

Little Secrets, Act One

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: T

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All That Was

I'm not even sure now what I felt that morning, waking hour or so of sleep with what felt like a lead fist in my stomach. The entire world spun faster for me than anyone else, making me dizzy as if I had been pummeled to the end of my tolerance. Everything was off-kilter, unreal. In the space of only a few days, in what felt like the blink of an eye, I had all that I had wanted for the last year or so of my life, short of the literary prize I've always sought. And then we left that place and reentered a world that had been taken over in his absence, making him regret all that had happened between us. Suddenly it was gone, over, as quickly as the battle he fought to restore things to their proper order.

I knew it the moment I saw the look in his eyes, the way he turned to me. Even before he spoke a word. I had been the one to upset the balance; I was now a liability. Whether we liked it or not, being with me had interrupted his mission. He loved me, I know he loved me. There wasn't a doubt in his mind when he stepped into that chamber. He never would have defied his father if he didn't. But I was a selfish luxury that he couldn't afford as Earth's protector. What was it his father said, "Is this how you repay their gratitude? By abandoning the weak, the defenseless, the needy - for the sake of your selfish pursuits?" Maybe he was right, maybe not. All I know was that all the brave words I had voiced the night before were only that: words. And I had shards where my heart had once been. As stupid and purple and girly as that sounds, it's dead on the money. How I managed to get through the confrontation with him the next morning, I'll never know.

He seemed to be in pain, somewhat hurt by the situation that we were in, unhappy. But I've come to believe that that was more due to my distress than anything. I wanted to be stronger than that, be the strong and sure woman that he's always known me to be, a pretty face with an intelligent brain and a steel spine. But just seeing his face that morning was like scrubbing your heart with steel wool. I was forcing myself to hold on then, having him there in front of me, trying to be caring and sensitive while he carefully chose words to make things easier, make our mistake seem like something less than it was. Yes, a mistake. "Look, Lois, someday you'll..." You'll find somebody? The fact that he could even think it, that it didn't pain him to say it out loud stung. That he could stand to think of me with someone else even before I could myself. I'm not sure if I've ever felt so wounded in my entire life.

I tried to shrug it off, hoping for an instant that he'd just leave. But then he made a comment about liking worrying about me, which was just too much. I broke then, my damned traitor mouth letting every sharp-edged thought out into the open. Like a fool, I turned

around as I finished, crying as I looked over at him. I remember an incident in my childhood when I had scooped up a handful of finely-broken glass and rubbed it between my fingers out of curiosity, to see if it wasn't softer when ground up. The pain I felt then came back to me at that instant, as he murmured to me, "I don't know what to say."

And like a schoolgirl with a crush, like the fool I've always been for him, I responded back to him what he had said to that reply that night in his Fortress. "I don't know; just tell me you love me." I didn't even have time to realize what I was saying, or how it sounded. All I cared about was just that, another reassurance that it hadn't been a mistake, that he had truly felt for me before his mission got in the way. After a moment, he slipped the glasses off. That last kiss was the tenderest and most bittersweet I've ever known. At some point during, I remember seeming to black-out, reality seeming to slide away. When I started to come-to, I realized from the look on his face and the fact that his glasses were intact, he thought I had forgotten. He thought he had ended it between us, it seemed. Something about that kiss...

Seems that whatever he had done had something of an amnesiac effect, enough so that it took some time to have those thoughts come back. Time in which life went on as it always had, same old Clark, same old Lois, same old banter. A month went by. Fragments of memory teased at the edge of my mind, memories of events that seemed like dreams to me, but they seemed nothing more than daydreams of the sort I had had since the day I met him. And then one day, Clark Kent didn't come to work. Didn't call, didn't leave notice with Perry. When called, his mother mentioned something about travel, needing to get away from the city for a while. Then Superman disappeared from our skies. I called everywhere, checked with all other news agencies. Scoured every photo and news service bulletin. I even found excuses to be a foreign correspondent for a time, in hopes of finding a clue. Nothing. As if he had vanished into nowhere. He was simply and completely gone. As much as I told myself that I didn't care, that he had only been a crush, only a relative daydream, I felt my heart break and wondered what had happened, what had gone wrong? Where did he go? And why?

And then the memories came back just in time to discover that I wasn't the only one he left behind.

Regrets and New Beginnings

Lying in the single suite in a Paris hospital, Lois wondered for the millionth time how she could have ever gotten herself into this. In the first months of her time overseas at the Planet's sister paper, she had struggled to maintain the standards she had always held to, yet she had been all too aware that it had all been just a fruitless search that had finished in a dead-end. The raven-haired reporter could only thank God that, even in Paris, Superman and his disappearance was still a huge angle. She had, of course, continued to file excellent and thought-provoking stories, but her heart just wasn't in it the way it had always been. Superman and getting the story. The story and getting Superman. Oh, and the Pulitzer Prize. That had been all she needed in her life.

And now, this. Something she had never expected. Something that was beyond her to stop. It was amazing the turns one's life could take in the span of just over six months.

When Lois thought back on it now, she knew she had felt only one thing when she had discovered that this constant sickness she was feeling wasn't a prolonged virus. It was the same emotion she was feeling at this moment, as hard as she fought it: cold and utter fear. Pregnant, with child, knocked up, call it what you wanted. It was always something that had been an impossible idea for her. The mere thought that her younger sister Lucy had married directly out of college and immediately had gone about having the first of three children at the age of twenty-two horrified Lois, although Ron was a wonderful man and her parents were overjoyed. That was great for Luce, though, and it seemed to light her up, even as the constant activity of her horde interrupted her sleep. Diapers, drooling, screams in the middle of the night, having to take them everywhere with you, no spontaneity whatsoever. And absolutely no more smoking. The mere thought of all of this could actually make her shudder.

Not that she didn't love her sister's kids, all of them very sweet and well-behaved when she came to see her family at her mother Ella's home for the Christmas holiday each year, but she contented herself with being the favorite aunt who could spoil them and send them home at the end of the day. She was more than happy with her life, with the excitement of Metropolis' fast pace and this exhilarating romance she had found herself in with the hero that she had named after a fateful accident. Why would she trade that for anything that took up every single moment of your life with the simplest things? Who would be that crazy?

A moment later, Lois' eyes opened wide with shock and she cried out, completely losing her train of thought and the rhythm of the timed breathing her mother had taught her when she was too stubborn to go to birthing classes. It had been a few minutes since the last contraction and the solid reality of it knocked the wind out of her. She had never been a wimp where pain was concerned, her father The General, had taken care of that early enough. Being forced through Daddy's boot-camp from the age of eleven on had made sure of that and had made her capable of that surety and daring she had today, much as she had hated him for it at the time. But, dear God, why did this have to hurt so much? And after the utter embarrassment of having gone into false labor in the city room of *la Tribune Quotidienne* two weeks before, followed by real labor beginning in the midst of a staff meeting. Of course, she hadn't known it was for real that time, the pain building slowly, until a rock-hard wave of agony had swept through her in the middle of a particularly astute comment. It had been - what, three hours since then? Four? - about two cigarette breaks, back in the good old days. God, for a cigarette!

At this point, she was just wishing it was all over. Or that she could somehow have it all taken back. All of it. Why had she ever been stupid enough to get involved with that damned man in the first place? Especially when they given in to their feelings later, only to have him

make her forget it all and then disappear? What kind of idiot was she?

Again, the pain stabbed her suddenly enough to snatch a gasp from the startled woman, her trained breathing technique stuttering to a stop. Biting hard on her lower lip, she smothered her whimper just in time for Lucy to reach over and take her hand, looking down at her with a plainly worried expression. Damn, she had noticed. Which made Lois all the more determined not to let herself cry the way she abruptly wanted to. What was she doing here? Why had this happened this way? And where the hell was he, now that she needed him more than ever?

"Are you okay, Lo? Was it another pain?" Lucy's hazel eyes searched her own, brushing dampened strands out of her face. From only a foot away, she saw her mother turn and start toward them. "Are you ever going to get her an epidural? Doctor..."

Even as Lucy raised her blonde head, her sister squeezed her hand and shook her head. "I'm fine, kiddo. It's too late for that now. Just, this is a new experience, you know? I hadn't expected it to hurt so much?" Smiling slight to reassure her, she just resumed her Lamaze breathing, fighting off the urge to tell her everything for the hundredth time. As angry as she was, she had made him a promise, she knew now. A promise to never tell his secret, a promise to never reveal what had passed between them. And even if he was under the impression that she remembered nothing, she wouldn't break that promise, although she had been sorely tempted in the months that had followed the return of those memories. No, as it was, her mother and Lucy believed the tale she had spun them. Hurt and alone in France, unable to find the one she sought, she had had a stupid rebound relationship with a guest columnist to cure herself of this fascination that she had with Superman. It was only once he had returned to his home periodical that she had discovered she was late. As it had been a comfortable situation between the two and they had parted as friends, she was sure that it would be a mistake to inform him of impending fatherhood and decided to go this on her own.

Lies, first to last.

Now she longed to tell them her fears, especially the fact that she had only recently realized that this baby, or babies as she found out, would be only half of their own species. The other half of their DNA was Kryptonian, like their father. And she knew absolutely nothing of them, beyond what he had passed on. She didn't know what to expect, how they'd grow, what they would be able to do and when. And there was the very real fear of whether they could be born like regular children. As close as they had been, it had amazed her how very little she had known him. And how she had missed so many little clues. How blind could one person be?

Now the pain came again, faster and strong, forcing the loud cry from her lips that she had been trying so valiantly to hold back. She could feel something moving inside her, something tightening, her belly distended and hard as granite, and knew immediately what it was. Forcing back another shriek, she raised her frightened eyes to the doctor as she shook, trying not to bear down. Tears stood in her eyes now, both her mother and sister at her side as she asked silently if it was going to happen now. Oh God, where was he?

Doctor Shuler nodded then from her position, acknowledging the question. "Yes, Miss Lane, it's time. They're coming. And from the looks of things, one has decided it's finally time to show. It's okay to push now. You're ready - your babies are depending on you."

In the last few moments before her life changed forever, Lois didn't know if she had heard anything scarier than that last phrase. And began to cry only brief moments before her first-born did. The baby was crying, breathing. Here. When she tried to gain the strength to look up, all she heard were several moments of gasps of wonder, exclamations from both aunt and grandmother, and a glimpse of fair skin and pale fuzz. Lois barely had a moment to

register that this was her child, hers, this was the tiny tenant that she had just evicted before she felt the pain flare briefly. The other one. The doctor had said to expect twins, but she had never imagined. There was hardly enough time for the first to be cleaned and handed to his grandmother before, with only a push or two, the second came into the world with a gusty wail. This time, she looked quickly enough and saw a little dark head as this little creature was taken from her. They looked normal, from what she could tell. Like any other newborn, with nothing to give away their unique parentage. And just as quickly as the second one was taken away, she closed her eyes and swallowed a sob, even as Ella and Lucy cooed over these new arrivals. A moment later, they finally gave her the pain-killer that she had been desperate for before and she waited for it to take effect.

For the second time in the last ten months, everything seemed unreal. This couldn't have happened, couldn't be happening to her. None of this was actually happening. She wasn't really here in this room with her legs nearly to her chin, her mother and sister were back in the states going about their lives, the soft crying she heard was not that of her and her children entwined. She would wake up alone in her apartment, wrapped up in the sheets and sweating, wondering what she had eaten the night before that had given her such an insane dream. She would be home, in Metropolis and probably late for work at the Planet. And Superman would still be here and things would be different between them. None of this foolishness that she was dreaming would have happ...

"Lois, would you like to see your children? I know a little boy and girl who would like to meet you," her mother's voice said suddenly, warm with happiness.

Fighting the urge to just nod off to sleep and sink further into this dream, teary hazel eyes opening against her will before the dark-haired woman could stop herself. When she looked up, Ella was standing at her side with a bundle of blue in her arms, turning to the side as she sat down in the chair at her bedside and giving her a view of the whimpering child hidden within. "This is your son, Lois. Look how perfect he is." Even as she tried to stop herself, she slid over a bit in the bed to look. And was instantly caught in a cerulean gaze.

The baby was a mottled pink, now that it was clean, though his skin was unblemished and looked soft. Most babies seemed interested simply to sleep after their ordeal, but this one was staring around. And from the moment that she had leaned to look, his gaze stayed on her, watching his mother as if fascinated. He had very little hair on his head, short of a bit of blonde down, but nevertheless he made her eyes water again as she spotted details that no other could, save another mother far away. Lois' panicked heart began to soften as she watched him, her chest aching as she watched him move. Her mother was right, he was perfect.

A moment later, Doctor Shuler came forward with a burden of her own, just as Lois was timidly asking if she could hold the boy. "Now, you can't just lavish attention on one there, Mommy. Your little girl wants you, too." After a moment, she was looking down now at her daughter with a thatch of little black curls, who woke long enough to fix her with eyes dark enough to make her wonder if their color wouldn't change. Her little rosebud mouth worked as her mother stroked her cheek with a tentative finger, amusing all to predictions of screaming unhappiness. Yet the child only yawned and seemed to decide that she'd rather have a nap first. And, in watching her daughter drift off to sleep, secure in her arms, Lois felt the last of her reserves break. The emptiness that had plagued her for months seemed to fill.

For the first time since Superman had disappeared, he was utterly forgotten as she held his children to her as she began to drowse. The only part of him she would ever have, she thought as she lay there and gazed at them with sleepy eyes, as utterly amazed then by them as

the little boy seemed by her. To hell with Jor-El and his pronouncements of wrong and right. If this was all she had, would ever have, she would treasure it, would love them with the love she wasn't able to give their father. Who was far away in space, who didn't even know they existed. But she did and that was enough.

Avoiding the Ghosts Of Heroes Past

Lois lay sprawled, tired, across the length of her couch with a finally-napping six-month-old Kala cuddled into her chest. Ella decided now was the time to bring up the topic that she had been saving for the last four months. It would have been unfair to speak of it just after the twins' birth - her oldest daughter had not quite expected the essential insanity that goes along with the birth of one child, let alone two. That was part of the reason why she had delayed her return to Metropolis. She had claimed that it just didn't sit right with her that Lois would go it alone with both children so quickly. Lucy had wanted to stay as well, but their family finances had made that a complete impossibility. Her little Lucy was a sweet child, still protective of Lois even though she no longer needed to shield her from their father's exasperated wrath. It had somehow always fallen to the baby of the family to be the mediator between Lois and Sam. He was gone now, and Ella still remembered all of the endless battles of will that had frequently broken out at random times. Old habits died hard; Lucy was still Lois' first defender.

Ella startled as Jason burred in his sleep, smiling at him where he lay dreaming in her arms. For once, the blue depths of his eyes weren't peering around curiously, both smooth lids closed in heavy sleep. The long walk in the Bois de Boulogne had obviously wiped out both generations of Lane children. From the moment she had first seen her twin grandchildren, her sharp eyes had quickly been able to pick out those features that belonged to the Lane genes and those that did not, leaving her to wonder about those unfamiliar traits. She looked at Lois now, her own eyes having closed with her arm curled around her little girl, dark hair splashed carelessly across the white fabric.

It was just as well that Lucy was back in Metropolis. There were a few things she needed to ask Lois, but she was quite sure that she might have to upset her to get the answers. Things had seemed quite strange with her headstrong child, beginning with the fact that she hadn't returned home upon discovering she was pregnant. Or the fact that she had never explained fully to Ella when and how it had occurred in the first place. She had never deceived herself into thinking that a woman as independent and striking as her daughter was pure as driven snow. This was a modern and freethinking world they lived in, but she had never known her to be foolish in that respect. And she had observed Lois' hesitancy and occasional discomfort around Little Sam, Nora, and Joanna. Not to mention the fact that she had made it quite clear that her career was of first and foremost importance. If she wanted children later, there was always time. But not now. She was too young, had too much to do, loved her job. What more could she want?

And now this...

She was very curious about how this had happened in the first place. When Lois had first told her of her plans to go overseas, Ella had completely understood. Her firstborn's fascination with Superman was well known and smiled about in the Lane household, although her father would have been less than pleased. The hero seemed to have stolen Lois' heart away from the moment he had saved her from the helicopter crash two years before. It was amusing to Ella how quickly she had approved of this man from another planet, and simply because he had done the impossible and saved her daughter from certain death. Although she had never met him, she had given her tentative approval of him, based Lois' descriptions of him and his deeds. In addition, her infrequent looks at him on the nightly news, had added to her high estimation of this 'caped wonder,' as one paper had called him. This Superman that Lois had given a name. Simply from the tone her willful girl used when discussing him, the look in her

eyes, had told her she had better approve. For the first time she could remember, Lois Lane was in love. Honestly and truly in complete enthrallment with this visitor from another star. It was clear as morning sunlight to Elinore.

But then, with no warning at all, he was gone and the entire world was in an uproar. And Lois was frantic, even looked quite pained when she had visited to announce her foreign assignment. It had taken over a month to talk her boss into allowing her to go, she had said as she bit her lip and ignored the chicken marsala in front of her. But she had she had been scouring every bulletin, any notice of a sighting of the Man of Steel, with no results. No one in the US had seen him, not since those awful people had attempted to take over the White House. He had seen to that, that she remembered, but then he had disappeared. She didn't know anything; neither did rival papers, which for once were sharing information about this frightening event. The next possibility was Europe; maybe he was continuing his clean-up of the damage those three villains had caused during their reign of terror. There had to be something, anything, to go on. And since they had had a close friendship, in the end, Perry had told her that she probably had the best chance to find him.

For an hour, she talked about this new, temporary position she would be taking in Paris, closer to his possible sightings, and how she would be home soon, once she was able to get in contact with him. That she was sure it was all just a misunderstanding and that we could soon all breathe a sigh of relief. Life would go on as usual.

But no mother could miss the dark circles under her eyes, the spark of hurt that she tried not to show. He was gone and it hurt her deeply, that was clear, but Ella was never sure why exactly it troubled her so. It wasn't as if Superman shouldn't be allowed time to himself, away from the public's prying eyes. But why the haunted look in her child's hazel eyes, why the pale cheeks?

The calls had come on time for several weeks, check-ins with little updates as to where she had been and what people were saying. The trail of her savior had looked warm for a while. But after about a month and a half, the calls had come less frequently, and her Lois had begun to sound tired as well as anxious. And more than a trace angry. Abandoned. In spite of all the little clues, no one had conclusively spotted him in airspace or at any disaster. Her voice conveyed clearly how heartbroken she was.

Just after the trail had gone cold, any trace of his presence on earth finally impossible, the call had come. Lois told her to sit down in a voice very unlike her normal one. First there was the news that she had finally confirmed that her hero was nowhere on Earth. Then, as her tone quivered, Ella's child dropped another bombshell. She had just discovered herself to be three months pregnant. And, seeming to bite back a sob, that the father would not be involved. No real explanation of why she had gotten involved with someone else while trying to find the man she claimed to love, no plans to come home to have the baby or why she and the father would not be together, just that. "Momma, when it's time, you'll come over, won't you? I wouldn't normally ask you to do it, but I think I'll need you. I'll pay for the ticket and all. Please?"

What could have possibly happened to change Lois' usual behavior so completely? Going to Europe to find one man, only to have become pregnant by another with whom she no longer wanted contact? And with the way she had obviously felt about Superman, how could she have possibly been with another? Only in anger. Lois was very capable of losing her temper, of being somewhat vengeful with those that had hurt her. But the times this happened were few and far between and Ella never would have imagined it.

Yet, maybe she should have. That very love Lois felt for him, combined with this sudden 'abandonment', could just have been enough for her to strike out. To tell herself that she didn't need him. Now, to be honest, Ella had never known the extent to which Lois and Superman had been involved, had never asked. For the millionth time in the last eighteen months, she wished she had. Because it was impossible to ask her child now. The mere mention of his name caused Lois to change the subject. It was a closed topic, as far as she was concerned. That part of her life was over now. She had grown up now, that was a silly phase she had gone through. Reality had returned, she had the twins now, planned or not, and that was all she needed. Really.

And it was true. The days leading up to the birth had been difficult, making Ella worry that Lois' mood-swings and general unhappiness were centered on the children. But Lois was finding a way to juggle a return to this French paper and spend all of her time with these new arrivals. It heartened her that Lois was so attached to them, after seeing her initial reaction to their birth. Her regrets had been there for all to see and her heart had gone out to Lois.

She remembered all too well her own hurt, only having hated her Sam once in their life together, and over this same child. He had been disappointed that she had given birth to a girl-child instead of his long-hoped-for boy. Ella, exhausted from the eighteen-hour experience, had been wide-eyed with wonder when confronted with this active and boisterous baby. Hearing the resignation and faint anger in his tone as he complained to the doctor, thinking she couldn't hear - she had almost risen from the bed to punch him in the jaw. Instead, she had simply held baby Lois Joanne closer to her and let her feel the love she felt for her. And when Sam had been harsh with her growing up, even to the extent of telling her that she was a disappointment and trying to make her twice as tough as any boy, Ella had often stepped into the crossfire to soften the blow. Elinore could only be pushed so far, as well.

Stirring herself from her deep thoughts, she again looked over at her child, her heart aching for her. Her life had not been easy. She had been the oldest, the one to bear the brunt of her father's dissatisfaction, the first to break down the impossible barriers that Lucy had later simply skipped through. These trials had given her the strength, drive and toughness to become the well-respected reporter she now was. She could give as good as she got. And then she had managed yet another impossible feat, winning the love of a god among men, only to be deserted for some unknown mission. A mission deemed greater than her. Being the wife of a general, she knew that feeling all too well. Oh, her poor strong-willed, unbreakable girl...

After a moment, she rose from her chair with Jason, the boy never even aware of it as his grandmother walked into Lois' small bedroom to settle him into his crib. She lingered a moment after smoothing the blanket over him, her heart full as her fingers ran over the softness of his hair, which was growing in more thickly now. It was still light, although it was starting to darken somewhat to a dark blond bordering brown now. Lois herself had been born with light hair, while Kala's had been nearly jet black from the day of her birth, with hazel eyes that very nearly mirrored her mother's own. And those blue eyes of his. Once again, she wondered at them. Wondered about the Frenchman who was his father. Would she ever know what had happened? Ever know what to expect in these children that were only half her child's, or would she always be amazed by traits she knew nothing of? She had the feeling it would continue to be the latter, which would have been fine, if she hadn't had the somewhat guilty realization that there was a grandmother out there who couldn't share her joy.

What isn't she telling me, little boy? she asked her resting grandson silently as she stroked his cheek. *Why can't she just explain it? Or even tell me his name? And why didn't she tell*

him, for good or ill? And why won't she just come home where we can watch over her? Oh, Jason, I just want to understand...

With a sigh, she shook her head and smiled at the baby before pulling away. It was just Lois' way. But, even if they couldn't talk about the past, the present was still a safe topic. If only she could talk her into moving back to Metropolis, closer to all of the people who loved her, where she was well-known and loved... Where she knew everything and everyone knew her. And she knew that Perry White wanted Lois back at the Planet despite her evasiveness. He had been calling nearly every other day for updates on both her and the babies. There were even times when that young Jimmy Lois spoke of with such a combination of annoyance and amusement could be heard in the background, asking questions as Mr. White spoke to her, the older man constantly hushing the youngster, ordering him out of the office when he interrupted for the thousandth time.

They missed her, that was clear. And when Lois spoke to them, even as she carefully chose her words, it was obviously reciprocated. Everything she had ever cared about was back in Metropolis, except one thing. She needed help with these children and Ella's visa was running out. And she hoped that the new position that Mr. White had mentioned might be enough to lure Lois home and back to her old life. Especially when they told her that Mr. White had planned to ask her to train as his possible successor. Effectively making her assistant editor-in-chief.

Her feet carried her to the doorway before she even realized what she had done. Ella looked back once again to the tiny being dreaming in the crib before gently closing the door. She would lay Kala down as well, and then she and her daughter would talk. Superman was gone; she had given birth to twins by a man she hardly knew out of hurt and anger. But it was over and done. Let the past stay dead then; life moved on. And so would Lois, if her loved ones had any say in the matter.

Painful Perceptions

As I got out of the cab in front of the Planet that morning, I realized that I had never thought this building could look any more intimidating than it did that very second. Not even when I was fifteen and had come to wheedle Perry White into a job, bold as brass and just barely starting high school. For one perfectly insane moment, I considered telling the driver that I'd changed my mind, that I would like to go back to my apartment, please. But I'd never been a coward my entire life.

Before I could even begin to utter the words, I shoved my fare into the cabbie's hand with just a bit of a tip and pushed open the door in an attempt to discourage that idiocy. Trying to ignore the shakiness of my limbs, I slid from the vehicle and out into the early morning sunshine. Once my heels touched the pavement, it seemed impossible to move forward, into this place that had meant so much to me. As I tried to settle my nerves, my eyes wandered as the cab pulled away. The sidewalks were teeming with pedestrians as always this early in the morning. The hum of murmured conversations of coworkers reached my ears, and the mingled scents of strong coffee, hastily-smoked cigarettes and gasoline filled my senses.

It was a scent that had always comforted me, this wakening smell of a Metropolis morning, the way it jumpstarted my adrenaline. But now, it just brought back memories and a nervous yearning for nicotine, which was now off-limits. Memories that I had better learn to forget if I was going to continue to make a good life for him and Kala. I knew better than to look up to the shadow falling over me, at the globe looming almost seventy stories above my head. That really was where all of this mess had started. It was only sheer stubbornness and pride that propelled me forward, clutching my briefcase as I adjusted my trenchcoat over my shoulder.

I think I must have cursed both my mother and Perry a million and one times for talking me into coming back here as I strode with seeming confidence into the lobby and toward the elevator banks it was just another day. Business as usual. The interior of the Daily Planet was a microcosm of the world outside the revolving glass doors. Over four dozen voices echoed against the walls and high ceiling before bouncing off again as they moved into one of the three elevators. The sound of shoe heels was a steady beat. Here, life had gone on.

Yet all seemed just as it had been when I left almost two years ago, with the exception of the signs of renovation that Perry had mentioned over trans-Atlantic calls. I caught a few surprised glances as I made my way over myself, a few people poking each other and nodding in my direction, but no one greeted me out loud. And I became acutely aware of just how much I had changed in such a short time. How different I had grown from the woman I had been before, before he had left. Before I had disappeared from the place like a mad jet, before it became clear that he had left me ... all of us. And how completely lost I felt in this most familiar place.

The sensation of being watched and talked about didn't stop then, as we rose slowly up the height of the building. Jaw clenched, I kept my face unreadable and concentrated my thoughts instead on the babies I'd left at home. It was difficult to do, leave them alone with Mom and Lucy for ten hours so soon after arriving. Feeding them this morning and then having to walk away had been a special kind of emotional torture. All three of us had gotten used to the alone-time with each other. It continued to baffle me how different it felt to have children around, especially once that I had mine. And the thought of two of them back then...

But it seemed like everything new that they did, the way that Jason's hair slowly darkened from blonde as time went on, the expressions on his face, Kala's eyes like mine and her

attempts to try to form sounds, if not words - utterly commanded my attention. Despite of the way they came about, even if their father wasn't a part of their lives, they'd become my anchor. My reason to get up and keep moving. Sorrow or not, those two wouldn't let me fall to pieces. And they needed me. Me and no one else. And this from the woman who wanted no part of all that 'Mommy' mess. *My, my, the independent, free-spirited Miss Lane, what has become of you?* I thought with a small smile.

I hated to think of it as using them as an excuse, but that was the first reason I gave Mom for not wanting to move back, how young they were. At only nine months old, it seemed cruel to uproot them from their routine and the only home they had ever known. It was only a partial excuse, though, because the flight would seem like a short stay in Hell if Kala had decided to let loose with one of those horror-film screams of hers. The one thing I've slowly learned is that kids are completely impulsive. In the case of mine, the ante seemed to have been upped more than even the average. And I prayed hard every night that there would never be outward signs of their mixed heritage.

But the moment my protest was of leaving was uttered, I should have known it was only a matter of time before I lost the argument. Paris was beautiful, but my heart had ceased to be in it due to the nature of my arrival. I had come here to find him, then had stayed to protect all of us. Besides, loneliness was an issue. Not to mention, I was deathly afraid that she would ask too many questions if I kept arguing. Questions that I had no completely straightforward answers for.

I had thought that if I had a plausible, if uncomfortable excuse, even a potentially image-harming one, it would keep others from sniffing out the truth. But I hadn't counted on Mom not letting well enough alone. In a way that was all too eerily familiar as we sat on the overstuffed couch in my apartment, both of the babies sleeping, she demanded the full story, top to bottom, and once it was told, began to pick over little inconsistencies. She had caught me off-guard, you see, and I was scrambling to tell the story I had rehearsed in my mind over and over. All along, I think I was sure that Mom would be the hardest person to convince; even when I was a child, very little got past her. It was if she could read the truth just by glancing at your face, no matter how hard you tried to hide it.

Knowing I was cornered, unable to even begin telling her the truth in any way, I'm ashamed to say that I took the coward's way out. Before I could even brace myself against her loving and concerned words, I was bawling like a terrified four-year-old. Even as the longing to tell her the truth was becoming unbearable, I stuttered out that big fat lie once again. About Superman's disappearance and my being a wounded idiot and the stupid non-existent Garen and the torrid prolonged one-night-stand/revenge sex that never even happened.

I hated it, hated every single untruth that I spoke, but I couldn't tell her. How could I possibly explain what I had been up to with the World's Defender?

"Well, Mom, it's like this. I've been hooked on Superman since I first met him, even more so than I'm sure you've gathered from my never-ending discussion, but get this? I found out Clark Kent, that sweet and goofy klutz from work was the very man I had to drawn to when we were on assignment as newlyweds. I said I loved him, he said the same. Only not in words. Anyway, we went to his place in the Arctic, this giant crystal fortress, and we proceeded to seduce each other after a home-cooked meal. Afterwards, the hologram of his mother said that he had to give up being a hero if he wanted to be with me. Guess what happened then? He did. And we slept together. Several times that night. And the entire world went to hell as we did it. Well, once the smoke cleared, and he chose his mission and the entire Earth over me. And just

before he flew off to God-knows-where, we formally broke up and the kiss he gave me made me forget everything for a while. And I found out that I was pregnant with your half-alien grandchildren. Surprise!"

Oh, sure, she'd take that extremely well. That thought had been enough to make the waterworks even worse.

I was so torn up about it and worried over what would happen when I had to truly go out and face the world again, that when Mom brought up how much everyone missed me and wanted me to come back, it didn't take too much to agree with a sob. Without even really stopping to consider. I had avoided Metropolis from the moment I realized he was genuinely gone for a reason. It was a city of ghosts to me, full of memories that I couldn't bear to face, a skyline that haunted me, an apartment I had difficulty even thinking about. Nevermind that it had been partially paid for by my father or that I had had a hell of a time paying for my portion on a reporter's salary. At that time, I felt as though I had earned it for the way Daddy had always treated me and by the trials I had faced at the Planet. I had put it on the market once I was absolutely sure about the twins. I knew I could never have sat on that balcony again.

Nevertheless, I let Mom talk me into informing *La Tribune Quotidienne* that I would be returning to the United States, in spite of my earlier agreement to continue on after my maternity leave was over. I let her call Perry and tell him that I would accept the position he had offered and would be coming home. I let her help box things up and prepare all three of us for the move. I seemed to draw closer and closer to the twins as the date of departure grew more and more near. They went everywhere with me and both slept with me every night until we boarded the plane early that drizzly morning.

Sitting quietly in my seat, my anxious brain needing somewhere to go during that long flight, I made myself deal with all of the trauma and mystery of the situation I had found myself in, as the twins alternately slept, were played with, and were fed. I knew that I had to do what my mother was trying to lead me to do; I needed to get on with my life. Needed to resume being the person I was. My entire life wasn't swallowed up in him. I could do this. I could move on with my life.

It was just a case of finding out how.

Before I could torture myself further, the loud ding of the bell cut short this trail of thought as the elevator doors slid open. I was forced to move along with the frenzied traffic of journalists in a rush to both the Associated Press ticker and the coffee pot. Not to mention Perry's Monday Morning Massacres, the bullpen meeting that all of us lived for or would kill to avoid, depending on the week. For the first time since I was fifteen, I slowly made my way to the double swinging-glass doors, only to stop just to the side as the others filed past in twos and threes in an ever-increasing flow of discussion. It was awkward, that hesitant feeling in my gut as I watched this world I knew so well from the outside. Why did I feel this way in a place I loved so well, almost as if I no longer belonged?

Thankfully before I could ponder it seriously and psych myself out worse, I heard a voice that was familiar. "Miss Lane? Miss Lane, is that you? What're you doing out here? You look like someone just sent you to the principal's office." And then, as I glanced around to see where it came from, the owner of the voice was striding toward me with a boyish grin and camera around his neck.

I couldn't help the relieved grin I felt coming as he made his way across to me, smiling himself just like the boy he would always be to me. I'd known Jimmy for quite some time, practically since he first started interning here when he started high school. Poor thing got a

couple of photos into his regional paper when he was just a kid, took some really striking photos for his yearbook and of special events like weddings, got known around his neighborhood, and let his photography teacher give him a big head by saying how outstanding he was. Said that he was so good that he definitely should go professional. Only the kid had a better idea; he wanted to be a crime-beat photographer.

And wound up becoming a glorified gopher and whipping boy to Perry. Not exactly the career path he had been dreaming of. I'd always encouraged him to keep going - he was young and still had plenty of time. But he would just smile and point out that the Chief and I were examples of young people who had made it. I could only imagine what the frustration was like for him, but he took it well. I had no doubt that if he kept going at the pace he was, he would be a seasoned professional by the time he reached my age. Especially if Perry continued to thaw toward him, which was slowly but surely happening despite his blustering.

I chuckled quietly thinking about it. It wouldn't be a surprise if he did thaw toward Jimmy, seeing how he took Clark under his wing, as unimpress...

The amusement froze in my throat as his name entered my mind, my frown clear as Jimmy came up to me. Damn him. Damn him for the fool he made of all of us. Even now, at this of all times... Only Jimmy's voice broke me out of my agitated thoughts, saying in a worried but teasing tone, "Uh-oh, I know that look, Miss Lane. Who should we put in the witness protection program?"

I gave an uneasy laugh at my acidic thoughts as I went to hug him, his hug as always tight enough to remind me of the schoolboy crush that had never seemed to go away. As I followed him in, and he took my briefcase, I got all of the updates I could possibly need about the City Room and its latest going-ons, entanglements, and sob stories. Two weddings, five deaths, a divorce, and only my twins for births.

Norm Palmer had been having a bit of heart trouble lately, but was back on the job with a bill of good health. Gil and Judy had separated and she and their brood of four had gone to live with her mother in Missouri. I was rather sad to hear this, as the two of them had always seemed such a happy couple. Steve Lombard had finally harassed the wrong pretty young female, the new CEO's daughter, and been fired for his trouble. The man had been a royal jerk, making several passes at me and causing much grief for Clark and Jimmy, and so it was no great loss. Remembering him and his horrible creeping hands, I suppressed the urge to wrinkle my nose in disgust. And it seemed to give Jimmy a great deal of joy as he related the incident, so detailed were his descriptions, and so spot-on, that as we reached the editor's office I started laughing.

"Olsen! Where's my..." For once in his life, Perry White fell speechless. The beginnings of a grin lightened his face, and then he scowled and bellowed, "Lane, I expect my assistant to be on time!"

Just as quickly, not even giving a moment to consider the recent change of affairs, I stifled my surprise to return the look and retorted with a hand on my hip, "Well, if I were your assistant, I would have been. Nice to see you, too, Mr. White." For just an instant, I winced internally, wondering why I always had to rise to the bait, but it faded. If I had reacted any other way, he would have wondered what had happened to me. He and Jimmy may have expected me changed after all of this, but I would have died before letting them dote on me. "As it is, though, you have one star reporter back in your midst. Is my desk still available?"

"No, but the office next door to me is open," he shot back, eyeing me with just as much resistance. "The one on the left - my nephew's on the right, where I can keep an eye on him."

That really got me and I could feel my jaw tighten as I narrowed my eyes at him, missing the last sentence entirely. The fact that he was even pretending to misunderstand me was just insulting. In no uncertain terms, I had told him over and over that, while I would come home willingly to the Planet, I wouldn't consider being hired back in anything other than the same position I had left. Senior reporter was what I had worked for, had fought for. I'd always loved my job, loved the thrill of chasing down a lead, and loved the competition. I had absolutely no interest in being tethered to a desk simply because I had had a baby or two and the men at work felt more comfortable that way. Lois Lane was not going to become a desk jockey just because she was now a mom. The mere thought of Perry thinking I would put up with that train of thought infuriated me. "If this has anything to do with my having Jason and Kala now... if you think you can settle me into a nice and cozy position like some complacent broodmare, you have another think coming. I never wanted a desk job and I won't start now."

"Lane, you're the only one around here with enough balls to even be *assistant* editor," he snapped. "It's not as if you have to take over my job; I'll still be running this place when I'm seventy. You won't need to be at the desk all day; you can still go out and get the scoops. You just won't have to be climbing under an elevator car with a hydrogen bomb in it to justify your paycheck."

There wasn't a day that went by that it didn't drive me absolutely bananas that Perry knew me as well as he did. And he knew full-well that the recklessness was part of the thrill. My expression didn't change other than to allow for a scowl. "You would have expected nothing less for that story and you know it," I replied sarcastically. "You're not dying any time soon, Perry; you have the constitution of an ox. And you know that staying in this building and playing it safe is completely beyond my capability. I can't just write puff pieces for the Metro section. I won't. Your star reporter left here only to follow a lead story. Now, if this is up for debate, I hear that the Star has an..."

"Who says you were star reporter?" was Perry's retort. "Kent had as many articles as you, and he got them out faster - less proofreading, too. Look, Lois, I thought I was doing you a favor here. I'm not throwing you over to the wolves in the Lifestyle section. No matter *why* you left, you brought back more than a story. Take this job and your kids'll grow up knowing you instead of your byline."

Now I could feel the blood draining from my face. He knew that he'd scored a direct hit at my expense, but this time he had no idea what kind of anger he was tampering with here at those words. For one blinding instant, it was on the very tip of my tongue to tell Perry exactly why Kent had always seemed an equal with me all these years. All of those times, all of those stories... Not to mention the fact that it's his fault that I had to face this indignity, to be told to step back in the interest of my children. I had to force myself not to speak when every part of me wanted to have a tantrum worthy of a furious four-year-old. How dare he...?

And the worst part was that he *was* right about Jason and Kala. Look at Gil and Judy. Damn him.

I must have betrayed myself somehow, seeing the now real worry on Jimmy's face. But my editor-in-chief's face never changed, the both of us having been through similar confrontations before. But he had not the slightest clue what lay behind this difference of opinion. Taking a deep breath as I stared at the ceiling, I slowly counted to ten. It didn't seem to last long enough. That managed, my voice was very nearly calm when I replied, "I'll tell you what, Perry. Until something happens to make things any different, I'll take it in name only. I'll go to the meetings, I'll go with you to meet the players. I'll go home at five on the dot. I'll do all

the things that a good little assistant should. But I still go out in the field, I still get to have my sources. I'm not 'acting' *anything* until there's a need for it. Deal or no deal?"

"Deal," he grinned, putting out his hand. "Shake on it, Lane?"

The door behind us opened abruptly. A handsome young man all but burst into the office, russet hair falling rakishly forward into his eyes. "You want to roll on the Bulgaria situation, or should we hold it another ten? The print room's getting antsy."

"Let 'em squirm," Perry barked. "Smith'll call in on the wire, he's been doing it for years."

"Thanks, Uncle Perry," the man said, at last noticing there were other people in the room. "Hope I wasn't interrupting ... anything..." He loses his train of thought as his eyes land on me, with that poleaxed expression I've seen so many times. It was too bad for him that it mattered to me very little just then.

"Richard, meet Lois Lane, star reporter and assistant editor, as of today," Perry said expansively. "Lane, this is my nephew, Richard White. He's cleaned up International for me."

"White?" I asked pointedly. Since when has the *Planet* indulged in blatant nepotism?

Perry just glared. I could read his expression like it was in forty-eight point type, and it said, *So what?*

I couldn't resist the slightest smirk at his expense. Ah, so it *was* like that. Unable to help a slightly wolfish grin, knowing that it generally threw male co-workers off balance, I held my hand out to him. It's not as if he was any kind of competition, being essentially in another department. Would probably be best to make nice. "Hello, Mr. White, good to meet you. You can't have been here all that long. I don't remember Perry telling me that you had hired on." My lips continued to smile at this new addition, but my clearly sardonic eyes flickered over to his uncle. I just couldn't help it. Old habits coming back. "How do you like it here so far?"

"Wonderful, really," he replied. "It was a bit of a challenge at first, but I just couldn't pass up the chance to work for the paper that got the first Superman interview. I admit I was a little stunned to see you here, Miss Lane - Perry told me he didn't think you were ever coming back to Metropolis. I really admire your work; it's great to have you back."

Would I *ever* get away from *him*? That name - those names - followed me like a tin can tied to a dog's tail. At least Mr. White the Younger was astounded by my fame and not my frame. But I couldn't resist giving him some of the old Lane derision. "Really? I appreciate the remark, but you don't know what it was like with me here."

"Oh, Perry talks about you all the time," he said with a wink to his uncle.

"Yes, but how much of it is printable?" I retorted, and they all broke up laughing.

In the middle of his chuckle, Perry appeared to notice Jimmy for the first time and barked, "Olsen! You got those photos ready yet? No? What're you hanging around here for? Get to work, kid!"

"Uh-oh, we're next," Richard said to me. "I don't get hollered at any less for being his nephew - which is just the way I want it. Let's run."

I had to chuckle at that. At least there was a sense of humor there. He'd need it. There are a few more moments of discussion, the Chief giving me a rundown of the where-to-go's and what-to-do's of the day, telling me to take Jimmy once he's finished picking up those photos, as well as extra information to be given to HR due to the position. I gritted my teeth over it, but thanked him again for thinking of me. He glowered, I sighed and rolled my eyes, and the audience was over. Ten seconds later, Richard and I were leaving the office, Jimmy waiting for me just out of Perry's line of sight.

Richard broke to the right, heading for his own office, then paused to glance back at me. I

pretended not to see the way his eyes followed me; the last thing I needed were entanglements of any kind. Especially not now. And especially not with an obvious Superman fan who's so closely related to my boss.

Before I had a chance to think about it further, Jimmy was at my side and we were headed again for the elevators. Only this time I was not alone as I stepped in, with an old friend at my side and the solidness of my status at this paper renewed. And I felt more confident than I had in a long time. Despite all that had changed in my life the last sixteen months, familiarity suddenly felt like armor around me. There was life after Superman. He may have left me with no explanation, left all of us, I may have been the mother of Kala and Jason, but I was still Lois Lane. I could be star reporter and a great mother to my twins. And I was home. I was finally home.