kid she’d wondered what it would be like to have Superman’s powers, but she’d never coveted them. Now that she’d had them for a couple of months it felt like a part of her was missing.

“I don’t know when you’re gonna get your powers back, but you don’t have to have powers to help people. You know that.”

Kara thought about that. Her Girl Scout troop did do volunteer work; maybe she should see if there was something like that coming up on the troop’s web site. She smiled.

Just then Jordy’s eyes lost focus and he tilted his head, concentrating. His expression turned grim.

“What is it?” asked Kara.

“Earthquake in the Philippines, a bad one. Dad’s probably—”

Dad blurred into the room, already in his Superman uniform. “I have to go, kids. Mom and the others won’t be home for a couple hours yet. Jordy...”

Jordy sighed. “I was gonna go to Greg’s house...”

“I can stay by myself,” said Kara. “I’m not a little kid!”

“Honey, I know you’re not a little kid, but...” Dad stopped and smiled. “I guess I’m just being overprotective after you were kidnapped. If you can be Supergirl, then you can be responsible on your own for a few hours. Just, make sure you don’t open the door without looking to see who it is, OK?”

“I know, Dad.”

“Oh, and don’t answer the phone if you don’t recognize the caller ID...”

“I know, Dad.” She smiled. “I’ll be fine. Go on, people need Superman.”

“When Mom gets home, let her know where I’ve gone, OK? Though she’s probably already helping plan the Planet coverage on her phone while she shops.”

“I will.”

“Oh, and can you make yourself lunch? There’s plenty of stuff in the fridge...”

She rolled her eyes and made shooing motions. “Dad, I’ll be fine! Go!”

Dad nodded and disappeared.

Of course, after she’d been alone for ten minutes, she’d remembered that Tempus had technology that allowed him to appear inside the house without using the door. Consequently she jumped a little at every creak the house made, which for a one-hundred-ten-year-old brownstone was not infrequent.

She tried to read, but was just a little too nervous for that.

She did make herself a toasted cheese sandwich for lunch. She accidentally touched a hot part of the toaster oven and discovered she was not invulnerable, yet.

She finally sat herself in front of the TV and turned on the news, hoping to see her father in action. The news channels weren’t covering it nonstop, but the combination of a big disaster and Superman was interesting enough that they spent a portion of each hour on it. By switching between the various networks she was able to watch him half of the time.

The rest of the news was pretty boring, though. Actually, before the kidnapping she wouldn’t have been interested enough in the earthquake to watch it, either. Being a superhero for a few weeks changed your perspective. Not to mention knowing Superman was your dad.

The earthquake was a bad one, and it looked like he’d be there for some time. The networks were estimating that it would take Superman at least into tomorrow to rescue all the people trapped in collapsed buildings.

It would be faster if he had some help, she thought.

Sooner than she expected she heard a key in the front door. She shrank slightly; Tempus wouldn’t have a key, would he?

But it was Mom who walked in, followed by Laura, Caitlin, and Emily. She relaxed.

“Where’s Daddy and Jordy? Are they here?” asked Laura.

Kara shook her head. “Jordy went to Greg’s house. Daddy had to, umm...” her eyes strayed to the TV, “go to work.”

“Oh,” said Laura, disappointed. “Daddy has to go to work a lot. I wish he could do it on the phone like Mommy.” She looked to the television. “Ooh! Is Superman on TV?”

Mom obviously already knew what was happening, but Kara watched as the penny dropped for Emily and Caitlin. They drifted over to the living room and watched the coverage, still standing with their coats on, holding their shopping bags.

“Yes, honey,” said Mom. “That’s why I was spending so much time on the phone with Uncle Perry. There was a big earthquake in the Philippines. Daddy went to work because of that.”

“Where’s the... the Philip-eens?” asked Laura. “Why is it called that? Can you only live there if your name is Philip?” She frowned. “What are the girls named?”

“No, honey,” said Mom, smiling. “That’s just the name of the country. It’s near China.”

“Oh. Can I watch Superman, Mommy?”

“Why don’t you go put your new clothes away first, OK?”

“Uh-huh!” agreed Laura; she scampered up the stairs.

Kara watched her little sister go. “Some of the video is kind of sad, Mom. And also...” Her eyes motioned to Superman, who was being shown lifting rubble to clear the way to some trapped survivors.

Mom smiled. “We can let her watch a little. If we *never* let her watch him...” She left the thought unvoiced, but Kara understood.

Emily realized that she and Caitlin were standing there holding shopping bags and the front door was still wide open. “Oh — we should probably get the rest of our shopping out of your car.”

“Here,” said Mom, handing over her car keys. “Just lock it up when you’re finished.”

Emily nodded and took the keys; she and Caitlin put their

bags at the foot of the stairs and trooped out the front door to unload the rest of the shopping.

“Mom?”

Her mother’s eyes were on the television. “Yes, sweetie?”

“They’re saying D... Superman is going to be busy till tomorrow at least.”

Her mother came and sat beside her, putting an arm around her. “That’s the way it goes sometimes, honey. Him being gone for a day or two isn’t a new thing; you just know the reason, now.”

Kara nodded and continued watching, feeling a strange tension between guilt for not helping, and relief at not having to.

Kara hovered above the shattered fuselage, indecisive, as the wind and snow howled around her. There were so many bodies... was there anyone left alive? She couldn’t hear any heartbeats.

She was terrified and wanted to stay aloft, but she seemed to be sinking lower, closer to the ground. She looked over the dead: the men, women, children. Suddenly, her breath caught in her throat.

One of the dead children looked like Laura. Against her will, she looked closer.

It was Laura.

And there was Jordy. And Caitlin. Jessica. Bailey, Megan, and Kevin. As she looked over the bodies, she saw the faces of her family and friends. Emily. Even Mom and Dad. “They’re all... dead,” she whispered. “All of them.”

“Yes, they are,” said a voice. She whirled around.

It was Tempus.

“And now it’s your turn.” He pulled out a giant piece of Kryptonite, which for some reason was in the shape of a stylish handbag; he slung it over his shoulder. Kara fell to the ground, knowing she was in tremendous pain.

“Why? Why do you want to kill everyone?”

Tempus stopped applying lip gloss and turned away from the mirror. “Because you’re a geektard loser, that’s why. Isn’t that enough?”

“No,” whimpered Kara. It was starting to get dark. “No...” Everything faded away.

“Sweetheart?”

Her mother’s face swam into view as Kara opened her eyes. Behind her, Caitlin sat up in bed, half asleep. “Are you OK?”

“What happened?” asked Kara, sniffing.

“You were crying in your sleep; Jordy heard you. Were you having a bad dream?”

“I... I guess.” The memory of it was already fading.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I can’t really remember it now. What time is it?”

“About four-thirty. Can you go back to sleep?”

Kara looked up at her mother, and relaxed. “I think so.”

“OK.” Mom kissed her forehead, leaving a safe, warm feeling behind. “See you in the morning.”

“What are you doing?”

Kara turned to look at Caitlin. “Oh, hi.” She turned back to her closet, and sighed. “Just checking that I have clean clothes for school this week.”

Caitlin came to stand beside her. “So you’re going back tomorrow?”

“I guess. I talked it over with Mom, and I feel OK. Plus I’m already over a week behind on my schoolwork.” She rolled her eyes. “Even though I went to school for nine weeks in Milford.”

Caitlin looked over Kara’s closet. “Mind if I look?” Kara shook her head, so Caitlin started flipping through Kara’s clothes.

She started grinning. “Some of your T-shirts are pretty funny.” She pulled one out. “I love this one!”

“Really?”

“Sure! Just because I’m a jock doesn’t mean I don’t like geek humor. I like Doctor Who too, remember? You should wear one of these when you go back!” She turned to Kara, and noted the pensive expression on her face. “What?”

Kara looked down. “I don’t wear those to school. Not any more, anyway.”

Caitlin stopped her rummaging. “Is it that girl you were talking about? Paige?”

“Yeah...”

Caitlin put her hands on Kara’s shoulders. “Kara... you’re a superhero.”

Kara looked up, puzzled. “I guess. But nobody can know, so it doesn’t matter.”

Caitlin shook her head. “The only person who needs to know it is *you*. Also, you’re a really nice person, and really smart.”

Kara nodded slowly. “Paige think I’m dumb for being into science and math.”

“Didn’t you say your birth mom was a scientist? So you’re following in her footsteps; I bet she’d be proud of you. *You* should be proud of you, and not worry about Paige. She’s probably just jealous because you’re a better person. And I bet she’s also jealous because you’re prettier than she is.”

Kara’s cheeks turned pink. “That’s what Mom says...”

“Your mom is scary smart, Kara.”

Kara smiled a little. “Yeah.” Her smile faded. “But the other kids think Paige is cool.”

“I’m sure not *everyone* thinks she’s cool; *I* sure don’t. Just be yourself, and I bet you’ll find friends who like you for who you are.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yeah, I do. It worked for me. And for *you*, in Milford. So when Paige gives you a hard time, just remember which one of you saved over two thousand lives and got to know the President and his family personally.” Caitlin grinned. “And which one of you is an alien princess. That’s way cooler than Paige will ever be.”

Kara tilted her head and thought about that for a while, then smiled and started rummaging through her shirts. “I guess I could try wearing one of these again tomorrow...”

“Tomorrow? Don’t kids at your school wear their costumes on Halloween?”

Kara frowned for a moment; then her eyes widened.

“Tomorrow... tomorrow is Halloween again? Oh my gosh, it *is!*” She clapped a hand to her mouth. “My costume!”

“Ruh-roh,” said Caitlin.

Kara ran out her door shouting, “Mom! Mom!”

Clark carefully checked the surroundings before darting down through the back window. Tired and filthy, he was about to step into the shower when he heard “Oh no... *now* what are we going to do?!” from downstairs.

Worried, he turned his vision on the dining room, only to find all the females of the household hovering around Lois at the table, as she wrestled with fabric and their sewing machine. He relaxed; it looked like a household emergency, not one requiring Superman.

Five minutes later he walked down the stairs, happy to be in clean clothes for the first time in over twenty-four hours.

“Daddy!” squealed Laura. “When did you get home?” She ran to hug him, with Kara close behind. Lois, Emily, and Caitlin turned away from the sewing machine to watch.

“A little while ago, pumpkin.” Clark knelt down and sighed contentedly as he hugged his daughters. He’d dug out far too many children on this rescue, and not all of them had survived. As it always did, coming home to his own children helped revitalize him. Even after all this time, he never forgot to be thankful for something that, growing up, he’d been certain

he'd never have.

"You were gone so *long*, Daddy!" complained Laura.

"I didn't want to be, sweetheart, but I had to work." He and Kara exchanged glances; words weren't necessary, now that she knew.

Clark held onto his girls for a while, his eyes closed and a smile on his face, then released them and stood up. Lois moved in and embraced him in their stead.

"Was it rough?" she whispered, inaudible to anyone but him. She felt him nod. "I love you," she added more audibly, leaning back in his arms to look up at him.

Clark cupped Lois's cheek with his hand. "I love you too." They kissed enthusiastically.

"Yuck!" exclaimed Laura.

Clark laughed and continued to hold Lois in a loose embrace, both of them smiling. "So, what are you all up to?" He let Lois go but kept an arm around her.

"Mommy is trying to do our Halloween costumes, but she's having trouble," Laura confessed. "Aunt Emily tried to help but they're still not done."

Lois's ears turned pink.

Clark knew better than to tease her when she was this frazzled about something. "I guess we kind of forgot about your costumes with everything that's been happening. I'm sure Mommy and I can get them finished tonight." He looked to Lois. "Maybe after the kids are in bed?"

Lois understood the message and nodded in relief. *Superman to the rescue... again*. Clark couldn't sew other than minor repairs, but Martha sure could. When Laura went to bed at eight, it would be seven in Smallville.

"But right now, I want to enjoy the rest of my Sunday with my family."

Chapter 52: A Day in the Life

Kara took one last look back at her parents and Laura. Her little sister, wearing her Alice in Wonderland costume, waved enthusiastically from the window of their car as their mother pulled away from the curb. The car accelerated rapidly into traffic and was quickly lost to sight.

Kara turned, hoisted her backpack, took a deep breath, then walked through the gate into the Larson schoolyard. Other kids were heading for the door too, and she was relieved to see she wasn't the only one in costume. She gathered her Hogwarts robes so they wouldn't drag in the dirt as she walked up the front steps and through the door.

It struck her that if she had her powers she could have really come in character by flying in on a broom.

As she walked down the hall towards home room, Kara had the odd feeling that she was invisible, like a ghost. She'd gotten so used to the other kids staring at her in Milford, to everyone knowing who she was, that being just another kid again seemed weird.

She turned into homeroom half expecting to see Mr. Kroum and Bailey, but of course Ms. Mendez was sitting behind the desk.

"Kara!" she called out, smiling.

The chatter of the other students stopped.

"Hi, Ms. Mendez."

Ms. Mendez surprised Kara by getting up and coming over. "Welcome back! May I give you a hug?" Kara nodded, and her teacher proceeded to do just that. "I'm so happy to see you're safe! I saw the news over the weekend."

She held Kara at arm's length. "I see you're ready for Halloween. So who are you?"

"Hermione Granger."

"I didn't think she wore glasses — *it has* been a while since I read the books..."

Kara blushed lightly. "Hermione doesn't wear glasses, Ms. Mendez. But I need to and just started."

"Oh, of course; I remember Jordy. Well, your costume is very nice. Are you sure you're ready for school?"

Kara nodded. "I think so."

The moment she went to take her seat she was surrounded and barraged with questions, just as she had been in Milford. The other kids were especially interested after the news had spread that the kidnapper was Tempus, a.k.a. John Doe, the man who had taken over the country in 1997. They asked her all sorts of questions about him, but Kara shrugged, saying she'd been unconscious during the kidnapping and had only seen Tempus for a few minutes at the very end.

She couldn't give very many details, but it was enough to keep the kids fascinated until the bell rang.

Emily looked up from Jordy's laptop to the clock on the mantel. It was getting close to one in the afternoon; no wonder she was hungry. She turned to Caitlin, who was sitting next to her on the sofa. "It's getting late — do you want some lunch?"

Caitlin looked up from the tablet she'd been using, and blinked. "Oh. Oh, definitely." She stretched and yawned.

The two of them were home alone, the Kents having gone off to work and school. Emily was continuing the research she'd begun over the weekend, looking into hospitals, places to live, schools, and commuting options.

Caitlin was doing research of her own. She knew that when she went back to school it would seem strange if she didn't know what the other kids were talking about. Emily realized she'd be in the same situation with her coworkers, so Caitlin had been passing information along as she found it.

Jordy had lent Caitlin his American History textbook, saying he didn't need it that day. She'd skimmed it cover to cover; it felt like cramming for a test where she hadn't attended class.

Metropolis and Gotham City had been part of the United States since the founding of the colonies, but the differences in U.S. history seemed inconsequential until the end of World War II, when the Wayne family name began to figure prominently. The League of Nations had become the Congress of Nations instead of the United Nations.

Even then, things seemed mostly the same in the U.S. through the sixties: the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, civil rights, assassinations and the Vietnam war. It wasn't until the seventies that things started to differ markedly. After the funding cuts following the Apollo program and the moon landings, the U.S. had decided to pool its resources for manned spaceflight with other countries under the auspices of the Congress of Nations. Caitlin didn't remember everyone who'd been president back then, but none of the names after the early seventies sounded familiar. Emily didn't recognize them either.

She'd gone from Jordy's history book to Wikipedia and the Internet in general, trying to learn about the kind of pop culture you wouldn't find in a textbook. She found that things were mostly the same, but there were celebrities, movies, bands, TV shows, brands and so on she'd never heard of. It wasn't as bad as she'd thought originally: many of the ones she hadn't heard of, Emily had.

The two of them realized that no one was expected to know everything that was going on, and there was enough overlap between the two Earths — maybe 90% — that they'd be able to get by socially.

The differences worked both ways. The most obvious example was Superman: there had been no fictional character, no comics, no movies, no mention at all until he'd burst onto the scene in 1993, rescuing a sabotaged space shuttle. Similarly with Batman, who'd also shown up in the nineties.

It wasn't just Superman and Batman. Caitlin couldn't

remember exactly, but thought there were names back home that were not known here. Even though every beloved favorite she thought to search for, she found.

That was a relief, but it was also more than a little creepy. This world was so like their own, but a little... off. Her head was swimming by the time Emily called a stop for lunch.

They were just sitting down to cold cut sandwiches when the doorbell rang. They looked at each other, confused. Lois and Clark hadn't said anything about visitors today. Emily got up and peeked cautiously through the peephole.

There was no one there.

She hesitated, then opened the door. There was a package on the stoop. It looked to be from Amazon.com.

"Just a delivery," she called to Caitlin, and leaned down to pull the package inside the door. It was quite heavy.

She froze when she noticed it was addressed to Emily Jordan, c/o Kent, at 348 Hyperion Avenue.

"What is it?" asked Caitlin.

"It's addressed to me, and I know I didn't order anything. How could I have? Caitlin, come with me."

She backed away from the door carefully, leaving it ajar, and went straight to the cordless phone in the kitchen. She looked at the list of numbers by the base and dialed. She fidgeted nervously as she listened to it ring.

She sagged in relief when the call was answered. "Hi Clark, it's Emily... Well, there was a package left at the door, addressed to me... I don't know. The doorbell just rang. There was no one there, and we didn't hear a truck..." She frowned. "Clark? Hello?"

There was a whooshing sound, and Superman materialized next to her. "I'll take a look at it. You and Caitlin stay behind me." Emily blinked in confusion, staring dumbly at the phone in her hand for a moment before hanging up and following his instructions.

Superman peered into the package, examining its contents closely. He straightened up and smiled. "It's OK." He walked over and picked up the package, closing the door at the same time. He brought it over and set it on the coffee table.

"What is it?" asked Emily.

Superman grinned. "Why don't you open it? It *is* addressed to you."

Emily looked at him curiously, before starting to tug at the sealing tape on the seams. It was obstinate.

"Allow me," said Superman. Using his finger, he unsealed the box for Emily, then stepped back.

Inside was an eight inch stack of papers.

Emily lifted the top sheet off the pile. It was a medical license, stating that Emily Anne Jordan, M.D., was licensed to practice in the state of Delaware. She laid that one to the side, and found a diploma from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, also in her name.

She and Caitlin gaped as they dug further. Undergraduate diploma, birth certificates for both of them, elementary and middle school transcripts for Caitlin, immunization records, Social Security cards.

Passports. A Delaware driver's license, showing an unfamiliar address in Wilmington. A credit report in Emily's name, showing the same address.

Three years' worth of tax returns, with her signature on them. "How..." began Emily before trailing off. "I don't believe it... We only got here three days ago, and it was the weekend..."

"I guess they pulled out all the stops when I called in that favor," said Superman. "If you ladies don't mind, I left Lois sitting alone at lunch and I really ought to get back." He grinned. "Have fun; we'll see you tonight." With that, he was gone again.

Next was a statement from Citizens Bank of Wilmington for a checking account. It listed the same address as the driver's

license, and showed a balance of thirty-one thousand, four hundred ninety-one dollars and twenty-seven cents. There was a checkbook and ATM card that went with it. There was even a post-it note on the ATM card giving the PIN.

Emily and Caitlin started crying, and embraced. It wasn't extravagant, but it was enough money to get them started in Metropolis. After a few minutes, they dried their tears and continued.

There was a newspaper clipping from a Wilmington community paper:

A local family was left homeless last Tuesday when their rented house burned to the ground. The family, who wished to remain anonymous, lost nearly all their possessions in the blaze, but fortunately there were no injuries. Firefighters are investigating the cause; a problem in the electrical system of the home is suspected.

The street name given matched the address in Wilmington.

There was a credit card and an accompanying statement, also showing the same address. Emily peered, fascinated, at credit card transactions she knew she hadn't made. She was glad to see the current balance on the card was zero.

There was a form from the Postal Service, noting that mail sent to the Wilmington address would be forwarded to 348 Hyperion Avenue in Metropolis.

There were court records, showing Emily as Caitlin's legal guardian.

"Why didn't they just make you my birth mom? I was kinda hoping they would."

Emily gave her little sister a one-armed hug and kissed the top of her head. "I would have loved that too, honey, but it wouldn't stand up to a DNA test. This is safer."

"This is *so cool!* It's like a James Bond movie! These guys thought of *everything*," marveled Caitlin.

There was paperwork from Caitlin's "old" school in Wilmington detailing a home study program for her to follow until she could be registered at her new school.

Caitlin frowned. "Everything..." she grumbled.

She and Emily kept going through the papers, assimilating the backstory of their new lives.

"How was school, sweetheart?" Mom turned her head back to look at Kara briefly before pulling out abruptly into traffic. Today it was her turn to take Laura — and now Kara — home, and she was in a hurry to get back to work.

Kara hastily finished buckling her seatbelt, deliberating as she did so. She had to be careful what she said since Laura was sitting next to her, hanging on every word. "It went pretty well. The kids were all really curious about the kidnapping; I almost didn't have time to finish lunch."

"Did that bother you?"

"Actually, I kind of liked it. I got to talk to a lot of kids. I... I met a girl who wants to get together later this week. Her name is Danielle Jackson. She likes some of the same things I do. Can she come to our house?"

"Of course she can, honey! That's wonderful!" Mom changed lanes abruptly, cutting off someone pulling out of a parking space. They leaned on their horn, but Mom ignored it. "What else happened?"

"I'm thinking about signing up for the math team after all, so I got an information packet from Ms. Germain. Also, I guess I wasn't as behind in school as I thought. I, um, already knew most of the stuff."

Mom understood why. "That's great! So, all in all, a good day?"

Kara tilted her head. "There was one weird thing..."

"What was that?"

"Paige McArthur talked to me in the girl's room..."

Mom frowned. “What did she say?”

“That’s what was weird. She was all worried, just like Jessica was on the phone, and she sounded like she really meant it. She cried and she hugged me, and she said she was so glad I was all right. She acted like she’d been my friend all along.” Kara shook her head. “I don’t understand. How can she call me a geektard loser and then turn around and act like we’re friends?”

Mom blew her breath out. “Some girls are like that, honey, especially in middle school.” She had a faraway look in her eyes.

“First I thought she was my friend, and then she was really mean. Now she’s acting like my friend again. What should I do?”

Mom looked at Kara in the rear view mirror. “If she’s friendly to you, try to be friendly to her. But be careful trusting her with your feelings. I wouldn’t trust her any further than I could throw her.”

Suddenly Mom got a strange expression on her face. She and Kara looked at each other in the mirror, and both started snickering.

“What’s so funny?” demanded Laura. “I don’t get it.”

Chapter 53: Home

Kara moaned in her sleep again.

Someone ate too much candy, thought Caitlin. Of course, she wouldn’t be making observations like this at five-thirty in the morning if she hadn’t, too. She’d slept fitfully all night.

Trick-or-treating had been more fun than she’d expected. She hadn’t expected to go at all, but Kara had cajoled her into being Harry to her Hermione; it was a good fit given her black hair and green eyes. She’d felt guilty adding to the costume panic of the previous evening, but Kara’s mother had told her not to worry about it. She’d put her hair up in a bun, and makeup on her forehead gave her the lightning bolt scar.

Borrowing non-prescription glasses was not a problem in the Kent household.

Jordy hadn’t gone trick-or-treating, opting instead for an early evening showing of a new horror film. He’d invited Caitlin to come along with him and his friends, and she probably would’ve gone but for her promise to Kara.

Mr. Kent had had to beg off accompanying them at the last minute, saying something had come up for “work.” He’d try to join them later. Ms. Lane and Emily had escorted the three girls around the neighborhood.

Emily and Caitlin had both felt liberated walking out the front door. There was nothing forcing them to stay in the Kent home, but the lack of identities or money had tied them there. Now that those problems were solved, for the first time in a long time they felt free.

Emily was going to be meeting with Dr. Lane the next day and talking over the hospitals she’d researched. Next was job interviews, and after that, apartment hunting.

Mr. Kent, true to his word, had joined them towards the end of their trick-or-treating, and they’d returned home in plenty of time for Laura’s bedtime. And for eating way too much candy.

Caitlin turned over and tried, again, to go back to sleep. Kara moaned again, but this time it escalated into crying; Caitlin sat up quickly to look.

Kara was floating above her bed, tangled in her sheets. Her hands were clapped over her ears, her eyes squeezed shut; she was curled up in a ball and clearly in pain. “Daddy...” she whimpered. Caitlin scrambled out of bed but wasn’t sure what to do.

Suddenly Mr. Kent was there, blurring into the room wearing a bathrobe and his glasses. He gently gathered Kara into his arms, and murmured so quietly in her ear that Caitlin couldn’t even hear the sound. Kara nodded, her face still contorted.

Mr. Kent turned to her and whispered, “Caitlin, could you go tell Kara’s mom that I’m taking her to Smallville? The city is a

little too much for her right now; she needs a quieter environment. The same thing happened to Jordy, and she should be fine in a few hours if this goes like it did for him. But we’ll have to tell her school that she’s home sick today.”

Caitlin nodded, and Kara and her father vanished.

“Could you take it up a little higher, sweetheart? Thanks.”

“Sure, Grandpa.”

Clark watched uneasily as his father worked under the one-ton tractor that Kara was currently holding above her head. She was hovering a few feet in the air already, and floated a bit higher.

A little practice had gotten her hearing under control again, faster than Jordy had done so, but Clark reasoned that Kara had had lots of practice with her hearing already. She merely had to get used to the difference in controlling it here. It was considerably more difficult than it had been in that other reality, but she’d managed.

However, he’d been shocked that not only her hearing, but *all* her powers had returned. He’d kind of expected her to follow the same sequence as he and Jordy had now that she was home. Maybe it was because she’d already developed her powers in the other world, or maybe it was because she was a girl, or maybe it was something else. He guessed he wasn’t as much of an expert on the subject as he’d thought.

Bernie would have a field day trying to figure this all out.

Having her powers all kick in at once had been hard on Kara, but it had only taken her half a day to get everything somewhat under control. At least, enough not to break or burn things inadvertently. He’d had to repair the screen door to the kitchen after she’d ripped it off its hinges, and she’d managed to plow a new furrow in one of the corn fields on her first flight.

He was also surprised at how rapidly she’d regained control. Then again, he had to admit that Ultra Woman, Resplendent Man, and the New Kryptonians hadn’t taken too long to control their powers after getting them. Even Jesse Stipanovic had managed to partially master his, and he’d only been three and a half. Clark was baffled, but it wasn’t as if he *wanted* her to have a hard time with it. And Kara was clearly delighted and relieved to have her powers back.

None of that helped his nerves as he watched his father work with the Tractor of Damocles looming over him. “Dad, are you sure you don’t want me to...”

“Relax, Son. Kara and I are doing just fine, thank you. Anyway, I’m done.” He backed out from under the tractor, straightened himself, then winced, massaging his lower back. “You can put it down now, sweetheart.”

Kara floated down, then gently lowered the tractor to the ground. She examined her filthy hands. “Grandpa, can I borrow your rag?”

“Sure thing, sweetie.” He handed it to her and she wiped her hands. “Oh, and can you hit my lower back with some heat, if you don’t mind?” Clark opened his mouth to object, but Jonathan shot him a warning glance, and he closed it.

“Sure, Grandpa!” Kara lowered her glasses and warmed her grandfather’s lower back. Clark relaxed when his father’s flannel shirt didn’t burst into flame.

“Ahhhh...” sighed Jonathan, “that was just right.” He turned and smiled at his granddaughter. “Thank you, sweetheart.” He held his arms open and Kara ran to hug him.

She tilted her head at the same time as Clark. “Grandpa, Grandma’s calling us for lunch.”

“Well, then, why don’t you run ahead, wash your hands, and help her set, and your dad and I’ll follow, OK?”

“Sure!” said Kara. Rather than run, she shot up into the air, looped a loop, then flew off towards the house in a corkscrew.

Jonathan laughed out loud. “Someone sure likes being able to

fly again.” He motioned Clark, and they started walking back to the house at normal speed. “We won’t be able to do this kind of thing much longer though, I’m afraid.”

Clark turned to his father. “What do you mean, Dad?”

Jonathan didn’t answer directly. “I’m getting too old for this work, Son. I’ll be eighty in a few years. It’s about time for me to retire, I think, and relax a little while I still can.”

Clark tried not to let his disquiet show. “What are you thinking?”

“Well, I’ve been talking to Paul Irig about leasing the fields to him for farming, and keeping just the house and the land right around it. Your mother and I have thought about moving to Metropolis to be closer to the grandchildren. She likes the idea, but I’m not sure I could take living there. Too crowded, too busy.

“Still, I’d like to see them more often, too. Another few years and they’ll all be able to fly out here on their own to visit, but I don’t know if we’ll still be around in a few years.”

Clark wanted to object, but held his tongue.

“Maybe we could live in the suburbs, where it’s quieter. Maybe we’ll stay here. We’re still talking it over. But I’ve made up my mind to retire.

“With Paul and his brother working the land it’ll be harder for you and the kids to fly in and out without being seen, or for the kids to practice. We’ll have to be much more careful.”

Jonathan shrugged. “You’ll have to move your Kryptonian stuff somewhere else, too. Too risky leaving it here with other folks on the property all day.”

“That’s OK, Dad. Don’t worry about the kids having a place to practice. There’s lots of places I can take them where there’s no one around. And I can find another place for the globes and the spaceships. You do what’s right for you and Mom.”

Jonathan nodded, and was silent for a while. “What are you going to do about Kara and Jordy?”

“Lois and I think they’re still too young. We’d like to give the kids more time to have a normal childhood.”

Jonathan quirked an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything.

Clark ducked his head in admission. “OK, OK, I know that’s not really in the cards. But as normal as possible. They need to concentrate on school, and growing up, but most of all on making friends.

“As hard as being Supergirl was on Kara, the friends she made there made it easier. She needs friends here, too. Superman never would’ve lasted if Lois hadn’t been there to support and encourage me.”

“Fair enough,” admitted Jonathan, “and eleven may be too young. But do you really think you can get them to wait till they’re adults?”

“Maybe not,” agreed Clark. “Still, once they go public there’s no going back, and everyone’ll be watching everything they do.” He sighed. “Then again, Supergirl did all right... I don’t know. Sometimes Lois and I want to let them help now, on easier stuff — maybe in secret. Sometimes we want them to wait till they’re thirty.” He smiled sheepishly. “I guess we have a little time left to figure it out.”

“I’m sure you and Lois will know when the time is right. You’ve done a good job raising those kids so far.”

“I just wish there was a superpower for parenting.”

Jonathan laughed and clapped his son on the back. “Me too, Son. Me too.”

“Oh, I like that,” said Martha. She tugged a little on Kara’s cape. “It’s very cute. Did your foster mother make it?”

“Uh-huh.”

Martha walked around her granddaughter, taking in the details of her uniform. “Do you want to keep this look for now?”

Kara tilted her head and thought, then shrugged. “I like it.”

“Well, I have some ideas for when you feel like a change.

Hmmm.” She rubbed the skirt’s fabric between her fingers. “This material may be a little too stiff, I think. I’ll try a lighter fabric, but not what I use for the rest: that wouldn’t hang right or move right. Maybe I’ll try some of the cape material, and put some pleats in it...”

Clark shifted uncomfortably. “Mom, she’s not going public just yet.”

Kara and Martha exchanged a glance that Clark was unable to decipher.

“Oh, I know. She’s going to be practicing her powers, though, like Jordy. I know you don’t want her to be seen, but if she is she should be in uniform. And you *know* she’s going to be flying, don’t you?”

“I know,” admitted Clark. It was a given: if she *could* fly, she would. He’d never attempt to deny her that.

“Before Superman, when people saw you fly they just thought they were hallucinating. Now things are different. Better that someone see Superman’s children practicing their powers or flying around than Clark Kent’s. Besides, I made your uniform, I made Jordy’s, and I want to make one for her.”

“Jordy has a uniform?” asked Kara. “What’s it like?”

“Similar to your father’s. Jordy plans to go by ‘Superboy.’”

“What’s he going to do when he’s a grownup? He can’t call himself Superboy then.” Kara looked to her father. “Dad, are you going to retire as Superman and have Jordy take over?” Martha laughed out loud at the look on Clark’s face.

“I don’t plan to, sweetheart, at least not *that* soon. We’ll figure out a new name for Jordy when the time comes.”

“Hold your arms out, honey,” instructed Martha, as she applied a tape measure and started jotting down measurements.

“Grandma?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Why did you make Dad’s uniform... I mean, why is the...” She blushed and stopped.

“Why is there underwear on the outside?”

Kara’s and Clark’s ears turned red together. Clark coughed.

“Um, yeah,” answered Kara.

“Well, first of all, it’s more modest *with* that detail than it would be without it, trust me. Second, it’s a symbol. The whole point of the outfit being so loud and colorful was to make people focus on *it*; it became a part of who Superman is. That’s why Superman never appears in anything other than that suit, and why you kids need your own.” Martha smirked. “The first time your father wore it, I told him no one would be looking at his face.”

“Mom!”

Kara giggled.

“Hold out your hand,” instructed Dad.

Kara did so, and one of the two globes sitting on the table in the treehouse lifted into the air, glowing. Kara’s mouth fell open as the globe floated over and landed gently in her palm. The moment it touched her, somehow, she knew that it and she were both from Krypton.

The globe flared white, and the brilliant light washed away the world around her; she was left facing a man and a woman. Even if there hadn’t been a family resemblance, the woman’s blonde hair and blue eyes were a giveaway. These were her birth parents. She felt disheartened; she didn’t recognize them at all.

“Daughter,” said Alura’s image, and suddenly a shiver traveled up her spine. She might not remember their names, she might not remember their faces, but she remembered that voice. It stirred an echo inside her of something she hadn’t even known was there. “*Iciu*,” she murmured, not even realizing she was speaking the only Kryptonian word she knew: Mother.

“Daughter,” repeated Zor-El’s image, evoking the same feeling. “You are not yet of age. When you are, we will have more to share with you, of your history and heritage.”

“Do not dwell on us,” continued Alura’s image, “for we are the past. Kal-El is the only father you will have known; if he has a human wife, she is your only mother. That you survive and thrive in your new home is enough. We are content.”

Zor-El went on, “You must live in the present and the future, and your task for now is to grow into adulthood. Become who you are to be; discover your callings. Then, there shall be time enough to learn of the past.”

“Until then,” and for the first time Alura’s image showed emotion, a tear tracking down her cheek, “dearest Kara, farewell.”

The glow faded, and she was back in a treehouse in Kansas with her father. And she was crying. “Daddy,” she whispered, and he lifted her into his arms.

Kara’s heart ached for the parents she had never gotten the chance to know. But her senses took in her father’s heartbeat, warmth, touch, and scent, and all the other little signals that defined him; she relaxed into his embrace. Zor-El and Alura were right: *this* was her father, holding her. Her mother was waiting for her, back in Metropolis. She might have been born on Krypton, but she belonged here, on Earth.

Everything she’d learned about her heritage, about her abilities, about her family, hadn’t changed who she was. She was Kara Zoe Kent, age eleven.

She might not be sure what that *meant* yet, but she had plenty of time to figure it out.

“Come on, Kara mia,” said Dad. “Let’s head home.”

THE END