

Little Secrets, Act Three

by **Kala Lane Kent**

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Rating: T

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What Would Happen If

Richard and Clark were both laughing as they waited on their luggage. "So then the witch says, 'What stepping stones?'"

Clark chuckled, shaking his head. "Where do you get these, Richard? They're so bad they're funny."

"Dumb jokes dot com," he replied. "No, seriously. They have stuff I haven't heard since grade school. Like the one that goes, 'Two guys walk into a bar...'"

"And the third one ducks," Clark said, grinning, and then felt a sudden pang as he remembered just who had sprung that one on him. *Lois and her warped sense of humor.*

"Yeah," Richard said. "You all right, Kent? You look a little melancholy there. Homesickness is supposed to happen when you're away, not when you get back."

Clark forced a laugh. "Well, I guess it never really hit me how much I missed home until I got here," he replied, feeling that casual remark echo through the past two months, back to the first moment he'd stepped from the spacecraft and seen waving corn again, felt the breeze on his face. "I mean, we were a little too busy to be nostalgic down in Mexico."

"True," Richard replied with a sigh. "It's a good thing those guys in Tijuana can't aim worth a damn."

They can aim just fine, Richard, they just weren't counting on me catching the bullets, Clark thought. He'd had to be very quick, faster than Richard could even see, and thankfully the smugglers were far enough away that they thought they'd simply missed. "Being a reporter's more dangerous now than it used to be," he said quietly. "People target us specifically."

"A free press is a dangerous thing," Richard countered, "to people involved in illegal activities and to oppressive governments. They fear us, rightly, and they're willing to go to any lengths to maintain their secrecy. But if we didn't do our jobs, we'd be letting those people win. And I for one am not inclined to let them win."

Clark just nodded thoughtfully. Any possibility of making an intelligent and insightful reply shattered at the sound of a woman's voice. *A familiar woman's voice, raised cheerfully.* "Clark! Hey, Clark, fancy meeting *you* here!"

Richard saw Clark turn to look, and suddenly break into a wide, boyish grin as the voice's owner made her way through the crowd.

Lois was not having a good morning. She hadn't slept well, but then, she never did these days. Her hair was trying to frizz, and her favorite eyeliner had gone missing. When she took her cell phone off the charger, she realized that it was still flashing LOW BATTERY, and took a closer look at the charger itself. None of its lights were on, meaning the damn thing was broken. And the spare charger was at work.

The iguana had gotten out while she neatened up the living room, and it whipped her with its tail when she tried to push it away with the vacuum's hose attachment. Jason had to rescue them from each other, cooing sleepy blandishments to the lizard while Lois put iodine on the fresh welts on her ankles.

It was nearly time to leave, but the twins were dawdling, still logy from last night's dose of Triaminic. And to make matters worse, Lois could feel her sinuses drying out, a sure sign that she was coming down with their cold. Richard hadn't called from the airport like he said he would, and she began to worry that his flight was delayed.

I have to call Mom and tell her I'm bringing the kids over, Lois thought, adjusting her

favorite pinstriped suit jacket. *And I have to leave in five minutes if I don't want to be late.*

"Mommy?" Kala said, walking slowly up to her.

"Oh, baby, what's wrong?" Lois asked, almost kneeling to brush the hair off her daughter's forehead.

Kala looked very unhappy, and her skin was warm under Lois' hand. "I don't feel so guh..."

Then, in mid-sentence, her breakfast of oatmeal returned.

At speed.

Lois froze in horror, oatmeal dripping off her suit, her hair... *Oh my God. Don't throw up, don't throw up...*

Kala, seeing what she had just done and already feeling awful, began to cry.

"Mommeeeeee, I'm sorry," she wailed, shivering as her stomach roiled. Her loud, harsh sobs brought Jason running, but when he saw their mother slowly standing up and looking like she'd been showering in slightly-used oatmeal, he started crying, too.

Lois felt like bawling herself. *I give up! I just plain give up this morning! How could this possibly get any worse?*

An hour later, after calming the twins down, cleaning up the kitchen, having another shower, and getting dressed again, she had her answer. Traffic was fairly light getting out to her mother's house, but heading back into the city it was a nightmare. Lois gripped her steering wheel hard enough to make her knuckles turn white, and glared angrily at her cell phone. If she'd had some charge left in it, she could've called Perry and let him know what was going on, maybe ask if he knew anything about Richard's plane. As it was, though, she found herself completely cut off from communication.

This is it. This is the absolutely worst morning of my life.

Well...

*Okay, this is the second - the third worst morning in my life. The first was the morning after I broke up with **him**, the second was when my memories finally came back and I realized just how screwed over I was. At least **this** miserable start to my day has nothing to do with a certain man in a cape.*

I'm going to be almost two hours late. At least it can't get any worse than this.

The employees at the Daily Planet had learned to get out of Lois' way when she stalked into work with *that* expression on her face. It meant that her own personal little doom cloud was following her, and it had a tendency to rain on whoever got in her way. They didn't openly avoid her, they just sort of drifted somewhere she wasn't.

All except the breakroom crowd, that is. Lois' usual Starbucks had a line all the way outside of the store, but caffeine was utterly necessary, so she steeled herself for the awful newsroom brew. Unfortunately, Polly Matheson was holding forth in wistful tones as Lois entered, surrounded by the usual crowd of slackers and Babette from Accounting, the one honest employee just there for the coffee.

"He is *so* utterly dreamy - I know, I sound like a high school girl, but oh, that man! Lois was crazy to let him get away..." Her voice trailed off as she saw Lois heading for the coffee pot, the black-haired reporter's jaw firmly clenched.

The loiterers who had egged Polly on, a mixed crowd who preferred gossip to work, all fell quiet at the sight of their boss, though they secretly hoped for a confrontation. Lois had been closemouthed about Superman for the last few years, and perhaps if she unloaded on

Polly they'd get a few juicy tidbits...

Polly herself had the decency to blush. In the face of Lois' stony silence, she could only say, "Lois, I didn't mean that to sound... I mean, if it was me..."

"It wasn't you," Lois said brusquely. "It was me. And it wasn't what you think it was, either. I had a bit of a flirtation with him, hardly anything to get worked up over. When he left, I moved on with my life. Case closed." Ignoring the murmurs of *Oh, really?* from the back of her mind, Lois added creamer and sugar to the oily black liquid in her coffee mug.

The crowd radiated curiosity, but Lois had no intention of saying anything else on the topic if she could avoid it. Finally Polly burst out, "It sounded like a whole lot more than that. From your articles and stuff. I mean, *I Spent the Night with Superman?*"

Hazel eyes narrowed as Lois tried to keep her tone civil. "Polly, I didn't pick that headline. Perry did. Same way he picks *all* of the front-page headlines. And he does it for the shock value; all of you know that. *Furthermore*, I had just met him and I was interviewing him. I don't mix business with pleasure, and I don't sleep with *anyone* on the first date. Not even aliens." It was unlike her to be so blunt about that little fact, but some traitorous part of her wanted to remind Polly that the man she was rhapsodizing over wasn't even human.

The younger reporter frowned disapprovingly. The comment didn't appear to be discouraging to her; like most women, she assumed that if he *looked* human, he might as well *be* human. "Well, all I can say is, if you were in love with him, you should've waited for him to come back."

"Really? In that case, you're welcome to him. I'm not going to waste my life waiting around on a momentary attraction. If *you* want to sit around twiddling your thumbs and pining over a man who disappears without a word for six years, feel free to do so." Lois had sounded almost cheerful while she spoke, and then her voice dropped to an angry hiss. "*But not on my time*. All of you have jobs, right? If you want to *still* have them ten minutes from now, get to work!"

The group scattered, all except Babette, who grinned and gave her a thumbs up. "Get 'em, Lane," she whispered. "I hate it when the gossipy crowd gets between me and my morning dose of motor oil. Nosy buggers."

For the first time that morning, Lois smiled. "Thanks." As she headed over to the bullpen, she almost thought the morning wasn't a complete waste of makeup after all.

Lois cruised past the cluster of reporters in animated conversation just inside the door, then halted. Ron was just coming out of International and saw her weary but basically okay expression vanish, replaced by blank disbelief. Lois took several steps backward and slowly turned to look at the group by the door.

At its center was a stunning redhead whose appearance immediately reminded Lois that she herself had slept three hours last night and been puked on this morning. Surrounding the woman were several male Daily Planet employees, including Jimmy Olsen, Jerry Ellison from the Nightlife section, and Brian Beateau from the Arts department. But standing closest to her, and smiling as if bewitched, were Clark and Richard.

Even from several yards away, Ron could see Lois take a deep breath as her eyes narrowed slightly. Her expression looked calm and even friendly as she walked up to the group - unless you knew Lane women, knew that the exquisitely slow inhale through the nose was their equivalent of a boiler's high-pressure valve whistling. Ron headed their way, trying to get Jimmy's attention and get him out of the line of fire.

Richard and Clark were both listening to the redhead, utterly absorbed, until a

wonderfully cordial voice said, "Richard, darling. I'm so glad you got in on time; I was worried about you when you didn't call."

The International editor winced. "Lois, honey, I'm sorry. Clark and I ran into Ms. Lang at the airport and..."

"Lang? As in Lana Lang?" Lois said, and suddenly her voice had an edge.

"Yes, and you must be Lois Lane," the redhead said with a dazzling smile. "I've heard so much about you - these two can hardly stop singing your praises long enough to tell me where the Style department is."

The cheerleader. Clark's first love. And I know she's my age or older, but she looks five years younger. Lois managed to smile politely and shake her hand, but Clark knew the look on her face and started edging away. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Lang," Lois said sweetly, and Richard finally saw the tension in her jaw. "You're here for an interview, right? Putting on a fashion show next week, silent auction afterwards, proceeds go to charity?"

"Exactly right," Lana said. "Are you going to be there?"

"Oh, no, I'm so sorry," Lois replied, still with the saccharine overtone and the steel underneath. "I'm so busy lately, it's just unreal. Wish I could, really."

For a minute, green eyes looked into hazel, a question unspoken between them. "That's too bad," Lana said eventually. "I would've enjoyed seeing you."

Lois just nodded, then asked courteously, "Wasn't that interview scheduled at nine? Because it's a quarter to ten now."

"Oh! I'm going to be late! What a first impression to make on Ms. Vega. I hate to run like this, everyone, but..."

"It's okay," Richard told her. "Clark, would you walk Lana over to Style?" He cast a pleading glance after Lois as she stalked away.

Clark looked at him dubiously. "Sure," he said, and added softly, "If I were you, I'd let Lois drink that coffee before you try talking to her. You know how she is without caffeine."

Richard just nodded as he and the others went their separate ways, and Clark showed Lana the way to the resident fashion maven's office. Once alone with his old flame, though, he found himself without much to say. The feelings he'd once had for her had unexpectedly mellowed into warm regard, and he didn't want Lana to think he was still the puppy-eyed follower he had been back then.

"Life in the big city suits you, Clark," Lana said with a wistful smile. "You're looking fabulous."

"Thanks," he replied. "You, too." Most of the how-have-you-been small talk had been exhausted on the trip from the airport to the office, and Clark had sort of known what was going on in Lana's life courtesy of his mother. She'd broken up with the jock, Brad, shortly after graduating, then quit college and married a banker who turned out to prefer golf and young tellers to spending time with his wife.

"What got you into fashion?" Clark asked, searching for something to say.

Lana smiled. "I have a nice little PR blurb for the article, but I'll tell you the truth. When I was in college, my roommate was a girl named Elena, an exchange student from Italy. She was studying medieval history, and one of her projects was to make a set of clothing using only the materials and technology available back then. Everyone else was going to do a simple tunic and leggings, or a peasant's kind of dress, but Elena wanted something nicer than that, and I helped her make the kind of dress a noblewoman would wear. I'd always known how to make clothes from patterns, every girl back home does, but actually designing this entire outfit from

first sketch to last stitch was so much more fun.

"It was a real challenge, too, but it looked fabulous when it was done. While I was married to Don, I kept my hand in, making clothes for myself and a few friends. Nothing big or fancy, but I developed my style while I was a bored housewife. Since I never finished my degree, it was the only real skill I had when I got divorced. As to becoming famous for it, well, I just got lucky."

"I imagine it had more to do with determination and hard work than luck," Clark chided her gently. "Good deal, though. What are you going to tell Agi when she interviews you?"

Lana grinned, a mischievous look Clark remembered well from the old days. "That I learned dressmaking from my mom. It's technically true, but it leaves me more space to talk about my winter collection coming out."

He chuckled with her as they reached the office marked *Agnes Vega, Style Editor*. Unfortunately, Clark's mirth was cut short. Several floors below, his exquisite hearing picked up Lois' voice rising. *I'd better get down there*, he thought with a quick wave to Agi.

Lois completely ignored everyone in the bullpen as she headed for her office, the set of her shoulders broadcasting *Leave me alone* as clearly as if she'd used a megaphone. Of course, the one person who should've recognized her state of mind immediately was also the one with the most cause to upset her.

"Dammit, Lane, where the *hell* have you been?" Perry barked, throwing his office door open.

All of the nastiness that Lois had held back when talking to Lana suddenly burst its bonds. She turned very slowly to look at Perry, her eyes blazing with frustration and anger. Biting her tongue, she stalked over to her boss, grabbed his sleeve, and dragged him into his own office before unleashing her temper in a torrent of obscenities.

The reporters in the bullpen looked at each other silently, their eyes widening. The door hadn't shut completely, so they could hear Lois ranting.

"Your bloody nephew didn't *call* this morning, here I am wondering if his plane crashed or something, and I get here to find him drooling over some Kansas *cheerleader*! Not to mention, my morning was *lovely*, thank you *very* much - both kids are sick, I'm getting their cold, my cell phone charger's broken, and that goddamn *dinosaur* you bought my son *attacked* me! I have *welts*, Perry, freakin' *welts* on my ankles from that vicious little beast!"

She went on in the same vein for several minutes, until she felt eyes in the back of her head. "And I just had to break up the subjective journalism coffee klatsch on the way in ... one of you out there *shut this goddamn door*, it's none of your *business* anyway! So I *really* don't want to hear about being late when I *don't even want to be here!*"

Cringing, Jimmy tiptoed to the door and shut it carefully. Vera from the secretarial pool stopped in her tracks, having heard the extremely unladylike language Lois was employing. The girl sniffed, still annoyed at having been chased out of the break room. "What's her problem anyway? My God, Lois is *such* a bitch."

"Shut up," Jimmy snapped at her, surprising himself with his vehemence. "Ms. Lane is under a lot of pressure right now."

"And she's your boss, so she can fire you," Rhea from Arts added as she breezed past with an armload of books.

Vera wisely said nothing more, hurrying back to her own department. Rhea's column, *The Eclectic Reader*, was avidly followed by soccer moms and cognoscenti alike, her unbiased

point of view valuable in a literary critic. Though she rarely got involved in office politics, her opinion carried a lot of weight with Perry.

Clark got to International just as Lois was winding down, and saw that Richard had wisely gone into his office to wait out Hurricane Lane. He headed to his own desk, listening to Lois rant and sympathizing with her.

"And in short, I'm sick, I'm worried about my sick kids, I'm pissed at you for giving them the messiest pets on earth and *really* pissed at you for that vicious lizard, I'm exhausted, my best suit is covered in partially digested oatmeal, and I'm about to hamstring your nephew for forgetting to call me! He'd rather spend time with some fashionista than let his *fiancée* know he's finally back after being gone for *two weeks* - a dangerous trip *you* sent him on! *So don't screw around with me, Perry! I am not ... in the mood ... for this bullshit! Especially not from you!*"

Pretending to type, Clark peered into Mr. White's office, where the editor was looking at Lois very calmly. "Are you done?" he asked almost gently.

Lois paused for a minute, growling at him under her breath and running her hands through her hair. "Did I mention I hate that frikkin' lizard?"

"Yes. Four times."

"And your nephew's a jerk?" She glared through the glass at Richard, who was typing up his last installment on the story and ignoring the yelling coming from Perry's office.

"Hey, you're the one who wants to marry him."

Lois opened her mouth to say something, then stopped herself, glancing around the office. She didn't catch Clark looking, but his presence was enough to silence her. "Richard still didn't call me. How could he forget something that simple?"

"Lois, if you're not finished kvetching, at least get me an umbrella," Perry said. "And open a window or something - all that swearing has used up the oxygen in here."

Lois took a deep breath and sighed heavily. "Dammit, Perry! I just didn't need all this at once this morning, you know? First the kids, the lizard, the traffic, that twit Polly cooing over Superman and reading too much into *your* headline - and then when I get here, my ... my fiancée is being mesmerized by some redhead! I have never felt so old and unattractive and *domesticated* in my life!"

Perry took hold of her shoulders and looked at her sternly. "Lois, you're none of the above, and you ought to know it. Now listen, get yourself together and get to work. You'll feel better once you do."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Thanks for the fatherly advice, Chief."

"Anytime, Lane. Oh, and could you grab me some more black pens while you're up? Everybody steals them."

"Sure, Perry. Just because you married your secretary doesn't mean you should have to actually fetch your own pens out of the supply room."

Perry grinned. "Now *that's* the Lois I remember."

Clark watched surreptitiously as Lois squared her shoulders and left Perry's office. The City beat reporters all paid strict attention to their work as she cruised past, heading for the supply room.

If it had been a little smaller, it would be the supply closet. As it was, the space was so filled with folders, hanging files, copy paper, toner, ink, pens, pencils, notepads, and other journalistic necessities, it was quite claustrophobic. Being an interior room with no windows didn't help that feeling at all.

Lois disappeared inside, and Clark quickly used his x-ray vision to make sure no one else was there. *Perfect. She's been dodging me for two months; maybe I can corner her long enough to explain. There's so much to be said, and she may be angry enough about something else to listen to me ... or give me a few answers. Besides, **someone** within ten years of her age ought to remind her that she isn't old, or domesticated, or unattractive in the least. Lana's pretty, but Lois is Lois.*

No one else was watching. He darted across the room with super speed and eased the door open, then closed it behind him silently. Lois didn't even turn around, hunting through the shelves for a box of pens that hadn't been emptied. Only when he was standing right behind her did Clark realize she hadn't heard him approach, and he tapped her shoulder to get her attention.

But she took half a step to the side, and his fingertips landed on the back of her neck instead. So absorbed in her task was she that Lois' back jerked in reaction before it automatically stiffened and a shudder rose from her lips before she could trap it. She knew who it was almost instantaneously; blushing with shame at her reaction and angry at them both, Lois whirled around to face him. This wasn't the time for it, not after all she'd been through so far that day. Not after the mix of feelings churning in her since his most recent absence. She had held so much back for so long, locked in every thought and feeling, every memory and nightmare. Keeping a handle on the raging emotions only tenuously, those stormy eyes locked with his. The demand in them was clear: *What do you want?*

When she turned so quickly, his hand had slipped down her spine to rest at the small of her back. They were standing closer than they had since his return, with the sole exception of that dance at the Pulitzer's ... the memory of her lips so near melded with another memory, far older; another kiss, sweeter than their last; a time that was long gone but suddenly so near...

Without thinking, Clark pulled her a little closer, as captured by his feelings as she had been while they danced. The attraction between them had always been magnetic, and it only intensified with time apart. Before either of them really knew what they were doing, their lips met, softly at first.

All the horrible moments of the morning, all the frustration, the upset was suddenly gone. Her lingering anger at this man, her recent almost adulterous thoughts of him and the guilt that came with it. Even the presence of Lana Lang and her damned beauty, Clark and Richard's reactions to her. For Lois, just that brush of lips roared through her like being thrown down by the strength of a monsoon wave, electrocuted by the most searing of lightning. The sound of her gasp was lost, forgotten as quickly as the way she had instinctively and vainly attempted to push him away. Her body felt as if had been turned to glass and struck with a tuning fork, an impossibly sweet chime resonating through every cell. The weakness, the intensity that had drawn her on that crowded dance floor seized her, and she was returning the kiss fully. No past, no future. All of it forgotten for the sake of this. There was only now.

When they last kissed six years ago, Lois had temporarily forgotten three days. Now, both of them forgot the world around them, forgot everyone else in that world, even forgot themselves. Superman's mission had no place here, nor did Clark's disguise. Even the General's Daughter was swept away by passion, the Romantic's satisfied murmur fading. Only this moment existed, this man and this woman, Lois and Kal-El both stripped of anything but their eternal longing for each other. As if to confirm that fact, as her fingers curled into his hair, Lois' other hand was grasping one side of the glasses frames and pushing them out of the way.

Even as she did so, his hand slid down to her hip, lifting her easily. The difference in their

height vanished and he kissed her more deeply, not even realizing that he was holding her completely off the ground. His mouth silenced her soft moan as she wound one leg around his hip, fingers clenching almost desperately in his hair.

Years literally melted away around her as she held tight to him, reeling at the sensations tearing at her. The memories that had taunted her ever since his return were mere specters compared to the recollections that blazed through her now. She remembered wondering how it was possible to have felt so many things in so short a time.

Clark's hand on her hip traced the curve of her thigh, making her shiver. The last time he'd had his hands on her there ... oh, how sweet those few hours that belonged to them only, the memory of his sometimes hesitant but very thorough discovery of her body. The light and tentative kisses that deepened in surety until they were as full of passion as this one now, his free hand wound into her hair and his tongue darting into her mouth quick and hot.

This sudden needy cry was harder to conceal, Lois as deeply caught up in the spell as he, only moving closer now. There was no room for excuses or denials, no need except for theirs. All too well she could see the half-anxious look on his face that night when she had slipped onto his lap, not that she wasn't also aware of the expression in his eyes he tried to hide. And then when she had begun to move, the intensity of his reaction. *God*, those eyes on hers... It all washed through her mind then as if it were no further away than an instant. His skin against her lips over and over as she had taken advantage of the lack of skin-tight uniform, the impish joy she had felt when she had glanced up to find him watching her raptly. The harshness in his voice, the overwhelmed surprise, as he tried to say her name. The mix of awe, adoration, and a bit of wickedness that she could affect him so greatly. *Oh dear God, are his memories this clear? They have to be. How else can he remember how to do this so well?*

A wordless husky murmur of need as Clark tightened his arms around her, lost in the memory of her legs wrapped around his back, the faint blush of desire across the tops of her breasts, their tips rising under his lips, and the secret heat of her like nothing he'd ever known or dreamed. His recall was perfect, achingly so, and he kissed her now almost hard enough to bruise as those feelings rose in his mind again, whispering, "My Lois," against her lips.

Only moments from surrender, lost in the remembrance of the past and the sensation of the present, Lois heard a cool, amused voice say, *That's funny - for someone who claims not to like him, you do seem to have your leg wrapped around his ass. Care to explain that, Lois?*

The comment came so quickly, it was more than several seconds before it registered. Then both voices, one external and one internal, were enough to slide white-hot through her conscience, freezing her in position. It announced without a doubt the reality of this, where they were, who they were. And what they weren't. *Oh God, what am I doing? Lois, what the hell is wrong with you! If you had been any later realizing, you'd have let him take you right here against the file cabinets, wouldn't you?* Instantly, she was berating herself, even as her body shook with the evidence that the General's Daughter had a point. She was more than just a bit affected, something that seemed reciprocated.

All of a sudden, she was tense, though she didn't try to pull away. That hesitation percolated through the haze in his mind, and Clark paused, suddenly nervous. What was wrong? "Lois?" he asked softly, voice still rough.

Even though you two managed to screw up everything else, the physical side of the relationship was never a problem, the General's Daughter said, still amused.

This reminder stung her conscience deeply, making her flush all the more. She was over this, it was a naïve crush. Nothing more between them. What a lie, one in a long line of many

where this man was concerned. How could she do this, after trying so hard lately to make Richard happy? Make him believe again that she was his? Yet here she was, breathing hard with every nerve in her body on high-alert, pressed tight enough between a filing cabinet and Clark that it made things all too clear that the past wasn't dead? And if she had been given a moment longer?

Even the reminder caused Lois to stifle another moan. She wanted this; the voice in her mind now was right. Wanting him had never been a problem, she had never denied that to herself. It was just everything else that had been their problem. And the temptation to toss everything aside for just this moment was so strong...

Closing herself, she forced herself to gain strength. It just wasn't right, especially done like this. Unfair and misleading. And wrong. Not now, not like this. Lois' voice shook as she spoke, her entire body atremble, "Clark ... please ... put me down..."

He blinked at her, trying to reconcile her words with her expression. Even her tone was still breathy. But still, what kind of gentleman would he be if he didn't do as she asked? Clark let her down gently, and for a moment Lois was still in the circle of his arms, still close enough that he felt her tiny gasp as well as heard it. "Lois, I'm sorry..." he began, and she drew back, putting two fingers over his lips to silence him.

"Don't," Lois whispered. Her eyes were so stormy, caught between desire and guilt, almost on the verge of tears.

So troubled, wanting to just kiss her again, Clark almost didn't hear the faint squeak of the doorknob turning. He took a quick step backward, turning to glance at the door, and his spine turned to ice as he saw through the door just who was walking in on them. Super-speed gave him time to leap back even further as Richard swung the door open.

Hints and Allegations

When Richard walked into the supply room, the tableau he saw wasn't absolutely damning, but it was implicating enough to give him pause. Clark stood several feet away from Lois, looking down unable to meet anyone's eyes, while Lois herself was holding out a hand as if to touch him, her expression fraught. Richard glanced from one to the other, taking in their suddenly guilty expressions, and said with a touch of sarcasm, "Am I interrupting something here?"

Lois caught her shuddering breath and let it out in an annoyed sigh, controlling her reaction. "Of course not," she told her fiancé, rolling her eyes briefly. It was much harder to summon up any of her usual venom when she added, "Kent, we'll discuss this later."

Clark glanced at her, his mind in turmoil. He'd never meant to kiss Lois, just came in to talk to her, full of sympathy and wanting to tell her ... anything to make her feel better. What had just happened? And what was happening now? Oh, God, what did *Richard* think just happened? As Lois stalked out of the supply room, Richard following her with a thoughtful look backward, Clark remembered what his mother had said. *Of course she's furious. That's proof that she still loves you.* Evidently it was true - that kiss had been full of longing.

He picked up a handful of steno pads as an excuse for going into the supply room in the first place, still thinking it over. *What if Lois does still love me? What if she's been so angry with me because she knew something like this would happen if she let me get close to her? Above all else, what should I do now? I don't want to betray Richard - I shouldn't have kissed Lois just then - but oh, my God...*

Lois headed back to her own department, iron self-control keeping her appearance casual. The flush to her cheeks might have been anger or the exertion of yelling at the coffee crowd and Perry. True, her hair was disheveled, but she always ran her fingers through it when she was nervous or angry, and everyone had seen her practically raking it while she argued with the editor-in-chief. *Thank God for smear-proof lipstick,* she thought. *As long as I can keep the shivers under control and breathe normally, I might just pass for a woman who hasn't been making out with her ex in the last five minutes.*

While she dropped the pens off in Perry's office, acting rushed, Richard wandered into her office, dropping himself into the chair across from hers. Lois met his eyes as soon as she walked in the door, and steeled herself against the evitable. "Yes?" she said, making her way over to her desk with a clearly nonchalant air. *God, please let this be an Academy Award-winning performance. Don't let him suspect.*

"What was that?"

"What was what?" *What was what? Wow, Lane, that didn't sound defensive at all. And, really what do you have to be defensive about?* Flatly ignoring those thoughts, Lois slid down into her own chair, not even looking up at him, and yanked the blackout notes from her drawer. *Call Evie @ Telnet Directery Assistance re: Vanderworth calls to & frm,* the note on top read.

Richard picked up the soft foam stress-reliever globe on her desk and squeezed it. Lois' manicured nails had permanently pockmarked most of the continents. "You're really rough on these things, you know it?" And in the same mildly inquisitive tone, "What was that in the supply room with Clark?"

Again her conscience burned at just hearing the words. Question was, was she really sure of the answer anymore? It had just happened, without a clear thought in her mind. She had

never expected to do that. But with all of her idle wandering thoughts of late, the reminder of her feelings and revelations the night of the Pulitzer, coupled with the very 'what' they were discussing, it seemed impossible to deny. *I'm still in love with him. I don't think I ever stopped loving him.*

But that doesn't make it right, either, and you know that. The General's Daughter's voice was almost kind in her thoughts. *Maybe you should just tell him the truth, even if it's a half-truth. You did promise to keep the secret. And it might help if you were honest with Richard about something.*

And to that excellent advice, Lois finally looked up at her fiancé with that trademarked sarcastic expression, rolled her hazel eyes, and replied in an utterly deadpan voice, "Yes, Richard, you were on the verge of catching me in an act of mad, passionate love with the biggest dork in your department. We'll have to remember to lock the door next time. By the way, it's nice to see you, too. Enjoy your two-week trip?" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she mentally winced. *Je-sus! Nice, very nice. You and your bloody defense mechanisms. Why did that have to be so close to the truth?*

Richard blinked, surprised by her sharpness. It seemed he'd hit wide of the mark, very wide, but still... For the moment, he chose to act as if nothing was going on. That assumption might even have been true. After all, this was Clark they were talking about: mild-mannered to a fault, extremely moral, and a friend of Richard's. If the nagging voice in the back of his mind was wrong, then no harm done. And if it was right, well, it was best to have some proof when he confronted Lois.

"No, I didn't really enjoy it," Richard said. "We were shot at by drug smugglers who thought we were ATF agents; Clark caught a mild case of Montezuma's Revenge and had to run off on me a couple times; we had to see a Texas rancher hold a gun to the head of an eight-year-old boy; and one of the people we were supposed to contact was executed by the 'coyotes' before we ever got there."

I'd rather be shot at than have the kids get sick, Lois thought as she 'woke' her computer, kicking herself as soon as the words formed. "At least you weren't alone," she replied.

"Yeah, but I didn't have the three people I love most in the world with me," Richard retorted. "Not that I would've wanted you or the twins in the line of fire, but I missed you. And if Clark's to be believed, you were the perfect person to be there - did you *really* talk a terrorist into letting all the hostages go but you?"

Lois sighed. *Ah yes, the boys have been talking. Just what I don't need.* "That was the guy who wanted to bomb the Ford building, eight or nine years ago. I just told him one hostage was easier to control than seven, and one hostage who's a famous journalist is more prestigious."

"You said that?" Richard couldn't help grinning at her. "Damn, woman. And then what?"

"Then I got him to let me look at the gunshot wound he had from shooting at the police, and convinced him he'd better go to a doctor or he could die horribly." Lois looked up at him and shrugged. "Plan B was to dig my fingers in the wound and steal his gun while he was screaming in agony."

Richard just shook his head. "Your picture should be in the dictionary next to 'spitfire,' Lois. I'm so glad you're on my side. So what did Kent want?"

Again there was that hunted, sick feeling in her guts. Of having to betray one or the other with a lie. Knowing that the expression on her face might betray her even if she kept her tone blasé, the dark-haired woman was immediately immersed in her notes again. "The usual. He wanted to apologize *again*. I wish he'd stop. It's over and done with."

Richard looked at her speculatively. "He obviously feels really guilty over it. Maybe if you weren't so sharp with him he'd get over it." *And let's see what you say to that, Ms. Lane.*

At first she didn't say anything, just froze at those words. Giving a gusty sigh as well as an annoyed roll of her eyes, Lois looked up at him again over the monitor. *Alright, Richard, you're starting to push it now.* "And maybe I'm just not ready to get over it. Richard, stop trying to help him fight his battles. He's more than capable of doing it himself, despite appearances. And you weren't here then, Richard. You don't understand the way things were with the four of us." The reminder of this made her frown again, although it had a bit less sting now. "Besides, like I told him at the Pulitzers, you don't just up and leave your best friends like that. He has a lot to make up for and I'll forgive him if and when I'm ready. Alright?" The aggravated look on her face was even more pronounced with the last word.

Richard knew better than to push her. Besides, the office was no place for a personal confrontation. But before he could say more than, "All right, hon," they were interrupted.

Perry threw Lois' office door open, stuck his head in, and glared at them both. "Richard, did I hire you for the city beat?"

"Duty barks," Richard said to Lois, and got up.

"Lane," Perry began, but she held up one hand and pointed to the telephone, where she was dialing Evie direct.

"Calling a source, I'll get back to you," Lois said sweetly, and Perry let her be, satisfied for the moment.

Clark stayed at his desk, trying to avoid Richard's notice. It appeared that he didn't suspect anything, which simply couldn't be true. Could it? The moment Richard walked in on them, Clark felt as if he had a giant neon sign hanging over his head, flashing the word GUILTY! But so far Richard hadn't said anything to him, had only given him a speculative look. Was it possible that he didn't have more than the slightest suspicion?

I don't know whether to be relieved or more upset. I do not want a confrontation with Richard, but if he's truly unsuspecting, then I feel obligated to confess. He's a good man, and a friend. Not telling him what happened feels as bad as a lie.

I didn't walk in there intending to kiss his fiancée, but darn it, she's the love of my life! I don't think either of us could resist that moment. And a moment is all it was, no matter how much my entire world feels knocked off-kilter by it. She's still engaged to Richard, and I'm still just her ex.

*But we **have** to talk soon. Somehow I need to talk to her about everything that's happened, everything she knows, if just to let her know how grateful I am for her keeping my secret... And if I can get a few answers, too, that would be quite helpful.*

The information from Evie had been very helpful, a long list of numbers regularly dialed from the Vanderworth estate. Having that research to work on helped Lois' mood considerably. What she wouldn't have admitted on pain of death was that the kiss she'd shared with Clark had done much more for her attitude and her self-image. Oh, she was still angry with herself for giving in to her tempestuous emotions, still frightened by how swiftly passion had overtaken her, but at least she no longer felt old and frowsy.

Lois had come in late, so she took lunch late, too, and headed over to Berg's Bistro for one of her more socially-acceptable vices: a quarter-pound blackened sirloin burger smothered in sautéed mushrooms and Swiss cheese. So bad but oh so good, and she could only have them

when the kids weren't around. She could practically taste the waffle fries, almost smell the smoky grill...

Wait, that really is smoke. What the hell? Lois opened her car window all the way and stuck her head out, looking all around for the source of the odor. Other drivers barely paid attention; this was Metropolis, where a red light didn't really mean 'stop' unless a cop was nearby.

Only after craning her head around for several minutes did Lois see the sinister gray cloud rising into the sky. It was coming from downtown ... it had to be the arsonist. Lois dropped back into her seat, snatched up her partly-charged cell phone, and dialed Perry even as she cut out of traffic and roared down a side street.

"The firebug's at it again!" she told the editor as soon as he picked up. "Looks like Lennox or higher, somewhere between 35th and 40th. Send a couple reporters and a photographer, Perry. I'm on my way, but traffic's bad."

"You get back to this office, Lane!" Perry barked. "You're not a beat reporter anymore, and those fires are damn dangerous!"

"Sorry, Chief, bad signal," Lois replied, raising her voice and scraping a fingernail over the microphone to simulate static. "Gotta go." Grinning with the joy of the chase, she flipped the phone shut and 'accidentally' turned it off in the process. *God, I forget how much I miss this.* Pedal to the floorboards, the Audi roared up the backstreets.

There was a nifty little way of bypassing the traffic here; up eight blocks, over three, up another four blocks, and a quick run through an alley brought Lois back to the main streets again, farther ahead than she would've been. Now the source of the smoke was clearer, and Lois' heart sank. Aetna was one of the largest employers downtown. The skyscraper ahead of her belched smoke into the sky, its top stories already engulfed in flame.

Traffic was completely halted as emergency personnel rushed to the scene. Lois spotted a conveniently empty sidewalk. The Audi thumped up over the curb and Lois parked it between two ornamental dogwoods, snatched up her purse and press pass, and ran toward the scene.

Running in heels is an art, she thought, dodging onlookers while pawing through her purse for the tape recorder. The crowd got thicker as she got closer, and she had to employ the famous Lane elbow to make way as she struggled to the front.

"Keep back!" a man yelled up ahead, and his voice had the harmonics of authority. Lois sidestepped, finally coming up behind a police cruiser. Edging out alongside it, she wasn't in the cops' direct line of sight, but she was out of the thick of the crowd at last. At last she could see what was going on.

This time, the arsonist had set the top three stories of an eighty-six story building afire. People were rushing out of every possible exit, looking more like a stampeding herd of cattle than the competent professionals they had been moments ago. The fire department had already arrived, some heading inside to help people out, the rest getting trucks and hoses ready to fight the blaze.

One first responder was missing, however. *I understand him being late that one time when he had to get here from Mexico - not to mention had to make excuses to Richard so he could leave - but where the hell is he now? The kiss was damn good, but he can't still be reeling two hours later...* Lois gnawed her lower lip, sharp eyes darting around the scene as more sirens howled in the distance. *I'm gonna hate myself for this, but I'll hate myself more if I don't.* Pulling the cell phone from her purse, she turned away from the crowd at her back as

she switched it on and went to the Contacts list. Under *Group: DP Staff*, she scrolled past *Chief, Jimmy, and Richard* to the listing *That Damn Man* and pressed Send.

It rang through to voice mail. "Hi, this is Clark Kent. I'm not, uh, answering my phone now, but if you leave your name and number I'll get back to you, um, as soon as possible. If this is you, Ma, I love you and thanks for buying me the phone."

Lois winced and rolled her eyes. *No wonder he doesn't date. How did I get myself involved with someone so ... so...* Then the message beeped, and she started speaking, so worried that the anger was gone from her voice. "Listen, I shouldn't be doing this. I don't even know if you can carry this thing in your cape or whatever. But the firebug's struck again, at the Aetna building between..."

Silence, but for the whistle of the wind and the rustle of leaves. Lois' already mussed hair blew forward into her eyes, but she still saw the red and blue blur darting into the building, the kind of speed she always expected to be accompanied by a roar like a jet engine, nevertheless so nearly silent. "Nevermind," she said, pushing End and trying to ignore the feeling of awe that rose in her.

Just behind her, Lois heard an ironic voice. "What's a high-powered assistant editor like Lois Lane doing mingling with us lowly beat reporters?"

Lois closed her eyes. *Please don't let her have heard the call...* "Hello, Toby. How'd you get here so quick? Chase the ambulance?"

"You almost sideswiped me on Twenty-fifth and I followed you," the pretty brunette replied, smiling. "I figured it was either a disaster story, Superman was around, or Starbucks was giving out free espresso. Two out of three ain't bad."

Lois glared, but she couldn't quite keep herself from smiling back. "Trust a *Star* reporter to follow me in. Can't you catch a story on your own?"

"I was on my way first! I had the inside track, Lois, I have a police scanner in my car."

"Maggie's a Lieutenant, for the love of God! Getting the scoop that way is cheating. I just evened the odds for the Planet."

"Oh, bull," Toby said, rolling her eyes. "You're not even a *reporter* anymore, Lane, you've gone to the dark side and joined administration! Now get out of my way and let me do my job. I'm sure the Planet will send a real journalist, eventually."

"Kiss my Pulitzer, Raines," Lois shot back, ready to trip Toby if necessary to make sure *she* was the first one to interview a firefighter or a cop. The fact that the *Star's* reporter had struck a nerve there had nothing to do with it, nothing at all.

Before they could snap at each other further, a sudden greedy roar erupted above them. Lois and Toby both whirled around in time to see the fifth, twentieth, and sixtieth floors of the building seemingly explode, glass flying everywhere.

The cell phone chirped from somewhere in the office behind him as Superman soared out of the airshaft. He heard the sirens, not just the rising and falling wail of police units but the bawling blare of fire department trucks. *The arsonist again! It wasn't bad enough he had to strike while I was on assignment with Richard - thank God for the water in Mexico, it's a convenient excuse - now this creep is burning buildings on the one day I just want to go home and sleep for a week to get my mind together. Oh, when I catch him, I'm going to drop him reeking of accelerant right in the D.A's office...*

The thought wasn't even completed when he reached the scene, flying at a little less than the speed of sound. Top floors fully involved, people heading for the exits with their panic

barely under control, fire and police on the ground already. *Stop the blaze first, then help with the rescue. He uses methanol - colorless, odorless, and it burns clear, so more may be on fire than people can actually see. That's been the problem in the last few fires, everyone thinking it was over when it was just starting. Fortunately methanol isn't as explosive as gasoline...*

And just moments after he entered, the building shook around him. *What the...? I see blue smoke, what combusts extremely fast and has blue smoke? Nitromethane! Good Lord, he really is into the model airplane fuels. Got to put these flames out.* Superman started on the fifth floor, from which most people had already escaped. The accelerant had been painted on the walls and ceilings of corridors, so that flame rippled along them. It was almost beautiful, in a frightening way.

Superman blew a freezing breath at the dancing fire, knocking it back. The nitro that had been used here made it difficult, but the fire department already had several hoses aimed at the shattered windows. The one good thing about the arsonist's choice of fuel was that it could easily be put out with plain water.

One last check with his superbly acute vision revealed no more of the faint blue flames on this floor. A woman had fainted in an office, and he quickly took her to the stairs where the other workers helped her escape. Up to twentieth, just a brief red and blue vision as he spiraled up the stairwell, his glimpsed presence inspiring hope among those hurrying down the seemingly endless stairs.

The stairwell door was hot, and he went up to twenty-one and back down through the floor, blowing out the flames. A man, panicked, trapped in the elevator; four secretaries barricading the corner office door and screaming for help from the balcony. One man carrying a badly-burned woman; another man passed out from smoke inhalation only yards from the stairwell. Superman saved them all, working as fast as he could, wrapping his cape around people as he flew them through the fire and down to the waiting ambulances.

The work numbed him, narrowed his focus; put out the fire, save the ones who were trapped or hurt, always heading upward. Hurry, get to the next floor, keep the blaze from spreading. Catch the fire, fight it like a savage, vicious beast, pin it down and drive it out of existence, and try not to listen to its hungry roar, try not to think that it bellows defiance when it swallows people whole and their screams rise above every other sound. Rescuing people whose skin crackled under his hands, whose hair and clothes were gone to the flames, the smoke and the heat even robbing them of their screams, only their white staring eyes to prove they were alive. The further up he got, the worse it was, and anger began to beat in his temples beneath the shock and grief at what he was seeing. How dare anyone do this...

Lois felt her heart seize up as she heard and saw the explosion. *Those people inside ... and Kal-El ... my God.* In the next instant, she realized that the glass and debris were falling right toward them. The crowds the police had kept back would probably be safe, but she and Toby were now well inside the lines and too close for comfort.

The two reporters dived in unison for the shelter of an overhang across the street, barely escaping a shower of glass fragments that fell onto the pavement with obscenely cheerful tinkling sounds. Half of someone's desk didn't land so gracefully, coming down from an upper story to smash into a police car. Lois and Toby watched, silently, fulfilling their duty as the eyes and ears of their readers. No interviews now, just the need to witness, and then to report. *This is what happened, this is how it was. I was there, I risked my life so all of you didn't have to. This is the story.*

A telephone handset with someone's hand still clutching it landed just in front of them. Bits of steel lanced through the air, warped by the explosion into deadly projectiles. Concrete dust danced in the air, frosting everyone's faces and clothing. The roar of the fire, the smoke and the confusion, and through it all the reporters who raced into danger made themselves into living recorders.

In spite of journalist objectivity, in spite of her almost sacred calling to witness events of this magnitude, Lois was thinking in the back of her mind, *That could've been me, or the twins, or Perry or Jimmy or my mother. And for someone else, it is. God, please, no more ... let the cops catch this bastard, let him burn himself up, anything, just please never again.*

The fire on the top floors had been burning longest, and it was much more reluctant to surrender. Thankfully, no one was left up here, and Superman could concentrate on battling the flames. He was focused on the smoldering carpets when he became aware of a faint beeping noise somewhere below.

That's somewhere about the fortieth floor - no reason for a smoke alarm to be going off down there. Sounds like four different alarm clocks going off, really. I'd better check it. Much as he hated to leave what he was doing, the top floors of the building were already pretty much gutted, and with the other blazes extinguished the fire department was working on this one now. Superman flew down the stairwell, noticing that most people were now in the lower half of the building and proceeding more calmly.

The fortieth floor was mostly given over to maintenance and janitorial. He traced one set of beeps over to a far corner of the building. *Just paint cans stacked over here. What could be beeping? Another ignition device? I know this guy uses delays, but why would it make a sound...* And then he moved the paint cans aside, and saw what was behind them.

Just an old, battered suitcase, with a travel alarm clock sitting on top of it, beeping in time with three other alarm clocks somewhere else on this floor. Only why was it *here*, and why was the clock counting backwards...

Lois had managed to snag one of the executives coming out of the building for a few questions. "Did you have any warning?" she was asking.

The man's eyes were a little too wide, but he mostly had it together. "The fire alarms went off upstairs. Everybody reads the paper, we know about the arsons. Never thought it would happen *here*. Security's been beefed up for weeks. Soon as we heard the alarms, we knew it hadn't been enough."

"Any ideas on how the arsonist got in?"

The man shook his head. "Not a clue. Used to be security would let you in if they knew you. Last month or so, you'd better have your badge or you'd be stuck outside waiting for a manager to approve you."

And badges can be stolen, Lois thought, but her train of thought was interrupted by a crash above. Everyone on the street looked up, fearing the worst, and their expressions turned to puzzlement as they saw Superman flying straight up at his top speed, the glass wall he'd flown out of fragmented. The downdraft of his ascent hit them, blowing Lois' hair into her eyes again. *What the hell is he doing?* she wondered, trying to focus her eyes on the rapidly-dwindling dot that was Superman.

So she was looking right at him seconds later when the four suitcase bombs went off. The fireball was visible for miles, but Superman had flown high enough that no buildings were

damaged.

Everyone on the ground who had seen him fly up cried out at this latest explosion. Lois was no exception, in spite of the fact that she knew an ordinary bomb couldn't hurt him. What if that wasn't ordinary? Luthor was behind all of the arsons, she knew it. What if there was kryptonite in those bombs? What if all of this had just been a trap for Superman?

Lois watched the sky, ignoring the tears that burned in the corners of her eyes. *Please, let him be alright...*

The force of the blast knocked him reeling, spinning through the air for a moment. He caught himself quickly, scanning the city below. *No damage. I was high enough, thank God.* Superman rushed back into the building, waving to the crowds to let them know he was all right. All the while he tried not to think about what would've happened if those bombs had gone off while everyone was still evacuating. *Placed near critical support structures. Whoever did this meant to bring the whole building down, and timed it to kill the most fire and rescue workers possible. Who would be sick enough to do something like that?* He was all too sure he knew the answer to that question.

The top floors were still burning, and he hurried to blow them out. The fire department's highest ladders and longest hoses helped, and Superman concentrated on the innermost sections of the building, halting the blaze before it could spread along air ducts and electrical conduits.

He had no idea how long he'd been fighting, tasting smoke in the back of his throat, feeling ash on his skin and in his hair. At last, though, the conflagration was out. This had been the worst of the fires so far, and the most intricately planned. Superman didn't know how many people had been harmed or killed, but the thought made his stomach churn painfully.

One last scan of the building revealed a child hiding under a desk on the sixty-first floor. The smoke hadn't reached her; she had simply panicked at all the alarms and people rushing for the exits, and she had hidden. He worked his way down through the building to her, checking the structural integrity as he did. The fire had damaged it, but not as badly as the arsonist had clearly hoped.

Here she was. "It's safe now," he said gently. A little dark-haired girl who reminded him of Kala peered fearfully out at him, then brightened when she recognized her rescuer.

"Superman!" she cried, and leaped into his arms. "It was so noisy, I was scared."

"It's okay now, sweetheart," he told her as he carried her to a window broken by falling debris. "You just hold on, and I'll get you out of here. Who are your parents?"

The child murmured the names as he flew gently out of the window and drifted to the ground. Her eyes went wide with fascination, staring fearlessly around her as they flew.

Lois barely had time to register that Superman was okay before he headed back into the building. The police, seeing the explosion, were suddenly a lot more concerned with members of the press sneaking inside their lines, and Lois had to dodge several officers' eyes.

Murmuring notes into her recorder, she quickly described the events as she'd seen them; the initial fire high up, the sudden burst of flames from several points in the building, and then the bombs Superman had removed just in time.

She paused then, collecting her thoughts. Everything still pointed to Luthor; he had the resources and the sheer ruthlessness to plan something like this. And it would be just like him to time the final blast so it would kill the first responders. But Luthor never did anything just

for the heck of it. He had to have another purpose behind this, and Lois let her gaze roam as she wondered what that could be.

The sudden sense of something wrong made her stop and suddenly pay attention. A man had gotten inside the police lines and was filming the building with a video camera mounted on a tripod. He seemed to be paying close attention to the fire itself, now confined to mere flickers from the roof, and only occasionally switching to pan his lens over the ambulances and the survivors able to flee on foot. Something about him was just...

*I don't recognize him, Lois thought, looking more closely. True, I don't know **all** the photojournalists in Metropolis, but I've never even seen this guy before. Tall, sandy-haired, clean-shaven, but there's something about the eyes I don't like. And the way he's watching people doesn't seem right. He just looks out of place.*

The man seemed to notice Lois looking, and leaned away from his camera to catch her eyes. When he had her full attention, he gave her a cruel, knowing smile and an ironic little wave.

Lois felt the hairs at the nape of her neck prickle. Intuition told her this man was either the arsonist or someone connected with him, and that meant he was Luthor's crony. She whirled, looking for Superman, ready to yell for him to catch this crook. They could find out exactly where he fit into this macabre puzzle later.

A clatter of metal behind her, and Lois turned back to see the man melt into the crowds. *Dammit*, she swore at herself, moving forward quickly then, sure that he hadn't had adequate time to disappear completely with a crowd this size. *I knew it! I knew that creep was up to something.* Bracing herself for the resistance, Lois pushed herself into the throng in pursuit of the tall man, momentarily forgetting any of the events that had just occurred as she maneuvered her way after him. For an instant, she thought she could see his crew cut hair, her quarry possibly no further than fifteen feet in front of her...

Then the crowd around her surged forward, beginning to cheer. Lois had to move with them or be crushed, and she struggled against the tide, cursing her delicate build. The police were trying to hold them back, the building wasn't entirely stable, but everyone had seen what Lois now saw as she turned around: Superman landing gently, a little girl cradled in his arms. A perfectly unharmed little girl who could've been Kala...

In spite of knowing both twins were in the suburbs with her mother, in spite of having seen the disturbing man only seconds ago, for one instant Lois believed that *was* her daughter, just rescued from Luthor's henchmen. She lunged out of the mob, flashing her press pass at the closest cop, and wound up being one of the first media representatives around Superman despite having been the furthest away. By then, of course, she had seen the little girl's face and knew she wasn't Kala, but there were still plenty of questions to answer.

A pack of journalists surrounded him as he handed the little girl over to the police. He hadn't given the press much of his time since he'd returned, and there was no escaping them now without being completely rude.

Some of the faces were familiar, some were new, and Superman barely had time to catch his breath before a pretty blonde he knew well elbowed her way to the front. "This is Cat Grant, WGBS News, live at the scene of downtown Metropolis' latest fire," she said hastily into her microphone, then held it out to him. "Superman, do you believe this blaze is the work of the serial arsonist?"

Cat's cameraman was behind her, focusing in on Superman's face. "The police will be able

to determine that when they complete their investigation," he replied cautiously. *I do **not** want to do this now, but I can't really escape it, either.*

The questions came thick and fast, cameras pointed his way, microphones and tape recorder pushed toward him. "Superman, were you able to rescue all of the trapped workers?"

"How many bombs were inside the building?"

"Do the police have any leads or any suspects?"

"What's being done to prevent future fires?"

"Any indication of the arsonist's next target?"

"Has anyone discovered a link between the targeted buildings?"

"These fires began after your return to Earth. Is there a connection?"

That last question, its tone almost rude, silenced everyone for a moment. Superman couldn't see the man who had asked it, probably some tabloid 'reporter' with no real journalistic credentials, but suddenly became aware of jostling in the crowd to his right.

The last person he expected to see elbowed her way out in front and thrust a tape recorder in his face. "Lois Lane, Daily Planet," she stated coldly. "Do you believe that your return has caused an increase in high-profile crimes such as this?"

And twenty cameras caught his poleaxed expression.

She'd been furious as she walked up. *I could've gotten that bastard! I could've caught him and gotten us a **real** lead! But nooooo, somebody had to fly down for their photo op!*

But as soon as the harsh words left her mouth, Lois started to feel sick. He was clearly shocked by her tone, and *everyone* around them knew perfectly well she didn't need to introduce herself. *Did I really say that? Jeez, Lane, why not be a complete bitch **on camera!***

Before he could even reply, Lois felt a sharp jab in the middle of her back and heard Toby Raines hiss, "Thanks a lot, Lane! Now I have to print something about you acting catty to your ex. I *try* to be nice to you in spite of the fact that you're the competition, but then you go do something like that."

Superman cleared his throat and looked right into Lois' eyes. "No, Ms. Lane, I don't," he said quietly, but his voice was sterner than it had ever been speaking to her. "Crime has existed since Cain slew Abel. These fires have gotten so much press because of the numbers of lives *saved*. It's the work of our police, our fire department, and our emergency medical teams that's remarkable here. I was able to render them some aid - and it's my honor to do so - but they are always the real heroes." With a nod to the rest of the press, he continued, "By the way, congratulations on your engagement, Ms. Lane. Ladies and gentlemen, if you'll excuse me..."

The moment they stepped back, still muttering over the frosty exchange that had ended the impromptu press conference, he flew up and away. Other reporters sought out police and firemen to interview, but Lois could only thumb the STOP button on her recorder angrily and sigh with frustration.

"That was lovely," Toby said, glaring at her. "Not like I can ignore *that* in favor of a *real* story. Well, since you've gone and forced me to become a gossip columnist, would you like to give me a little background on why you two are squabbling?"

"Shut up," Lois growled at her Daily Star counterpart, and stalked off.

*I can't believe I just did that. I can't believe **he** just did that! 'Congratulations on your engagement' ... Clark, you nasty jealous bugger, I'll get you for that one.*

The Romantic chose that moment to murmur, *And you were worried he didn't still care about you.*

Who said I was worried? the General's Daughter snarled. *Besides, being jealous doesn't prove he cares. Based on the supply room this morning, he's just being possessive of something he no longer owns!*

I do not have time for a mental breakdown! Lois shook her head sharply, silencing both voices. There was one sure way to distract herself from that man and lay one nagging fear to rest. She pulled out her cell phone and speed-dialed 3.

"Lane residence," Ella answered in formal tones.

"Mom, it's me," Lois said, closing her eyes gratefully for this anchor of calm and sanity in her life. "Are the kids okay?"

"Sure, dear, they're playing Connect-Four. And beating me, I should add. Do you want to talk to them?"

Just then, Lois heard Kala yell, "That's cheating!"

Jason immediately hollered back, "Is not!"

"Is too!"

"Is not!"

Lois chuckled in spite of herself. "No, they're fine. I'll let you go before they start World War Three. Love you, Momma."

"Love you too, Lois," Ella said fondly. As she replaced the receiver, Lois heard her say sternly, "What ever happened to good sportsmanship? Let me look up the rules and I'll tell you if it's cheating or not, but there's no reason to yell..."

Dropping the phone back into her purse, Lois sighed with relief and cut down an alley toward her car. For the first time that morning, her thoughts were far from Kal-El.

So she was too surprised to scream when she found herself off the ground and accelerating upward somewhat in excess of two hundred miles an hour.

It's All Coming Back To Me

Kal-El had meant to fly away, seek the solace of the sky. Lois was obviously pissed, still off-kilter from her terrible morning and their ... what do you call an encounter like that, anyway? Clearly, that had left her a little unbalanced. And what had she been doing at the scene of the fire?

Yet the more he reflected on her beautiful hazel eyes gone so cold, her voice so clipped and formal, the angrier he got. The Kents had raised him to suppress anger, to turn the other cheek, to always be the better person and present a mild face to the world. But Lois had been alternately ignoring him and lashing out. This final outburst, *in public*, was the last straw. He simply couldn't take any more. Superman halted and turned in the air, scanning for her.

Perfect. Lois was alone, walking down an alley. He dove faster than the human eye could follow, catching her around the waist and soaring up through the clouds. *Let's see you ignore me now, Lois.*

By the time she drew breath to scream, they were far out of earshot of anyone below. Lois had to settle for sinking her fingernails deep into the sleeves of his uniform and hissing, "Let me go!"

Kal-El had flown up behind her and wrapped one arm around her as he accelerated. He didn't want to be facing her at the moment, didn't want to be reminded of all their romantic flights. "Are you sure you want me to let you go, Lois?"

"Of course I'm sure! Put me down *right now!*"

"If you insist," he said, "but it's a long drop." He turned his arm a fraction of a degree, not enough to let go but enough to make his point.

The sudden clutch of her hands on his arm told him she realized she was at a disadvantage, for once. But not defeated. "So I remember," she spat. "Did you really drop me by accident that time, or was it just an excuse to be cute?"

"It really was an accident, Lois," he retorted. "I'm not anywhere near as manipulative as you think." He slowed, rising to stand on the air, and adjusted his grip to hold her around the waist, facing him.

Lois stiffened, hating the familiarity of his touch, and braced her hands against his forearms. *If you think I'm gonna wrap my arms around your neck like some lovestruck teenager, you've got another think coming.* "So what do you want? I expect you didn't bring me up here for nothing. Seems like every time we fly there's something you want."

He ignored the implication. "Some answers," he shot back. "In a venue where you can't dodge the questions."

"Answers? From me? Hmm, looks to me like you're the only one who *remembers* all the questions!"

"And that's the first question. What exactly do you remember, Lois?"

Her eyes narrowed with fury, pure spite in her voice. "I remembered everything after you'd left. *Everything.*"

"Are you sure?"

"I remember everything from using my gun to trick you into admitting who you really are, to hearing your father tell you that yours is a higher destiny," she spat. "And everything after that, Kal-El. I remember twice that night and once the next morning. I remember you shivering with shock and desire; I remember how dark my hair looked against your thigh. And I remember how quickly it was all over after you got your ass kicked in that diner and found out about the Zod Squad."

He flinched, blushing furiously; six years ago, her blunt tone and choice of reminders would've made him drop the subject right there. But Kal-El had been gone six years, had seen his birth planet fractured and poisoned by radiation. He had returned to his adopted world, the only home he'd ever known, and found it changed almost beyond recognition in his absence. And he had discovered the love of his life engaged to another man, raising some stranger's children, and generally going on without him. All of that might have been enough to break him, but for the hope that she might still love him. That they might be able to salvage something of their former closeness.

This morning, that unexpected kiss had fueled his hope, made it burn high enough that not even her snide remarks at the scene of the fire could dampen it entirely. Kal-El was beginning to see the pattern: the more Lois felt for him, the more his presence reminded her of their past, the more she tried to drive him away, to deny or degrade everything that had been between them.

But Lois wasn't giving him time to process all of that. "I also remember you refusing to talk about anything that was happening. You barely said ten words to me that night while I washed the blood off your face. 'I have to go back, I have to try something,' that was all. And then when I finally went to bed without you, figuring we'd make our plans in the morning, you snuck out on me. Snuck out the window like a little boy who'd been grounded, and probably *walked* all the way back to the Fortress! I was so worried I called in every favor Daddy's friends owed me and had the military looking for you out there!"

"Lois," he began, but she overran him. That little habit of hers was getting really annoying.

"You couldn't even be bothered to say goodbye - seems like that's a habit with you - and you damn sure couldn't let me try to help you. Never mind that I've got military and police contacts, never mind that I could, say, walk up to the three of them with a hunk of kryptonite. No, you're Superman, you had to do it all by yourself, go back on your knees to your father and tell him he was right and beg him for your powers back. I had no idea what happened or what you were doing until you showed up in Metropolis the next time. When I saw you again I was too glad you were alive to cuss you out like I wanted to!"

"Too bad that didn't work the second time," he told her.

When Lana left the fashion department, she met Richard in the elevator as he was making his way to lunch after a stop-off at the proofreading department. They wound up talking easily, and he decided to walk Lana to the subway terminal. *I can definitely see why Clark had a crush on her*, he thought.

In the middle of animated conversation, they passed a store displaying a dozen television sets. The live coverage of the fire was on. Drawn in, they watched it raptly, unable to look away from the scene of destruction so narrowly averted.

And then the press mobbed Superman, and Richard saw Lois' face in the crowd of reporters. His heart leaped into his throat at the thought of her being there, so close to danger, and then he recognized the look on her face.

"Oh, no," he said, seconds before his fiancée snapped out frostily, "*Lois Lane, Daily Planet. Do you believe that your return has caused an increase in high-profile crimes such as this?*"

He was watching when Superman's eyes narrowed briefly, his jaw tightening. "*Congratulations on your engagement, Ms. Lane,*" and Richard winced. *Oh, crap. I really did*

steal Superman's girlfriend.

"Oh, dear," Lana murmured, biting in her lip in sympathy. She felt for everyone at that moment - Superman, who hardly deserved such an underhanded attack; Lois, whose day was only getting worse from the sounds of it; and the kind, wonderful man beside her, who had apparently just had his worst suspicions about his fiancée's former love life confirmed.

But Richard quickly went from pained to pissed. *She has a lot of explaining to do. And I'm not going to be brushed off anymore.*

Lana touched his wrist lightly. "She's had a really awful day, Richard. I'm sure she didn't mean to be so..."

"Bitchy?" Richard finished.

"I was going to say forceful," Lana corrected gently.

"I don't want to talk about it," he replied, and changed the subject. "Got time for a late lunch?"

The redhead hesitated for a minute. He was such a nice guy, and she was feeling a bit peckish ... but he was engaged. "I'm sorry, Richard, if I don't get down there my assistant will faint from anxiety. But it's a very kind offer."

Richard smiled and glanced away, wondering what the heck he had been thinking. "All right, then, let's get you to the subway."

They walked the rest of the way in comparative silence. When they reached the subway station, Richard stopped and said, "Feel free to drop by the Planet anytime you've got news for Agi, though."

"Oh, I will," Lana said, smiling up at him. "Take care of yourself."

"You too," Richard said. For a long moment they just looked at each other, and then she took a step back and turned away.

He watched her leave, telling himself it was her safety that concerned him. As he headed back to the office, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Lois. She wasn't answering, but he left a message and abruptly decided to stop somewhere and have a sandwich or something. *This issue with Lois has waited for three years, it can wait a little longer.*

Kal-El wasn't finished saying what needed to be said. "I'm going to assume, based on this morning, that on some level you *are* glad I survived and returned from Krypton."

Lois clenched her teeth so hard her jaw ached, forcing herself not to slap him. It would only hurt her hand and possibly distract him enough to make him drop her. "That's completely unfair," she said, grinding the words out.

"Like everything you've been saying to me hasn't been just as unfair," he retorted. "Especially since most of the time you never give me a chance to explain. Can you stop yelling long enough for us to actually *talk* about what happened?"

"Talk about what happened when? Six years ago or two months ago? It's too late on both, Kal-El. All of that is over and done with."

"Oh, really?" he asked. "If that's true, why are you so vicious to me? Lois, can you really look me in the eyes and say you don't love me at all?"

Any moment now, one of her teeth would shatter from the pressure. "That doesn't matter anymore - I'm engaged with two children. It's been a *long* time."

"And that's another thing," he said. "You say you were so angry at me for leaving, you claim to have been hurt so badly, but barely a month after I'm gone you get pregnant? Care to explain that, Lois?"

She froze at that, the expression in her eyes incredulous even as the nausea in her stomach roiled. For a rash moment, she considered calling him on his own blindness and lack of faith. How could he look at them and not see it? Not see the rich blue of Jason's eyes and know them for his own? The way both of the twins smiled just like him, only Jason's was usually shy, more like Clark's. And Kala's hair had the slightly blue tint from his darker shade. If he could see right through her, than why the hell couldn't he see that?

Holding back the ticking time bomb that rose to her lips, Lois glared at him scornfully. "What did you expect me to do? Pine away for you like a dithering twit? Well, you should be thrilled, in that case. I spent over a month looking for you, practically sleeping by the Associated Press ticker with CNN in the background."

"And then you just jumped into bed with first man who looked interesting? What? Tell me what was going through your mind, Lois. Had you remembered by then? Were you doing it to get back at me? Or did it just seem like a good idea at the time?"

Again she bristled. That he'd think that of her so easily tore something inside her. How could he know so much but so little? Unable to help it, she was feeling the sting of his words deeper than he'd ever know. Struggling to keep the gut-shot feeling off her face, she struck out blindly. "What did it matter to you? You ended it, you disappeared. You told me that *'Someday, you'll...'* I believe the end of that was supposed to be *'find someone,'* wasn't it? You cloaked it all as if it never existed. And you have the gall to stand there painting me as a fallen woman? What right do you have to judge me? What the hell did you care? You made your big mistake and you cleaned it up. End of story. 'Thanks for the fling; the sex was great.'" Unaware of it, the fire in her eyes was being outshined by the spark of hurt glowing like a live coal. "Regardless of what you think me capable of, Richard isn't that kind of man. Check your facts, *Mr. Kent.*"

"We're not talking about Richard here, Lois," he reminded her. "I know he isn't the twins' father, so you don't have to try to lie to me. He didn't even meet you until you came back to Metropolis from Paris. Yes, he and I talked about you. He loves you, Lois, but the he doesn't know you. And the longer this goes on, the more he realizes just how much he missed about you."

Before Lois could reply to that, he continued, "It wasn't a fling, Lois. It mattered a lot to me, in fact. More than it seems to have mattered to you. I hate to remind you, but you were the first. And the only. Once I looked into your eyes on that flight after the interview, well, there's never really been another woman who could compare."

Now she couldn't hold back her emotions. He had hit her too many times where she lived, had punched her directly in the weak spot of her fears. How could he have known her so well and not at all? It took all she had in her not to attempt to struggle free of him, heedless of the fall. "Do you think that makes it any better, Kal-El? Is that supposed to be some kind of comfort? Do you think that would have made any difference then, when I was near a nervous breakdown wondering what had happened to you? When I was chain-smoking at a computer all night while I tried to piece together your trail? And when I remembered, do you think that didn't feel like lemon in the wound? Didn't make me feel like a fool?"

She looked away from him forcefully now. It was too much of everything. Too much hurt, too much anger, too much time passed. "And you're right. I knew Kala and Jason's father about as well as I know the man before me. Is that what you wanted to hear? I never realized that until this moment. Thank you for making me aware of that."

He flinched at that. "You knew me once, Lois. You knew better than anyone else on

earth. Yes, I made a lot of mistakes back then. The biggest one was not talking to you about *anything* I was going to do before I did it. You're right, I screwed up royally. And then the way you were that morning at work - I've never been able to stand seeing you hurt. I only wanted to make things better, Lois. It was fine for my heart to break, for me to bear the loss alone, but I didn't want you to have to remember all of that. I know taking the memories was a mistake *now*, but back then it seemed like the best way to spare you pain. Remember, that was the first time I ever told anyone about my past, the first serious relationship I ever had, the first time I ever defied Jor-El, the first time I ever failed the world in my mission, and the first time I broke up with a woman I loved, *all in the same two days!* Can you blame me for not thinking straight?"

Her brows rose at that, her hair whipping at suddenness of her head turning. Lois could only look at him in amazement, unable to believe what she was hearing. He was talking as if he had been a teenage boy caught by his father in the backseat with a girl after the senior prom. *Had* he even stopped to consider what his choices would do to her? That she had felt for him more than any other man she had ever met? Did he really just think that that had just been a typical situation of her to be placed in? Not to mention, and she was damned if she would, the little surprises she had had growing inside her when he left. Unable to help herself, she could only utter a bitter, broken laugh. "Take me back. Back to Metropolis. This was a mistake; it was all one big mistake."

"No, you're misunderstanding me," Kal-El said urgently. "Loving you was never a mistake. The decisions I made - including going back to Krypton - were what ruined everything. Lois, Jor-El was wrong. He told me I had to choose between you and all humanity, but I don't think that's true anymore. He was trying to make me into some kind of intellectual robot, free of all attachments, when even he had a loving marriage. He wanted me to be some kind of superhuman savior, but that's not what I am."

What she would have given to have heard those words while she carried the twins, how it hurt now to hear them and know better in spite of the thrill that ran through her as he admitted it. Even now, knowing it was no more in reach than a dead echo, it felt like sunshine pouring through her just to hear it. She knew better, even as a voice deep inside her argued loudly to the opposite. He had made his choice before, only to change it again. The man she had loved ... *did love* ... had never belonged to her. Never would, despite what he was saying now. It didn't matter, though. They had had their chance then, only to have it fall apart.

Softly now, she whispered, looking up at him, "The world may need a savior, from time to time, but I don't. I loved you, Kal-El, more than anyone else I had ever laid eyes on. But that was six years ago. There's nothing that we can change, not where we are or the people we've become. You don't even know me anymore, if you ever did. You could never have me over your duty. You can't even know for sure what you felt for me *was* love. Let me go; it's the only thing we can do. Save both of us the heartache."

He sighed; some things could not be argued about. At what point did a suitor become a stalker? How could he pursue her when she finally told him, calmly and sincerely, to leave her alone? "If it's really what you want, Lois, I will. But I'll always love you, and I'll always wish things had been different. And I'll never forget what you did for me - keeping my secret in spite of everything I did to you."

The grief and sorrow in his eyes nearly killed her. Once again, the feeling of déjà vu was strong enough to send her reeling. *Don't ever forget*, a ghost of her own voice whispered, chilling her as she fought tears. It was her this time, her being the voice of reason, where it had

been him the last. Yet it felt as if something was dying inside her, something impossible to close off. Rash words leapt to the tip of her tongue - *I still love you, and I love our children, too* - but she choked them back.

Even if he loves me, he clearly can't even imagine the possibility of the twins being his. There's no telling how he'd react to that news, but one thing's for certain: whether he considers them a mistake or the newest heirs to dead Krypton's legacy, he'll want to take them from me. Jor-El would demand no less, whether he would admit it or not. Kala's hearing is sharper than it should be, and Jason breaks a lot of toys that are supposed to be indestructible. If those are powers coming in, it's yet another reason for him to raise them himself. And I don't care how good his logic is, no one will take the twins from me.

For a moment neither of them could meet each other's eyes, and then he spoke again. "But if you ever need me... Lois, if you ever change your mind, if you want to see if maybe we could make this work again... I'm always around. I always will be. No matter what happens, if you need me, just call me. I'll be there."

Now, in spite of her struggle to hide it, the tears came silently without her permission. The venom drained from the wound, the anguish running through her entire body was clear. Only then, in that instant, was it clear to him just how much she had been bottling up. She looked so small and fragile now, nothing like the tornado that had ascended with him. Her voice was broken and almost tender when she replied, "There's no point, regardless of how anyone feels, Kal-El. We know how it ends. At least, we both do now." Lois looked up at him then, those unique hazel eyes glimmering, and doing so was an almost Herculean effort. "You're theirs now. The whole world. What's the point in selfish jealousy when you have to contend with that, especially when I have so much waiting for me at home? Be good to them, Kal-El, because they trust you again. Just know that they'll never love you the same way I did."

*Lois, tell him, dammit! What's wrong with you? The two of you could make it right this time. He loves you and you love him! No more of this 'I hate him' crap; it's the biggest damn lie you've ever told yourself. You love him, here, now, **this minute**. Say it, tell him the truth. All of it!* The Romantic flew into a rage then, knowing that the moment had come and their chance was slipping away. *Just tell him!*

No! The General's Daughter was louder. *Do you **really** want to go through all of that again? To think you can have him only to lose him? He loves you, he wants to be with you - none of that's new. Sooner or later, the world and the mission will win. He can't be who he is and not let that happen. Can you stand to have your heart broken all over again?*

Lois already knew the answer to that. Just this moment, the closure they'd never really gotten six years ago, was killing her. To have him again, to have the bliss of waking beside him, to nuzzle up to him in the hazy predawn hours and know he was hers, and then to lose it all once again - that would destroy her.

She saw the way he flinched when she mentioned what she had waiting at home, saw the keen agony in his eyes. And given the way this entire evening had gone, she really should've expected his next words. "Just ... don't ever forget, Lois," he said sadly.

No words existed to really reply to that, but Lois tried to find them, anyway. After a moment, she simply leaned toward him as he bent his head to hers. In the instant before their lips met, Lois whispered, "No more amnesia, not this time," even as a sad voice in her mind murmured, *Wouldn't it be better to forget it all and start again?*

He whispered, "Never again," and kissed her softly. For those few seconds while they were in each other's arms again, their feelings for each other were even more plain than they

had been during that blaze of passion earlier. This was the love they had both found unexpectedly, had cherished and had mourned. It should have been a kiss goodbye, but it didn't feel quite so final. More like the healing of old wounds.

Lois sighed and rested her cheek on his chest, letting him kiss her hair. "I'm sorry ... for how nasty I've been to you... I guess I blew that part of the promise, huh?"

"Shh, Lois," he told her, drifting gently down through the clouds. "You were hurt. I understand."

She pulled away a little, looking down to avoid meeting his eyes. There below them was the Daily Planet globe, and Lois was a little relieved to see that reminder of her sane life - her *real* life, she told herself firmly. He saw it too, and said quietly, "I think I'm going to take the rest of the day off."

"Go ahead," she replied more casually than she felt. Even if the war in her heart might not show on Lois' face, there were no words to accurately describe her feelings at the moment. "I need to write up the fire ... and some other stuff..."

Superman just nodded and set her down. They looked at each other another long moment, each seeing something beautiful once theirs and now unattainable, and then he stepped away. "Goodbye, Lois."

"Goodbye," she whispered, and watched him rise up into the heavens again. In her mind, she again heard her own voice echo back over the years as he disappeared from her sight. *Well, there he goes, kid. Up, up, and away.*

Lois drifted into her office like her own wandering ghost, speaking to no one and seeming not to see them, either. She sat down in front of her computer and stared at it for a few moments, then leaned forward and pressed the heels of her hands against her brow. So many thoughts crowded in her mind, so many emotions threatening to burst her heart, all she could really think was, *Now I understand how he felt all those years ago. I hate being the voice of reason.*

"I love you," she whispered brokenly, the words she'd never dared to say out loud, knowing that he wouldn't hear her unless he tried. Knowing right then that he was trying to think of anything but her. "Oh, dear God help me, I'm still in love with you."

And just as the first tears began to spill, her office door banged open.

"Dammit, Lois, where the hell have you ... been..." Perry stopped in mid-sentence as she looked up at him, her face so wounded and vulnerable. Everything he'd meant to say - to yell, really - vanished at that shattered look. "My God, Lois, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

A short, sardonic laugh. "No," Lois said, dashing the tears from her eyes with impatient gestures. "What do you want, Perry?"

He just stared at her. "Tell me what happened first."

Not in a million years. "I went to the fire scene. I ... I guess it bothered me more than I thought..."

"I guess so," he replied, "considering that you snapped at Superman in front of a TV camera and then mysteriously disappeared somewhere between that little press conference and your car. Which, by the way, is still parked on a sidewalk downtown, being roped off as a potential crime scene. Do you have any idea how many people are looking for you right now?"

"Huh? But Chief, why?"

A little annoyance crept back into his voice. "You vanish into thin air - that girl from the Star, Raines, said she saw you walk into an alley and never come out. Your car's sitting there,

you aren't answering your phone, nobody knows where you are, and we all know Luthor's out there somewhere. And then you turn up here!"

It dawned on her then, and she spoke before thinking. "Oh, shit, he brought me back here! I didn't even think about the car..." *My Audi is still illegally parked downtown, and the cops are treating it as a crime scene since I vanished... Why the hell didn't I remember to go back to the car?*

"He?" Perry asked. "Superman, I presume?"

Lois closed her eyes. "Yes, Chief, he decided we needed to talk after the little incident there."

"Good. And since he didn't drop you down a ravine, I assume you two are going to be civil to each other from now on?"

Lois shot him an evil look. "Yes, Perry, you're going to get your bloody exclusives back! Now excuse me, I have a car to fetch." *And a heart to glue back together... and a brain to find before I do something else stupid...*

"Don't worry about it," the editor told her gruffly. "I called Sawyer as soon as I saw you. She's bringing the car here. But if I were you, I'd turn on your cell phone and check your messages. That news feed was live."

"Oh, God," she groaned.

"Yeah, don't turn on your TV tonight. I'm sure they'll show it again," he said. "Too bad Richard's probably already seen it, wherever the hell he is."

Lois winced. "Perry..."

"Have you even told him yet?"

"Told him what?"

Perry crossed his arms and glared at her. "About you and Superman."

"What about..."

"Stuff it, Lane. The whole damn city just got a live definition of Woman Scorned. Have you even told my nephew - your fiancé - about your ex?"

Lois sighed disgustedly. "I think he suspects."

"Good. He'd be a damn fool not to, and I'd hate to think he was a disgrace to the White name." On that note, Perry left her alone.

Bracing herself, Lois powered up her phone. *You have ... twenty ... three ... new messages*, the pleasant recorded voice told her, and Lois groaned. *First message...*

Glass Houses

The cell phone buzzed for a second, then played the first recorded message. "Lois, it's Richard. I saw the news. We need to talk." There was an abrupt click as he hung up the phone, and Lois pinched the bridge of her nose, wondering if this was what a migraine felt like.

Next message...

"Miss Lane, this is Jimmy. I think the Chief's really mad at you - he's turning red and yelling something about you and the news? Call me before you come back to the office and I'll let you know if the coast is clear." Even as he whispered, she could hear Perry bellowing in the background.

Next message...

"Lois, this is your mother. I hope you realize you've just traumatized your twins. They were watching TV, and they saw all of that. Kala's in her room claiming that there's nobody named Kala home right now, and Jason's in tears because he says you said you and Superman were friends and now you're being mean. Call me."

Next message...

"Hey, Lane, this is Toby. Um, where the heck did you go? I saw you walk down that alley a minute ago, but I lost you after that. I was hoping for a sound bite that won't make you look like a total bitch. C'mon, help me out here?"

Next message...

"Lois, you'd better start answering this goddamn phone when I call you! Oh, and just so you know, I know Olsen called you. Don't bother calling him to find out if I'm not pissed anymore, if you wait for that you won't come in 'til February. Bring your butt back to the office before you say something else snarky on live television!"

Next message...

"Toby again. You're not at your car and nobody else has seen you. We all know you keep the phone on for the twins - why aren't you answering? You're starting to scare me, Lane. Call me as soon as you get this." A hang-up call followed that one, and then Perry again.

Next message...

"Now I'm mad 'til at least June! Why the hell is that broad from the Daily Star calling here to ask where you are? And who gave her your office number? Where are you, anyway?"

Next message...

"Honey, where are you? Uncle Perry called to ask if I'd heard from you. You left the car parked downtown and no one's seen you since the fire scene. Call and let me know you're all right."

Next message...

An annoyed sigh and a click as the caller hung up. The next two calls were hang-ups as well.

Next message...

"Lane, Sawyer. Toby's starting to freak out. Apparently you walked into an alley and disappeared? Please tell me you're just being cussed out - and rightfully so - by your ex. If you were kidnapped out from under all our noses... You'd better be off with Big Blue."

Next message...

"Lois, *where are you?* Your fiancé and your boss have both called me. I'm starting to get really worried. Not to mention the twins are still upset. Please just call and say you're okay."

Lois put her head in her hands and sighed heavily. *Just great. I managed to scare or piss off everyone I know in one twenty-minute period. Fabulous.* And still the phone continued to

play her messages, which became more and more shrill.

Superman took to the sky, for the solace and silence of the highest reaches, where the atmosphere was thin and the never-ending roar of humanity was easier to ignore. Superman rose higher and faster, trying to escape the pain of loss and the worse pain of knowing that she did still love him. That last kiss ... so much unspoken, but so very clear. And after he'd flown away, he'd heard her voice whispering. *What can I possibly do now? I love her, she loves me ... but that's not enough.*

Clark flew halfway across the globe, stopping in Indonesia to pull an overcrowded bus off the edge of a bridge. That finished, he hovered in the stratosphere, trying to collect his scattered thoughts.

*At least we've cleared the air a little bit between us. Maybe we can be civil to each other from now on... Not that it helps the fact that I'm still in love with her, and have no right to be. She **is** engaged to Richard. Someone I respect and admire. A man who's spent the last three years taking care of her and her twins. No matter what happens, it isn't fair to him.*

I need some perspective on this. I need to talk to someone I can trust. I need someone who can decode the feminine mind-set.

I need Ma.

Lois stared at her cell phone as the final message played. "Lane, this is Maggie again. Your boss called me. I'm bringing your car over to the Planet garage to keep you from getting a parking ticket. I don't know *why*, I ought to let them tow the damn thing. Next time you turn your cell phone off I'm gonna cram it up your nose, you hear me? I ought to write you a citation for disturbing the peace just for the amount of panic you've caused today." She paused, and Lois heard some faint metallic noises followed by a pop. "Damn German cars are a bitch to break into. You better hope I can hotwire this thing or I really will let them tow it."

Shit. Lois' forehead smacked into her palm again. *I don't believe this! A cop is breaking into my car. A lieutenant, at that. Good God.*

"This day is shot," Lois muttered aloud. She erased all of the messages and changed her outgoing greeting to say, "This is Lois, I'm alive, I'm fine, you can stop calling. Leave a message of it's important." Then she went to Perry's office and told him, "Chief, I give up. I'm going to go get my sick kids and write this one up from home, okay? I'll come in earlier than usual and might even sit in on a meeting with you to make up for it."

He glared for a moment, but the mention of the twins had a predictable effect. And there was the fact that Lois *never* asked to leave early. *Ever.* It had been a helluva day for her. "Fine. But if you're late, you're toast. Email it to me and the proofreading department by nine."

"Yes, oh, benevolent dictator," she snarked tiredly, and left. Perry just watched her go, shaking his head.

Richard gave up staring at his plate. The baked potato was too salty, the steak was too tough, the green beans were too bland ... and none of it was the restaurant's fault. *I've been sleeping with Superman's ex-girlfriend. Well, up until recently, anyway. Her insomniac hours on the computer pretty much ended our love life. Talk about an intolerable situation.*

*And that's not to mention Kent. I don't believe Lois for an instant. **Something's** going on there. From the way people have been talking since he got back, it was always common knowledge that he had a crush on her. God, using the word 'crush' to describe the feelings of*

a man over the age of nineteen!

*But why Kent? Lois likes control. I wonder how **much** she likes it? Enough to string along some guy too nice to call her a tease?*

His conscious stung him. I'm being spiteful because I'm pissed. Lois isn't really like that. No, it's more likely that she's seen through the slightly nerdy exterior as well as I have. And that she saw through it a long time ago. If they were more than friends, that explains all of her recent behavior towards him - and it also explains the first stamp I glimpsed in his passport book. Got to get a better look, but it was France, and the year looked about right.

*You know, for a while there I actually thought that Clark and Superman might be the same person. They returned to Metropolis around the same time, they were both probably involved with Lois, they're about the same height and weight and coloring... But I've seen video of Superman in action, and I just spent two weeks with Clark. There's no way - nobody's **that** good an actor. Besides, if they really were the same person, I think Lois would know. And if she knew, as mad as she's been at both of them, she'd have won the Pulitzer for exposing the secret.*

It's a ridiculous image, too. I mean, what does he do with the uniform? Tuck the cape into the back of his pants? Carry it around and change clothes while he flies? Some satellite would've picked that up by now. No, there's no way Clark could be Superman, or vice versa.

In the middle of that train of thought, Richard realized that his steak had gotten cold. He decided to cut his losses, pay for the disappointing meal, and go look up the two people who were always glad to see him.

To hell with work. What's the point of being assistant editor and the editor-in-chief's nephew if you can't blow off the occasional afternoon?

Lois' phone rang again as she left the bullpen, and she answered it while suppressing another dismayed groan. "Lane."

"Where are you, Lois?" Maggie said.

"Leaving the office."

"Great. Your car's on the third level, by the elevators. You can drive me back to my patrol car."

Lois sighed. "Please tell me you didn't screw anything up on my car when you broke into it."

"Oh, no. I'm sure that scratch will come right out, and you can tuck the wires back up under the dash real easy."

"Maggie!" Lois yelped. "Do you have any idea how much it costs to take that car to the dealer?"

"Relax, your 'baby' is fine," the lieutenant sighed. "You're just lucky you aren't paying to get it out of impound, you know that."

Lois was at the elevators then, and knew from experience she'd get no signal inside.

"Yeah, well, that's why I put up with sarcastic friends like you, Sawyer."

"Smartass reporter."

"Jaded cop."

The elevator doors dinged open, and Lois said, "See you in five," and closed her phone as she stepped in. When she got down to the garage, Maggie was leaning against the Audi and watching Lois critically. As the reporter fished her keys out of her purse, the lieutenant's gaze never left her. "If you're going to say something to me, Sawyer, please just say it."

Her only answer was a look from those ice-blue cop eyes, so Lois let herself into her own car with an annoyed sigh. Thankfully, she couldn't find any evidence of the way Maggie had broken in and hotwired it. Sawyer dropped into the passenger seat as soon as Lois unlocked it and started buckling her seatbelt.

Inside the car, the faint scent of soot on Maggie's uniform got stronger, and Lois rolled her window down a few inches. She wasn't even aware of what she did next until Maggie said pointedly, "I thought you quit."

Lois looked at the cigarette in her hand. It was that automatic, after all this time: get in, buckle up, roll window down, light cigarette. She'd already taken a drag without tasting it as she put the car in gear and backed out of the parking spot.

What the hell, she thought, and drew the smoke deep into her lungs. "After this day, Maggie, I deserve one."

"Really? You were a bit of an ass, but I don't think you deserve lung cancer for it," Sawyer said.

Lois simply rolled her eyes and raised her middle finger with an elegant flip of her wrist, and then drove out of the garage.

After a few minutes, Maggie tried again. "So, what happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, hell, Lois, the way you're acting, how on earth would I guess that?" Maggie replied. "The point is, *I* want to talk about it. Toby's going nuts worrying about you."

"Fine! So talk."

"You're usually better at controlling your temper than you were today," Maggie began. "I'm not saying you don't have a right to be pissed at the guy, just that it's unlike you to cut into someone in front of cameras. Now, I know Luthor hasn't done anything since he threatened you, but I also know that you haven't relaxed in the slightest. So maybe some of that can be blamed on you being on edge continuously for two months."

"Yeah," Lois said, navigating Metropolis' busy streets. "All wound up and no one to shoot."

"Be damn sure it's really justifiable homicide before you plug him," Maggie warned. "I guess I'd just like to think that, if something *else* was going on, you'd tell me."

The police driving course. All those hours at the firing range. A few off-the-record whispered conversations. More than a few drinks in out-of-the-way bars, talking about life and love and crime and politics. That wild dash home from the Pulitzers, and a few days later, the two boxes of Silvertip Hollowpoint bullets that Maggie had dropped off at the house. The lieutenant didn't have to mention any of those things, because they both knew about them. And she didn't have to say, *Don't you think you owe me the truth?* Both of them knew that, too.

What can I say? "Maggie, this isn't easy."

"I know."

Lois sighed. "Look, he wanted to talk to me. Is it my fault he decided to snatch me up out of alley and have that conversation a mile up? If it's any comfort, I was pretty damn scared, too."

Maggie nodded. "And did you two get certain things cleared up?"

"What are you talking about?"

The lieutenant sighed and ran her fingers through her short blonde hair. "I'm not used to doing interrogations outside the precinct, Lois. Did you and Superman get everything

straightened out between you, or are you going to publicly snap at each other again?"

Everything but the tiny little fact that I had his kids, Lois retorted in her mind. "Yes, Mags, we argued and yelled and then made up. Are you happy?"

"Ecstatic. Who said you could call me Mags?"

Now *that* was more like their normal ribbing. "It's a free country."

"Fine ... Joanne."

"Do you want to live to see your squad car again, Sawyer?"

Superman flew past the farm after rescuing some miners from a cave-in, and was unsurprised to see that Ma was out. *She and Ben are probably out playing bingo, or fishing, or watching a movie. For all I know, they could be competing in the International Scrabble Championships.* He shook his head slightly, still amazed that his mother had a more active social life than he did.

Then another thought occurred to him. *Speaking of a social life, I've been meaning to have dinner at Ron's house this week. Lucy will kill me if I put it off. I really need to talk about today ... but Lois' little sister would be an even better source of information, if I can figure out how to word the questions just right.*

Now that sounded like a plan... All he had to do now was call them, make sure they would be home, and find some way to fill the hours until dinnertime.

He had just taken his cell phone out of the pocket in his cape when he heard sirens, and lots of them, in Dallas. *As if finding something to do would be a problem...*

After dropping Maggie off, Lois headed out to her mother's. All she wanted was to see the twins, to hug them and hold them and forget her confrontation with their father earlier. Her mother had called twice, gotten the new message both times, and hung up without leaving one of her own. Lois hated not calling her, but preferred to wait and talk to her in person. With the twins around to moderate the conversation, of course.

When she pulled up to the house, though, Ella came outside right away. Lois considered that a bad sign and hurried out of the car, trying to smile naturally. "Mom! I figured I'd get the twins early..."

"You're still too late," her mother said crisply. "Richard was here twenty minutes ago to pick them up. If you'd answer your phone once in a while people could tell you these things."

The tone instantly set Lois back twenty years, and she blushed furiously. "Momma..."

"Lois Joanne Lane, I swear you never change. You look just the same way you did when you were twelve and pretended not to hear me call you for dinner." Ella sighed, folding her arms. "Get your butt in the house so we can talk."

The fearless reporter slunk into her childhood home just like that little girl who had tried selective deafness to avoid eating asparagus. Once inside, Ella went right back to her cup of tea, glaring at Lois in utter silence. And wasn't that another great mom trick, letting you anticipate just how awful a talking-to you were about to get. Lois had done the same with the twins when they misbehaved. Ella sighed heavily, and Lois winced because she *knew* what was next.

"Lois, I'm disappointed in you."

"Momma..."

"Hush and listen," Ella said sternly. "You let your mouth run away with you again, only this time it was on live television. Did you ever even *think* about what you were saying or who

was going to hear it?"

Lois bit her lip. *It's not like I blurted out his secret identity or anything. Which I could have done, except I'm too honorable.* Another voice added, *And still in love with him.*

Ella wasn't finished. "Not to mention, the man *saved your life* two months ago. Have you shown even a speck of gratitude? I didn't think so. You've been perfectly nasty to him ever since that interview!"

Oh, the things you don't know, Lois thought, staring at her toes. *I'd say this morning counts as very nice indeed. But I can't give away his secret, not even to Mom.*

"I dearly hope that for once in his life he stopped being such a gentleman and told you *exactly* what he thought of your comments! That *was* him who snatched you up."

"Yes, mother, we had the apocalyptic argument we've been waiting six years to have," Lois snapped, lifting her angry hazel eyes to meet Ella's. "You can stop treating me like a child, I've heard about it from him, the police, and my boss today, and after this morning I've had enough."

"If you don't want to be treated like a child, then stop acting like one," Ella replied, then swiftly continued, "At least you two finally talked. How did he react to the news, then?"

Lois took a deep breath, glancing away again, and Ella erupted.

"Lois! You had a perfect opportunity to tell the man *why* you're so damned angry with him, and you wasted it? How long are you going to wait before you tell him he's their father?"

"I'm not!" Lois shouted. "Mother, I am not telling him! After this today, we're at least speaking to each other again, but if I told him that... God only knows what he'll do. I'll kill him myself before I let him take the twins!"

"Please, Lois! That's the overprotective first-time mom speaking. I can't imagine him..."

"You know nothing *about* him!" Lois spat. "All you know is 'Superman,' the public persona. There's a *lot* about him that would shock you."

"Well, my daughter hasn't talked about any of her boyfriends since the one in high school with the earring. Except the shrink."

"You love bringing that up, don't you, Momma?"

Ella just grinned. "I knew Elliot was doomed when he kept trying to analyze you. You're not the kind of woman who enjoys having her flaws pointed out."

"Thank your husband for that."

"Stop trying to lead me off topic, Lois. What exactly about Superman would shock your poor, sheltered old mother?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "Well, for starters, in spite of his world reputation, those twins weren't exactly a virgin birth."

Ella sighed. "Child, there's nothing you did with him - nothing you've done with any man - that I didn't do before you. I'll have you know I'm no stranger to mad, passionate love affairs."

The reporter seemed taken aback. "There was someone before Daddy?"

That brought a torrent of laughter. "Oh, my dear Lois. I'm talking about *Sam*. Why do you think we stayed together all those years, the way we fought about you? Not that I didn't think about leaving him a time or two."

Lois blinked in surprise at that revelation; she'd always assumed her parents stayed together out of a sense of duty. Love had never entered the equation in her mind. Before she could fully process the new information, Ella was forging onward. "So tell me why you think Superman would try to take the twins away from you. I just have a hard time imagining you falling in love with someone that callous."

Sighing, Lois tried to explain. "It's not really him, Momma. It's his father. The computer-controlled hologram *recording* of his father. That night, when we ... his father made him give up his powers to be with me. Made him think he was giving them up *forever*. He was very clear on what he thought about his son, his almighty Kryptonian heir, choosing his selfish desire for a human over the needs of the whole planet." This last sentence was punctuated by a sarcastic tone and eyes rolling heavenward.

Ella scowled. "And you think his father would..."

"According to *him*, it was a mistake," Lois snapped. The mere mention of Jor-El was enough to make her furious all over again. "What do you think someone with a god complex would tell his son to do about the twins? His bastard heirs sired on a weak, primitive human? The way he thinks of our entire species is creepy enough without adding the fact that his son always does what Daddy says."

That disturbing thought gave Ella pause. "You loved him, though, and you're no fool. There must be something about him besides just following orders. Do you really think he'd do something so cruel to you?"

"He wouldn't see it as cruel," Lois argued. "He erased my memories for my own good - he said as much today - so what else might he do under his father's prodding? No, Momma, I don't trust him as far as they're concerned. You may as well stop asking, because I'm not going to tell him."

"If you don't, eventually *I* will," Ella warned. "You can't keep him in the dark forever."

Lois raked her hands through her hair. "Fine! When I think I can trust him ... when we've talked a little bit more ... then maybe I'll tell him. But the twins come first, and I will not let them be taken from me."

"Oh, that reminds me, Jason broke two more of his cars tonight," Ella replied, and Lois felt her spine turn to ice. "Seems to me he just doesn't know his own strength."

"Momma..."

Ella put her hands on her daughter's shoulders and looked intently into those hazel eyes. "Sweetheart, you're not going to be able to hide them much longer. What if they get his other powers? What if they start to see right through things? That'll scare them half to death if they glance at someone and find out what a spleen looks like while it's still inside. God forbid, what if they can fly?"

Lois blanched, her knees growing weak. She was suddenly faced by a vision of Jason and Kala soaring up into the night sky, waving goodbye to her, following their father out of her life. Her mother had to help her to the couch.

Clark couldn't quite conceal his look of shock when Lucy Troupe opened the door. "Lucy! Wow, you look ... radiant."

"Yeah, if I radiate any more Ron will have to buy me a wheelbarrow to carry this baby around in," she joked, taking the flowers he'd brought and kissing his cheek. "C'mon in, Clark. Mind the munchkins, they get underfoot."

Three beautiful children, with café-au-lait skin and coal black hair, ran up to Clark. Little Sam and Nora were old enough to remember him and each demanded a hug; Joanna hung back shyly. She had been born a year or so after Lois' twins and had somehow inherited her mother's merry blue eyes.

Ron stuck his head out of the kitchen. "Well, well, the prodigal returns! I was starting to wonder when you'd take me up on the invitation. Lucy, hon, sit down somewhere, Clark can

make himself at home."

"I'm pregnant, not sick," she said tartly. "You'd think by number four he'd be used to it, wouldn't you?"

Clark couldn't help wincing a little at that offhand comment. *What kind of a father would I have been?*

"Listen, woman, if you keep insisting on staying on your feet all day long, you're gonna regret it," Ron warned. "Even Lois figured out what bed rest was when she was pregnant."

Lucy just laughed. "Ron, she went into labor in a meeting! *That's* why she had to go on bed rest. Besides, she was a lot bigger than I am."

Oh, this was just too painful already. "Well, Lucy, she was carrying twins," Clark said.

"Yeah, two kids and a swing set for them to play on, from the look of her," Lucy teased. "Hey, Clark, you want to see the only surviving preggers picture of the Fearless Reporter?"

Ron checked on the chicken he was baking and added, "Lucy, she ever finds out you have that, she's gonna kill you. And then I'm gonna have to raise these wild children all by myself."

Lucy rolled her eyes as she led Clark into the living room and took the back off of a picture of Ron's parents. "Can you blame me for wanting to keep the only picture of my sister where she looks like the Goodyear blimp? She was always prettier and smarter, I had to make do with cute and popular. It's nice to see her looking like something other than a Playboy model." Then she handed Clark the photo that had been concealed behind the other one.

A sledgehammer to the heart couldn't have hurt that badly. Lois was still very delicate, but her pregnant belly was very prominent. And the look on her face was so lost and lonely, the camera having captured her looking out a window. Clark sighed. "Gosh, Lucy," he said quietly.

"I know. She's gi-normous. And let me tell you, pregnancy usually makes women happy and joyful, like me. Lois went the other way - her mood swings, brrr!" The pretty blonde shuddered dramatically.

Clark felt distinctly nauseous. *The last thing I want to think about is Lois with some other man, Lois carrying another man's children. It's not as if this guy was even important to her. And as much as I'd like to be angry at her, I can't help but feel sorry for her. Just look at how sad she looks in this picture.*

He didn't get much time to feel sorry for himself, though. Little Sam wanted to show him a homework assignment he'd gotten an A+ on that day, and Nora wanted to tell him about her upcoming birthday party. Even Joanna was curious about him now, and while Ron and Lucy put the finishing touches on dinner the three kids surrounded him with questions and laughter. The photo of a pregnant Lois was gone from the surface of his mind shortly after Lucy put it back in its hiding place, but the image would remain in his subconscious for quite a while.

Richard didn't get up when he heard the key in the lock. He was watching the Discovery Channel with the kids, but his mind wasn't on the emperor penguins that fascinated the twins. He'd had several hours in which to stew about Lois and everything that was going - or had long ago gone - wrong in their relationship. It was beginning to feel as though something huge had shifted, deep below the surface, and a widening gulf was slowly opening between them.

Once when he was thirteen or so, his parents had lived in a house with a huge oak tree right outside his bedroom window. Richard had loved that tree. When he climbed it he felt like he owned the world, looking down on the roof of the house and seeing the tiny little oak

saplings growing in between the shingles. He had never made the connection between the gnarled roots that reached up under the house's foundation and the crack in the plaster wall of his bedroom.

Richard's parents had spent a couple of years plastering over that crack, sanding and repainting, but it always came back again. He liked to lie in bed and pretend it was a map of some unknown river, and he was flying over it, seeking strange tribes or lost cities. Once he had dreamed that it was a door into another world, one with fearsome monsters to fight and beautiful damsel in distress to save, and that the crack would somehow widen enough for him to slip through.

It never got to that point, although it did widen. After a long, wet spring, he had noticed that the crack in the wall was wider than his thumb. His parents noticed it too, and a lot of serious men in coveralls had come to look at it and the oak tree and the outside of the house. And then one day Richard had come home from school and the tree had been cut down. He was furious, even though his parents explained that the massive tree was lifting the back of the house and might one day cause his bedroom walls to crumble, perhaps even while he was in bed.

The original hairline crack in the wall had actually spread to about three inches wide before his parents finally had the tree cut down, although no one could tell because of the constant repairs. And that was how Richard felt about his engagement to Lois at the moment. They were drifting apart so slowly, covering over the obvious gaps in their relationship, and all the while that outside force kept widening the emptiness between them.

It would be easy to say that it was Superman's fault, but Richard knew the blame really lay with himself and Lois. Too much had been left unspoken, and he had not asked as much as Lois had not told. Only now, with Superman and Clark Kent both back in her life, were certain things coming to light. It seemed he was thinking more frequently, *Do I really know Lois at all?* At first he'd assumed she was turning into someone new, but the longer he thought about it, the more he realized Lois was simply changing back into the woman he had never met, the one who had flown with Superman.

I fell in love with Sleeping Beauty, he thought, as Lois walked into the house and set her purse on the table, the twins rushing to her. *And now she's waking up.*

Throwing Stones

Never had she been so grateful to be in the confines of her own home as she was at this moment, even if the reception she got might not be the friendliest. Tonight, it seemed an impenetrable fortress against the insanity of the world. Something she desperately needed at this moment.

Almost as much as she needed the people inside.

Pausing to take a deep breath, she choked back the intensity of emotion rising in her chest. The nap that her mother had forced on her had helped, although it had put her behind by two hours and was making her fidgety. *Suck it up, Lane*, she scolded herself, *the twins are already home and have been through enough for one day. You'll just make it worse, dragging yourself in there looking like this. The last thing they need to see is Mommy falling apart because she and Superman fought. Or seemed to fight. Stop being selfish and act like a responsible mother. They don't need to have a clue about the mess Mommy has gotten herself into.*

Although I'm more than a little sure that Richard has already started to form his own opinions.

Despite the way her gut wrenched at that thought, she knew she couldn't stand out here all night. She let out a deeply-drawn breath before putting her key into the lock. *Here we go. But for the Grace of God go I...*

The moment she opened the door and stepped into the warmth of the entryway, she could hear the television running and the sudden sound of little padded feet on carpet. Tossing her keys into the marble bowl just off from the stairs, she couldn't help but smile as she heard them hurry toward her. It was amazing to her how her heart contracted at the mere thought of the twins, making her eyes water just slightly. *They're my miracles, something I never asked for or deserved*, she thought just as Jason made the corner first and launched himself toward her.

Kala was not far behind, and Lois nearly fell as her daughter ran full-tilt into her legs and clung there. Both twins seemed determined to squeeze the life out of her. Jason's arms in particular were very tight around her neck... "Sweetheart, Mommy has to breathe," Lois wheezed, and he immediately loosened his grip. Their eyes met for a moment, Lois smiling a little while she raised an eyebrow. Jason nodded seriously, remembering their just-between-us talk about being careful.

"How come you were bein' mean to Superman on TV, Mommy?" Kala demanded.

She resisted the urge to sigh. *Ah, the cliché lives. And always out of the mouths of these babes.* Lois set Jason on the ground before she answered. "Baby, I had a bad day. Some people at the office were saying nasty things about me..."

"Didja kick their butts?" Jason asked hopefully.

"Honey, fighting doesn't solve things," Lois said, treasuring the image of her stiletto heel buried in Polly's behind. She had learned that high-kick for a cabaret musical in high school...

"But Mommy, the cops fight crime all the time," Kala said. Her skeptical look mirrored her mother's own perfectly.

"That's different," Lois said, trying not to grin. "It's a different kind of fighting, and that's what the police have to do to keep us safe. It wouldn't be fair for me to just beat people up when they're mean to me; nice people don't do that."

"So why were you mean to Superman? 'Cuz he wouldn't beat you up for it?" Kala asked. Those eyes seemed to be watching closely for her answer. Close enough for Lois to wonder.

Why, why do they both have to be so damn smart at this age? Please, God, let Richard

not be hearing this. "Kala, I was mad about the people at my office, and I was accidentally mean to Superman. It's okay, I told him I was sorry later. He accepted my apology."

"You got to talk to Superman twice in one day?" Jason said in tones of awe. "Wow! When?"

Lois closed her eyes. *You're fighting a losing battle, Lane. They're starting to love just the thought of him.* The frustration was almost enough to make her tear up after the day she'd had. "He came to ask me why I had said such nasty things to him, and that's when I apologized."

"Superman's really nice," Jason said, and Kala nodded.

Swallowing bile, Lois agreed with them. Then immediately changed the subject. "Now, come on, what have you two been doing all day?"

"Watchin' a movie with Nana!" "Coloring!" "Playin' a new song on the piano!" "Beatin' Daddy at checkers!" The twins' day off had evidently been quite busy, and it took them a while to recite everything they had done. In the meantime, Lois was walking into the kitchen, getting a soda as both followed behind her, and suddenly getting very tense as Richard walked in. Thankfully, the twins never even noticed.

All he said, however, was, "What do you want for dinner?" And over the twins yelling for burritos - which, given the chance, they would eat for every meal - they very civilly decided to have chicken stir-fry, and started making dinner. Together.

Lois felt very odd about that. Even while she made the rice and Richard started the chicken, they kept a tiny space between them, a distance of exaggerated politeness. Every once in a while, she'd try to sneak a peek at him, just to gauge his mood, only to have him turn away. The worst part was the not knowing. Not knowing what he was thinking, not knowing what he'd seen, not knowing what the gossips at work had said.

While Clark was being mobbed, Ron beckoned Lucy into the kitchen. "Taste the mashed potatoes, hon. More salt?" As Lucy took the spoon from him, he whispered, "Luce, lay off on the 'my pregnant sister' stuff, okay?"

"Salt's fine, but it could use a hint more garlic," Lucy said in normal tones, then whispered back, "Why? I thought he'd get a kick out of it."

"Lucy! He's always had a thing for Lois, you *know* that. Showing him pictures of her pregnant with *some other man's babies* is gonna give him a kick all right - in the teeth!"

She winced as she realized her mistake. "Ouch. Okay, my mistake. Forgive me, love, I'm blonde."

Ron just rolled his eyes at her. "Just chill with it, okay? I don't want the man avoiding us because we remind him of *them* being together."

The younger Lane sighed. "It is kinda sad that he never got a chance with her, you know? Lois and Clark..."

"Yeah, I know," Ron said. "Would've been a sight to see. Now go keep the man company, beautiful."

She kissed his cheek and took a glass of iced tea back to the living room, where Nora was telling Clark everything she wanted for her birthday.

"An' a pony an' real pierced earrings an' Aunt Lois promised she'd bring me somethin' pretty and grown-up from her trip to Chicago..." The little girl saw her mother listening and hushed.

Clark offered Lucy a smile as she handed him the tea, trying not to let it show that he had

heard her conversation. "Wow, Lois went to Chicago? When was that, while I was in Mexico?"

"Oh, no, that was months ago," Lucy explained, settling herself into a chair. "She went with Perry to some conference. My dear sister made the mistake of telling chatterbox there about it, and she's never forgotten. You know the Lane women, we never forget."

Clark had to fake nearly dropping the glass to hide his sudden discomfort. *You could say that, Lucy. My life would be so much easier if your sister had stayed forgetful ... or if I never made her forget in the first place. Too bad I didn't think of it six years ago.* "Don't I know it," he replied with a forced laugh. "So fill me in. What've you been doing since I left? Still volunteering with the adult literacy program?"

By the time dinner was ready, Clark remembered why he had always been so fond of Lucy. She was such a sweetheart, the perfect foil for her sarcastic older sister, and he had a brotherly affection for her. The children set the table as Ron and Lucy carried in the plates. As they all sat down, Lucy flashed Clark that sunny smile and asked, "Would you say grace for us?"

Her request startled Clark a little. It had been so long since he sat down to dinner with anyone but Martha, and his mother had always said the blessing, ever since he was a child... The family joined hands around the table and bowed their heads. "Dear Lord, we thank you for this food, and our time together. Amen."

"Amen," the Troupes echoed.

In the midst of animated conversation, Clark felt less like an outsider than he had since leaving the farm.

In a rare deviation from the norm, Lois and the twins were curled on the sofa, watching TV and eating stir-fry off paper plates. Both had seemed extremely loath to leave her side since she had arrived home. Richard watched them from the side chair, his face mostly expressionless, but his mind seething.

What ever made me think I could be a part of that little trio there? Richard took a spiteful bite of his rice. *She doesn't need me. Sometimes I wonder if she even loves me at all. Part of loving someone is being honest and open with them, right? Part of loving someone is **trusting** them, and being trustworthy yourself.*

I should've listened to Perry. Hell, I should've listened to everybody in the office. They all told me, "Stay away from Superman's girlfriend, man. She's trouble." And all I saw was the beautiful, slightly lost mother and her incredible kids. I never expected it would come to this... I once compared her to a falcon, but I didn't know how accurate that was. They will stay with you while it suits them, and fly away when they want to. And if you try to hold them back, they'll tear you apart. They keep their secrets, too...

Just then, Jason looked up at him from where his chin was perched on Lois' hip, and saw his brooding expression. The little boy frowned slightly. "Daddy, are you 'kay? You're awful quiet."

Richard shook himself slightly, smiling for Jason's sake. "Sure, kiddo. I'm just a little tired, that's all." *Don't be a jackass, White. The kids love you. You owe it to them to fight this through with their mother instead of moping like a high school kid jilted on prom night.*

Kala looked at him from where she was laying beside her mother, flat on her back, but anything she meant to say was swallowed by a huge yawn. That seemed to startle Lois out of her daze, glancing over to see Jason starting to look owlish as well, and she sat up. "All right,

you two. Time for bed."

"Do we have to?" they whined in unison as she pulled them both up gently. As Lois got them rounded up, and herded them upstairs with a small hand holding each of hers, Richard remained downstairs, flipping through channels. Lois never even questioned his lack of participation. *After they're asleep. Then we'll talk. Stay calm, Richard, if you lose your temper with her you'll just wind up screaming at each other. Stay calm if you want answers.*

The Troupe kids were allowed an hour of television after dinner since their homework was done. Clark helped carry the plates into the kitchen, but came to a sudden halt as he walked back out. Hanging in the hall opposite the kitchen door was an arrangement of family photos, and one quite prominently displayed was of Lois and the twins when they were just toddlers. It was taken in Centennial Park, he could tell just from looking, fall foliage in the background. Lois was sitting on the grass, raven hair around her shoulders like a mantle, and she was laughing as she watched the twins throwing leaves at each other about a foot away. That both children were laughing as well was not a surprise nor was how perfectly the three seemed to fit together. Even as his heart ached, what shocked Clark was Jason's almost platinum hair. "Holy... Gosh, Jason's hair was *that* light?"

"Oh, yeah," Lucy said behind him, Ron having chased her away from the dishwasher, insisting on loading it himself. "It's finally darkening up, though. By the time he's old enough to drink it ought to be Lo's color."

Clark blinked at her in surprise. "You mean you think he'll get that dark? I always thought he got the lighter hair from his father."

Lucy grinned and pointed at her own hair. "We're not sure about the father; my personal guess is black hair, which is where Kala got it. Hers is just a shade darker than mom's. The blond's from the Lane side. Have you ever ... wait right there." She hurried out of the room.

"Now you've done it, Kent," Ron said from the kitchen, sounding faintly exasperated. "She's going for the photo album. You could be stuck here until January."

Lucy was back before Clark could figure out how to reply, and flipped to a page near the front. "Here you go. See these two?"

She pointed at a picture of a girl about Kala's age and a toddler. The younger girl had pretty blonde hair the same color as Lucy's, but the older one was about the same shade as Jason was now. And she had piercing hazel eyes and a slight frown aimed at the photographer... "That's you and Lois?" Clark said incredulously. "Oh, my dear God. I never knew."

Lucy flipped back a couple of pages and pointed to a scowling two-year-old. "And look, she's almost platinum here. Mom says she was the same way. I got my pure blonde from Daddy."

"Why does Lois always look angry in these pictures?" Clark asked, glancing through the pages. Sure enough, Lois was only smiling in one or two pictures, and that was generally a sarcastic toothy grin reminiscent of the one she'd shown more often once she was older.

"Lois was a pissed-off little girl," Lucy commented with a shrug. "Chalk that up to my Dad. You'll notice I have no pictures of her and him together. Thank God her daughter's sweeter-natured, although she does have a temper on her."

Clark couldn't help smiling. "Yes, I've seen Kala pout. She's strong-willed like her mother, too."

Lucy sighed. "Clark ... you're practically family. Could you *please* learn how to

pronounce the girl's name?"

"Oh, dear God," Ron groaned. "Lucy, will you *lay off*?"

Clark just looked confused. "What? But, I don't call her Kayla..."

"No, Lois will disembowel anyone who does," Lucy said with a trace of annoyance. It was obvious she'd given this speech in the past. "But she lets the other slide, I have no idea why. Once my sister crossed the Atlantic, she started letting people call the girl Kalla. It's *Kala*. One 'l' like the difference between 'all' and 'Al'. Kal-a. Real simple to correct, but she just lets everyone go on mispronouncing it like she doesn't care."

Clark felt hot, then icy cold. *Kala. Like Kal-El. Oh. My. God. She ... she named Kala after me... I wonder if ... black hair from the father... I'm not human, another species entirely, could they really be mine? She would've told me. She would've told me this morning. Lois has no reason to hide that from me if they are mine...*

"I'm sorry, Clark, I didn't mean to snap. It isn't your fault..." Lucy's voice seemed to fade as his concentration turned to Lois. He could hear her heartbeat, tune in to it anywhere on the planet, and just now it was racing as hard as his own...

The story hadn't been quite enough to put the twins to sleep, as had slowly become the case in recent months. They had insisted on sleeping in the same bed tonight, still young enough to oppose being separated at time, even by inches. Now both pairs of sleepy eyes were forcing themselves to stay open, watching her from Jason's bed as she closed the storybook and put it down on the nightstand beside her, shaking her head with a soft smile. It seemed as if they held onto consciousness as long as they possibly could these days. "Okay, munchkins, what do I have to bribe you with to get you to get some shut-eye tonight?"

Stifling another large yawn, Kala murmured out, "Lullaby."

Jason, even now dozing, managed to mumble out, "Yeah, Mommy, lullaby. 'Once 'pona time'."

Still sitting on Kala's bed, Lois had to smile. It really wasn't a lullaby, just a song she had had stuck in her head while she had been carrying the twins. Just a silly little ballad she had heard on the radio that wouldn't leave her. A song that she had gotten into the habit of singing to make herself feel closer to their father. A song that they had continued to want to hear for years. Amazing how something so coincidental could become so important.

Standing up, she moved over to side beside them, and started to softly sing to the twins. "Once upon a time ... once when you were mine... I remember skies ... reflected in your eyes... I wonder where you are... I wonder if you think about me... Once upon a time..." Lois paused for a moment at that, reaching out to brush Jason's cheek as the line whispered off her lips. "When the music plays ... when the words are touched with sorrow..." By this time, those blue eyes were closed, but even in sleep the similarities broke her heart. "...Once beneath the stars ... the universe was ours... Love was all we knew... And all I knew was you..." Sensing Kala might still be awake, she continued, her voice falling to a hush when she came to the end, repeating a line that sounded like her questions on life of late. "I wonder where you are... I wonder if you think about me... Once upon a time ... in your wildest dreams..."

She sat there watching them for a moment, pure fierce love welling up in her heart. There really were no words in any language of the world to describe just how much these two tiny beings meant to her. There really were entire days that she owed them for her continued existence, especially during the period in which she had first sung this song to them. And sometimes just the sight of them had her heart feel as if it would burst in her chest. Some days

it didn't even seem possible that they were hers. Silently tracing their features with her eyes, marking each trait that belonged to her, Lois finally turned away to turn on the bedside lamp. Making herself stand up, she leaned forward to both children to press a kiss to their forehead and whisper, "Mommy loves you," before starting quietly for the door, turning off the light, pulling the door closed without a sound, heading back down the stairs to Richard.

He was in the darkened living room, watching an old horror movie on television. As Lois walked up behind him, she recognized the scene where the front door of the haunted house burst open. Keeping her tone light and playful, Lois said, "So you're cheating on me with that actress again, huh? She really does look a lot like me."

On the screen, James Brolin told his wife to stay upstairs. "Like hell," she shot back, and followed him down to the foyer.

Richard, who had taken a deep breath and silently counted to ten after Lois spoke, answered without turning to face his fiancée, "True, she is older than me. And I only know her from movies and stuff like that. But at least she isn't keeping secrets from me."

Lois felt her heart start to beat faster. "Richard..."

Now he looked at her, and the anger that had smoldered in him all day rose to flame. "Why couldn't you just tell me? All those times, all those evasive little answers, all the changes of subject. I actually believed there was nothing going on. Do you have any idea how stupid I felt today, when I was the only person in Metropolis over the age of seven who didn't know that you were Superman's girlfriend?"

"I wasn't Superman's girlfriend!" Lois snapped. *Not technically anyway.*

Clark had excused himself, pleading a touch of heartburn, and tuned out Lucy scolding Ron for the garlic in the mashed potatoes. He only heard the first few words of the argument between Lois and Richard, but it was enough to make him feel terrible.

Dear God, what am I doing? I'm tearing them apart just by existing. And I like him, I never wanted to do anything like this to him. I never wanted Lois to be hurt, either. I guess the road to Hell really is paved with good intentions. Look where mine have gotten us.

I have to get out of here. Ron and Lucy are going to think poorly of me, but I need to be by myself for a while. I need to get my mind straight. And I really need to go somewhere where I can't hear Lois and Richard yelling at each other.

"Oh, really? You were in love with him, though!"

"He was *Superman*! Everyone was in love with him!"

"Not like you were," Richard replied, standing up. "You know what I mean, Lois, I'm not talking about hero-worship. You loved him. You weren't just his press agent, he wasn't just a story."

"Fine!" Now she was practically spitting the words into his face, the General's Daughter growling, *If you want a fight, you'll get one then.* "Yeah, I was in love with him. Sappy moony-eyed twittering-lovebirds-circling-my-head in love with him! But that was a *long* time ago, and he *left* me. He left me without a word! That ended any possibility of *that*."

"Are you sure?"

Lois sighed. "Richard, would you like a list of everyone I've ever dated, been involved with, had a crush on, or slept with? Would you like them separated out by blood type or in order by social security number? That happened long before I met you, why the hell do you *care*?"

"I *don't* care about everyone you ever slept with or wanted to, I only care about *that* one! He's a *superhero*, Lois, that's like saying you were dating the President or the Prime Minister of Canada or something! This is something I should've known about!"

Lois glared at him. "Fine, you know about it! Happy?"

"**No!**"

"See why I never said anything?!"

"Dammit, Lois! Will you just answer one question with a simple yes or no?"

"Sure! Ask me one that can be answered like that and I will!"

"Did you ever sleep with him?"

Lois blinked. *Shit. I can't let him suspect about Jason and Kala. Escaping on a technicality again...* "No, Richard, I never slept with Superman." *He didn't have the powers when we were together.*

Richard stared at her for a long moment, then sighed. "I'd feel a lot better about that if I didn't think you'd lie to me to protect him."

Frustration rose up in Lois until she snarled out, "Goddammit! Richard!"

"Well? How the hell am I supposed to trust you? You hide all kinds of shit from me, you outright lied about *him* until now..."

"It's none of your business!"

"If you're wearing my ring, you *are* my business, Lois! How the hell are we going to make a marriage last if we're keeping secrets from each other?"

He just dropped the M-bomb on me again. "Richard! Don't even go there!"

"No, let's go there," he said, stalking toward her. "Let's go there for once. Do you have any intention of keeping the promise you made when you started wearing that ring? Any intention at all of marrying me?"

A red haze seemed to float across Lois' vision. This was the worst time he could've chosen to do this, the terrible morning, the confrontation with the twins' father (who still didn't know he *was* their father), the scolding from Perry and Maggie and her mother, and the certain knowledge that her name would be in every gossip column on the east coast by morning...

"Richard, so help me God, don't you push me right now," she warned.

He was right up in her face, keeping his voice low in a belated effort not to wake the kids. "I want an answer, Lois."

She shoved him, hard, and he took a staggering step back. "Who the hell do you think you are?" she raged. "We've lived together for *three years*, and you *still* don't know the first thing about me!"

"No, I don't," Richard said, throwing his hands up in the air in mock defeat. "I don't know why it bothers me, really. Why should I expect to know anything that happened before I met you? I mean, what am I to you? Just the babysitter you can fuck after the kids go to bed."

Shattered. Her anger in shards, shock and pain taking its place, tears rose unwillingly to Lois' eyes. Oh, that hurt ... and it had just enough truth in it to make her feel guilty as well. She wasn't really *in love* with him, and she had never actually said yes when he proposed...

Speechless, the fury of a moment ago at war with her current desire to curl up into a ball and sob, Lois turned on her heel and stormed out. She didn't even hear Richard calling after her.

A fragment of wrath, her predictable reaction to being hurt, leaped up as Lois reached the foyer. She gave in to it enough to snatch the nearest throwable object, a framed picture on the table there, and fling it behind her. Richard, who had been trying to catch up to her and

apologize, take back his hasty words, came to a sudden halt as the photograph exploded at his feet, glass shards everywhere.

As Lois grabbed her keys and slammed the door behind her, Richard stared down at the photo on the floor. Prophetically, it was one of the four of them, seated in one of those Sears special family portraits.

Lois' mind was full of white noise as she drove back into the city, the car seeming to head back to the *Daily Planet* building of its own volition. Her head was whirling, and she craved nothing more than peace and quiet at the moment.

The radio was on mostly for background noise, but a song came on that caught her attention. Lois reached to turn it off, the lyrics making her shiver, but stayed her hand and listened.

*I try to see the good in life.
The good things in life are hard to find.
We're blowin' away, blowin' away
Can we make this something good?
Well, I'll try to do to it right this time around
It's not over,
Try to do it right this time around
It's not over
But a part of me is dead and in the ground.
This love is killin' me
But you're the only one
It's not over.*

Across town, Clark was sitting in the back of a cab, his hand pressed to his eyes. He'd managed to block out most of the argument while leaving the Troupe house with all the grace he could manage, but it left him with a headache and a sick feeling in his stomach. For the time being, he focused on a song playing on the cabbie's radio, one that seemed to capture his feelings.

*I've taken all I can take
And I cannot wait
We're wastin' too much time
Bein' strong, holdin' on
Can't let it bring us down
My life with you means everything
So I won't give up that easily
Blowin' away, blowin' away
Can we make this something good?
Cause it's all misunderstood?
Well I'll try to do to it right this time around
It's not over,
Try to do it right this time around
It's not over
But a part of me is dead and in the ground.
This love is killin' me*

*But you're the only one
It's not over.*

Dear Readers, I think most of you recognize the twins' lullaby as the Moody Blue's classic, "Your Wildest Dreams". And the song mentioned here at the end is Chris Daughtry's "It's Not Over."

The Closing of the Day

The weather had only just begun to show the first signs of the cold front coming through as she had started home only a few hours before. Now it seemed to be mirroring her emotional uproar, Lois thought as the Audi roared up the expressway, the darkened sky occasionally lit by boiling purple and white flashes from behind the shield of the cloud cover. Radio still playing softly in the background, her eyes remained on the cars ahead of her, willing herself to keep it together. Even with the heater on, she shivered. The temperature had dropped, making her wish for her trench coat, left behind in the heat of the moment. But only part of it was the cold and she was all too aware of it.

She had given herself the small luxury of a round of tears on the way out of Bakerline after hearing that song, to wail about her own stubborn fears, about the way her carefully constructed life was falling apart. About how all of this was going to affect the twins before trying to brusquely stem the tears. *Oh God, how could we do this with them at home? Especially with Kala's hearing. Oh, my God, what's wrong with me? And after what they saw this afternoon! God, Lois, have you lost your mind completely?*

Why? Why had he chosen tonight to dredge up all of this mess? After all that had happened earlier in this long-as-hell, awful day when nothing had gone right? And what had possessed her to give away so much about her relationship with Superman? Especially in light of that damned press conference? If she was being that stupid and loose-lipped, why hadn't she just gone ahead and told him the truth? Told him the reason things were kept hidden and why he had never been able to have her whole heart? Why not just come right out and tell him that Kala and Jason were Superman's children at this rate? Wouldn't *that* rock his world to its foundations.

Just as she put her hand to her forehead, trying to rub away the tension and threat of another round of tears, a soft, broken voice drifted through the speakers, lamenting, "*He says that behind my eyes... I'm hiding... And he tells me... I pushed him away... That my heart's been hard to find...*" That drew pained eyes to the lighted console as painfully as if she had been struck. Just as the piano continued the delicate melody, she snapped off the sound. With a disgusted and heartsore sigh, Lois swung the car across the lane and onto the Yellowknife exit.

It always amazed her how alive the city was every moment; even at this hour, Metropolis glittering with vitality even as the evening drew to a conclusion. At any hour, there was something happening, some event fully attended. Never a light dimmed. One light in particular caught her eye as she pulled onto Fifth Street, the blowing leaves dancing across her headlight beams. Ahead of her, slightly hidden by the lower levels of the building, the Planet globe called out to her like a beacon. Something in her calmed even as she pulled into the lot just next door, waving to Evans the security guard as she went past.

Once the Audi was parked and locked, Lois hurried up the steps of the front façade and into the revolving doors to get away from the brisk wind. She could smell the rain in the air, knew a storm was imminent. At least she had gotten inside before it started. The tap of her heels was lonely on the tile floor, devoid of the usual sounds of daylight journalistic hustling, as she made her way into the elevator. With only the hum of movement for company, the musak that usually filtered through turned off for the night, Lois tried to pretend she wasn't deliberately trying to ignore her own teeming thoughts until the bright *ding* signaled her arrival on the sixtieth floor.

As she made her way up the hall toward the sprawling hulk that was City and

International and put on a professional face that hid the chinks in her armor, she called out greetings to several female members of the custodial staff and a couple of the night-time maintenance guys, all of whom smiled back. Almost all had known her from years of her having worked well into the night on some story or another, living on black newsroom coffee and her Marlboros until she had finally put that particular piece to bed. A few of them were old enough to be her mother and had always tried to treat her as such. Even now she remembered Henrietta having snuck a cup of coffee and a couple of doughnuts over to her desk when she had fallen asleep at her computer one night after being up fifty-two hours. But it had been a while since she had been quite that dedicated. That was before the twins. When it had still been their father, her, the story.

Forcing herself to put those thoughts away, Lois stifled the lump in her throat. Answering questions about the twins and how quickly they were growing and how she was eating (*so skinny*, Isadora scolded as she shook her mop handle at her), she continued on, stopping only a minute to poke her head in and wave to Helen in the mailroom.

With that, Lois made her way through the double-glass doors into her sanctuary, relieved to see no one else had decided to stay late this evening. Unlocking her office door, she strolled over to her desk in the dark and sat down in the padded chair heavily. Sighing, she closed her eyes before unlocking the bottom drawer with a small golden key. Carefully, she drew the flask out of hiding and took a conservative nip before returning it to the place it came from. Closing her eyes, she forced all of her whirling thoughts into a box in the corner of her mind and slammed the lid. It was either disconnect or go crazy, at this point.

Now, get your head screwed on straight, kid, she ordered herself, grateful for the kick of the Russian liquor. That brought her back to reality. *Before all of this mess went haywire, you were trying to find any clues you could as to Luthor's whereabouts and just what he was up to with the Widow Vanderworth. You can worry about your family life later. Right now, you need to safeguard the twins.*

Moments later, her fingers were flying over the keys, Lois' pale and drawn face illuminated by the computer screen like that of a wraith. Work was the most potent and mood-altering of all substances for her and she indulged as deeply as she could.

The twins' bedroom door opened quietly. For a moment, Richard's head was silhouetted against the hall light, but seeing the twins still asleep he left without a word.

Several minutes later, Kala whispered, "Okay, he's gone downstairs."

"Are you sure?" Jason whispered back.

His sister just sighed heavily. "Yes, boogerhead."

"Don't call me a boogerhead!" he hissed.

"Don't be one, then," she said primly, sitting up in bed.

After a moment's sulk, Jason sat up too. "Well? What were they sayin'?"

"Bunch of stupid grownup stuff," Kala replied. "I think Daddy's jealous 'cause Mommy's friends with Superman."

Jason wrinkled his nose in horror. "Daddy's not jealous of Superman! That's dumb. Superman's the coolest *ever*."

Kala gave him her best imitation of Lois' cool, superior look. "Shows how much *you* know."

Her brother drew himself up and scowled. "Oh, yeah? I betcha I know somethin' 'bout Superman you don't know!"

"Hah! You don't even know how to listen through walls!" Kala replied scornfully.

"Fine, then I won't tell you," Jason said. "A *girl* would *never* figure it out by herself."

"Jason! *Mom's* a girl!"

"Yeah, but she's different. She's Mom. *You'll* never get it 'less I tell you."

Kala turned her nose up haughtily. "I don't wanna know your dumb old secret. I have one, too, and mine's better 'cause a *girl* figured it out! A boy wouldn't be smart enough."

"Liar! You don't know *nothin'!*" Jason hissed.

"You called me a liar," Kala said, eyes widening. "I'm gonna get you, Jason Garen Lane!"

"Ooooh, I'm so scared, Kala Josephine Lane," he mocked, then yelped when she hit him with her pillow.

He quickly jumped out of her bed to race over to his own, grabbing a pillow and swinging it at Kala. In the process of swatting each other, they forgot to be quiet, and one of Jason's backswings hit Captain Jack's cage with a loud rattle.

"Uh-oh," both twins whispered. Kala closed her eyes, but she didn't even need to strain her ears to hear Richard's footsteps on the stairs. "Daddy's coming!"

Jason dove for his own bed and yanked the covers over himself, just as Kala burrowed down into her pillows. By the time their door opened, they once again looked like two little angels asleep. The only evidence of disturbance was the fact that they were back in their separate beds, and the ferret's eyes glowing redly in the half-light.

Richard closed the door again after a while. For several minutes, the silence was only broken by Captain Jack shuffling around in his cage.

"Kala? You 'wake?"

"Course I am," she muttered angrily. "How come you had to make so much noise?"

"You started it!" Jason hissed.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Be quiet, he'll hear you!" Kala whispered.

"Fine! Just tell me why Mommy left."

The little girl was quiet for so long, Jason thought she'd gone back to sleep. "They were yellin', tryin' to be quiet but still *thinking* yellin', and Daddy said Mommy kept secrets from him. He said she lied to him about bein' Superman's girlfriend."

"What?" Jason whispered, awed. "Mommy was Superman's *girlfriend*? Uh-oh..."

"It was a long time ago, she said," Kala told him. "Mommy sounded mad but scared at the same time. They're both so mad, they used bad words ... Daddy said the really bad word and Mommy broke something and left."

"Oh." Jason's voice was very soft and sad. "Kala, d'ya think Mommy and Daddy will, you know..."

"I don't know," his sister replied. "I don't know, Jason."

"They wouldn't split us up if they did, right?"

"They'd better not!" Now Kala was fierce. "I won't let *anybody* take my brother away. Even if you *are* a boogerhead."

He stuck his tongue out, but smiled anyway. "I love you, too, Kala. I'll never let anyone take you away from me either."

...

Clark locked the door behind him, shutting out the cold wind rising outside. He looked around his apartment and sighed. Most of his belongings were still boxed up; the only room he'd managed to unpack was the bedroom, and only because he slept there. He moved silently through the other rooms of the apartment, vowing to finish unpacking. Coming home to something this impersonal just wasn't inspiring.

The bedroom was another story entirely. A framed photo of himself, Jonathan, and Martha hung at eye height just inside the door. His diploma and a copy of the first article he'd gotten in *The Daily Planet* were also framed and displayed prominently. The quilt on the bed was handmade by Martha, and the nightstand beside it had been a joint project between Clark and his father.

Oh yes, this room was full of memories. Clark gently picked up the photograph that sat beside his alarm clock, and stared at it for a moment, his expression somber. "But why would you lie to me?" he murmured to the empty room, returning the picture to its place. Lois' thousand-watt grin beamed up at him silently from within the silver frame.

Is it even possible? The thought had never occurred to him once he learned of his true parentage. *There's no reason to assume that a human and a Kryptonian could... We're analogues of each other, like those two species of snake I studied in biology class all those years ago. Emerald boas and green tree pythons. They look identical to a layman's eye, but they're from different continents, they're different genera entirely. No possibility of hybridization. And I ... I'm not even from this planet. How in the world could...?*

*But why **else** would she name Kala after me?*

Clark paced the room, scowling. *No. It can't be. Dammit, I'm an **alien**! Jor-El would've warned me if such a thing was even remotely possible ... wouldn't he? Would he have even known if it was?*

*Who knows **what** he would've said. Jor-El was none too fond of the idea of me fraternizing with the human race, anyway. Not to mention, I haven't been back to the Fortress since my return, and I'd hate to hear what he would say if he knew I was thinking about Lois. Again.*

His eye caught another framed photo on the wall, one of himself with Lois, Perry, and Jimmy. Taken back in the good old days, when the only competition for Lois' affection was ... well, himself. The ex-boyfriend - Elliott or Erik or something like that, the therapist, *but not mine* as Lois always said defensively - hadn't counted, even if he had sometimes sought 'closure' to their relationship. *You want closure?* Clark could hear Lois' sarcastic tone in his memory, annoyed that the man had called her at work. *It's closed. Closed, locked, deadbolted, security chain on, and a two-by-four under the doorknob. I'm tired of being analyzed, tired of you asking questions about my relationship with my father. If you **ever** say 'Elektra complex' to me again I'll have to send you to a proctologist to get my shoe back!*

Clark grinned, remembering. No, she'd never had any trouble getting over an ex... *Not until you, that is.*

That wiped the fond smile off his face. *Is that maybe why she named Kala after me? Something to remember me by, since I was never coming back, or so she thought? No one else would get the reference.*

I guess it could go either way. If they are mine, she might have lied to me. She lied about remembering - well, she didn't lie so much as omit, but still.

Little as I like to think about it, I have to confront her. Again. Now I just need an opportunity to catch her alone...

Outside the rain began to fall, joining the wind to make it a miserable night for flying. He would've preferred to take to the air and gather his thoughts, but the sound of the rain made him remember just how long the day had been. Clark sighed. *Maybe if I sleep on it, things will be a little clearer. I just can't think straight with that possibility rattling around in my head.*

It had worked for a good hour and a half, every suspicion about Luthor or his doings spiraling out onto the screen in a worthy distraction from her life. And then, as abruptly as steam disappearing, it was gone. In panic and disbelief, she had sat watching the monitor as if it were a lifeline, hearing only the wail of the wind.

And twenty minutes later, still staring at her computer screen, alone in the City Room, Lois felt her thoughts wander against her will. It wasn't something she especially wanted to do, but her mind was just well beyond the point of jumbled and weary, making it impossible for her to do anything else. The day had been too long, too tumultuous, and she knew full well that she was running away from everything. Something she had been doing for too long. And the wolf-hour thoughts were finally pounding at the door, demanding to be let in or else they would storm it.

Tenting her fingers against her temples, she let all of the tenseness and confusion make itself know. It was better to do it this way, away from prying eyes. Wasn't that the whole reason she had come here, to the one place in the world she felt safest? To try to work this all out, make some sense of it before she managed to destroy everything?

Here in her darkened office, she had to admit that it had been idiocy to think Richard would be anything less than furious with her, whether it really was his business or not. Maybe it was, in some small way. As much as she had tried to blow off the assumptions the others had made, he would have had to have been a fool not to think it a possibility, as Perry had said. And he may have been kind, but Richard White was no fool. But, knowing her as he did, he would also have to have known that she wouldn't want to talk about it, not with the way Superman had left. Reporter or not, Lois had never been given to blurt out her innermost thoughts and feelings to anyone.

She would never have let him so close if he had been a fool. And she had let him close, let her children grow to love him as they would a father who shared their blood. She had grown more than a little fond of him herself. But had it been more than that, more than warm affection for the man who had looked beyond the twins and still seen her for the woman she had once been? Had it ever been anything even approaching those intense emotions she had felt in the past? Her comment to Kal-El earlier echoed back in her mind, *You can't even know for sure what you felt for me was love.* Lois felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up, her stomach feeling sick.

That was another thing she had been trying to hide from.

Just thinking of him made her rise to her feet, instinctively trying to outrun the thoughts. Pretending that that wasn't what she was doing, she drifted over to the window just as she heard the rumble of thunder. So many stories up, she had a decent view of the city all the way out to Hob's Bay, a million lights like diamonds in the darkness. But she found her eyes scanning the roiling skyline. One hell of a storm was brewing, the weather systems crashing into one another violently before they would meld.

Lois had to laugh at herself, although it was a little shrill. She was looking for him, of course, whether it made her comfortable to admit it or not. All in all, any thoughts of him were making her uncomfortable as time went on. She still couldn't get the stunned look on his face

when she had fielded that question at him at the fire out of her mind. The look of upset at that moment had hurt more than any of the puppy-eyed looks she had gotten since he had come back. It seemed to wound him even worse that she was questioning him as a hero than as a man. And it had struck her deep to see it.

Almost as much it had hurt to see the mix of emotions in his eyes when he had questioned her about how quickly she had gotten pregnant. At first it had only infuriated her, the way he missed all of the little tells. Features and expressions of his that were impossible for her not to identify immediately, even at their birth. But there had been more than anger there in his eyes, more than the bitterness that had momentarily crept into his voice. The reminder tugged at her heart now, making her bite her lip. *Why didn't he see?*

How could he know, Lois? Honestly, isn't that what you had been hoping for? Neither of us thought it possible, she scolded herself. Or are you starting to change your mind? First you never wanted him to know, now you're angry because he can't tell that the impossible occurred. You keep using the same excuses, the same tired arguments. You've been using the twins' well-being as a shield to hide from how you really feel.

Especially when you found that photo of you hidden behind the picture of his mother when you were snooping through his desk the other week. Picked up that old frame the wrong way, and there it was, slipping out from behind the backing. That picture frame was old when he brought it on his first day and so was the one of you. Must have been one that Jimmy shot back in the day, probably eight years old. And he's been carrying it with him.

How was that for a kick to the gut since the only reason you even dropped by his desk was because you missed him? Not Richard's office, mind you, not your fiancé's, but Clark's desk.

What is it you want, Lois, or do you even know? Your feelings for him are as strong as ever, whether you want to face it for not. And so are Richard's for you. You can't keep doing this. Stop hiding from yourself.

For a long moment, the dark-haired woman stood there in the dim light cast by her computer screen, stunned by that last question. A question that really did deserve an answer.

The voice in her head had a point, loathe as she was to admit it. She had come here to find some answers and it seemed as if the only way she'd keep herself from running from the truth was to try an old trick. A moment later, she was out of her office and striding toward the empty hallway. There were some decisions to be made and this had always worked in the past. Lois was grateful that she had been wearing boots when she had left home. She was going to walk the *Planet*.

As the night wore on toward morning, Richard sat in front of the television drinking Lois' vodka in Sprite. And brooding. His eyelids felt gritty, but he wasn't tired and couldn't stand the thought of going to bed. The alcohol made his thoughts slightly fuzzy though he wasn't precisely drunk; he drank the odd little cocktail slowly.

The kids were sound asleep, thank God. Even when he'd heard a noise from their room, it had only been the ferret rattling around, and the twins had slept through that. At least they hadn't heard him arguing with Lois ... at least they hadn't heard his last angry words.

Stupid. Lois Lane is not the kind of woman who will break down and tell you the truth just because you hurt her. And that last one scored pretty deep. It's a thought that troubles me at three in the morning when she's staying up 'til all hours on the computer, but I shouldn't have said it out loud. Not the best way to ask someone what you really mean to them.

He took another swallow of his drink, grimacing at the strange sharpness the liquor gave to the soda. That was another reason for this particular mix - he didn't like the taste, and wouldn't be tempted to drink too much and possibly do something stupid, like call Lois up and toss a little kerosene on a burning bridge.

It's not quite that bad yet, Richard thought, looking at *Black Christmas* on the television screen but not seeing it. *We do need to talk. And really talk, not just yell at each other.*

Problem is, how on earth am I supposed to stay calm when I have the sneaking suspicion that she's hidden things from me from first to last? When her biggest secret is still uncovered, and I think I know the shape of it?

Clark felt himself drifting between sleep and awareness, listening to the rain on the window. He was ready to doze off again when he heard another sound, one far more familiar.

Lois' heartbeat. Coming from ... right beside him?

He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and caught his breath at the sight. She was curled into a ball on the other side of his bed, her dark hair spread out on the pillow. For a long moment, Clark just stared at her. Then he closed his eyes tightly, counted to twenty, and opened them again.

She was still there. "This has got to be a dream," he murmured, getting ready to pinch his forearm.

A delicate hand caught his. "What're you muttering about, Kal-El?" Lois asked sleepily, and he shivered. Her voice sounded so *real*...

"I'm going to wake up now," he said quietly. "This is a dream, and I'm waking up now."

"Silly," Lois said with a yawn, and she rolled over to face him, letting him see that her belly was distended. "Pregnant women - and their husbands - have to get their rest, you know."

"Pregnant?" Clark gasped.

"Yes," she shot back, fingertips brushing her stomach. "What did you think *this* was, a little overindulgence in the Godiva chocolates? I'm pregnant. With your twins. You were with me at the last ultrasound."

"No, no, no," and now he shook his head, trying to dispel this too-tempting vision. "No, I left for Krypton before I even found about the twins. This is just a dream, a fantasy brought on by Lucy showing me those pictures of you pregnant in Paris."

"What do you mean, you left for Krypton?" Lois asked him, sitting up now. The nightgown she wore was very thin, and he tore his eyes away from her body. "Honey, you never left. I think I would've noticed, you know?"

"I left ... I was gone for six years ... I didn't know, about the twins ... You were so angry at me when I came home..."

"Hey." Lois caught his face and turned him to meet her eyes. Once again he was falling into those mysterious hazel orbs. "Relax, baby. It was just a nightmare, okay? I'm right here, see?"

Baby? Lois had called him many things - some of them unprintable - but never 'Baby'. He so wanted to believe this was real, and that everything else he remembered was the dream, from the moment he stole her memories to their recent confrontation. "I have to get out of here," he whispered, wondering if he was going mad. He sat up and swung his legs out of the bed, grasping the sheets to toss them back, and then halted, and hastily pulled the blankets back over his lap. *Since when did I start sleeping naked? The only time was in the Fortress with Lois ... and I know I've dreamed of **that** more often than I can count.*

Lois saw his sudden discomfiture and chuckled richly. The hair rose on the back of his

neck as she purred, in a tone he hadn't heard for six years, "Relax, Kal-El, it's not as if I haven't seen you naked before. And done a lot more than look." That soft, knowing laugh again, and he began to blush as he remembered exactly when he had heard it last. Lois' voice dropped as she repeated, "A lot more. Or don't you remember how these little darlings got here?"

"Lois..."

She touched his cheek, turned him to face her again, that look in her eyes, the one he had never forgotten, breaking his heart. "It's okay, love. I think it's sweet that you're still a little embarrassed about your wife seeing you in the nude."

The second time she said it, it finally broke through his confusion. "Wife? When ... no, you always said you never wanted to be married. 'Three kids, two cats, one mortgage, ' remember?"

"That was before you," she said, running the tips of her nails over his shoulder. "Besides, it's two kids, no cats, and a lease. You really do have the strangest dreams, you know it? Imagine dreaming you'd left me! Kal-El, I know that you'd never leave me all alone and carrying your twins..."

"But I did," he whispered. "And it's killing me..."

Lois looked confused, and started to say something else, but her hand flew to her belly as she gasped in surprise. "Whoa! They're getting pretty rambunctious. Here, Dad, I think that's your son kicking."

Caught up in a storm of emotions, wanting so badly to believe that all of his problems were simply a bad dream, he reached out to her. If he could just feel his child stirring in her womb, then he would know this was the reality and all the heartbreak was nothing more than a nightmare...

His fingertips brushed the satin gown, but as he laid his palm on her rounded belly, Lois vanished before his eyes. Kal-El blinked ... he was sitting up in bed, in his pajama bottoms. And he was alone.

It was a dream ... a dream crueler than any nightmare. He rested his head in his palms, feeling more beaten and bewildered than the time he'd been without his powers and tried to take on that jerk in the diner.

The rain had abated, leaving a fresh, watery scent to the air. The winds were still high, and Lois leaned into them willingly from where she stood on the roof, letting her raven hair and suit get tousled. The five-story walk had exhausted her enough to have knocked down the last of her defenses and given her the answers she sought, although neither of them were ones which she could contend with. *I miss him, God knows I miss Kal-El more than anything else in the world. There's no denying that I still love him, not now. But how can I even think about doing all of this again? How dare I even let myself wonder what it would be like to have him back? How he and I feel has nothing to do with it. He's always been a weakness of mine, just as I'm one of his. We're no good for each other, we can only get each other in danger. Didn't he make that clear enough to me?*

Not to mention, I would ruin the twins' lives. They don't deserve to be uprooted, to have the only stability they've ever known crumble out from under them. How can I even dream of putting my happiness ahead of theirs? The only sensible thing to do is settle down, marry Richard, and give Jason and Kala some kind of sane, secure family life.

Late lightning lashed the sky, and thunder snarled. The suddenness of it was startling, but

Lois couldn't stop her heart from leaping. That sarcastic voice that lived in the back of her mind spoke then. *You, sensible? Sane? Stable? Why don't you get a lobotomy so you can keep playing Stepford Lois more easily?* The General's Daughter scoffed. *Anybody else would've had the sense, sanity, and stability to get the hell off the roof when there's lightning out, but you thrill to it. Face it, Lois, you're wild at heart, as strong in your passions and convictions as anyone. If you wanna be with Richard, make sure he knows that. And if you don't want him, stop playing with him.*

And then, as if she had an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, the Romantic chimed in. *While you're facing facts, have a look at your heart. You will never **not** love him. There's a part of you that belongs to him, forever and always, whether you act on it or not. And those twins are his - he'll **never** be out of your life or your thoughts. Don't they deserve to know who their real father is?*

Lois squeezed her eyes shut. *When the voices in your head gang up on you, that's a bad sign*, she thought. Frightened as it made her, she knew what she had to do. No decision needed to be made just now, at this moment, so long as she figured things out soon. But there *was* one thing she had to do, even if just to keep a promise. Softly she whispered into the wind, "Truce, Kal-El. Truce." She didn't know if he could hear her, although it didn't matter. She had said it and that made it real. There was no going back.

Staring off at the horizon, Lois stayed looking out silently for a bit longer before she was forced back inside by the numbness of her fingers. This time, starting to feel groggy, she managed the single flight of service stairs before taking the elevator back down to City.

The reporter made her way back to her office weary, her eyelids growing heavy with the lack of sleep over the last several nights. Sliding into her chair again, Lois attempted a losing battle with the Sandman. *If I just sit down for a bit, maybe I can get my mind in gear again. Just rest my eyes for a moment...*

The digital clock on the corner of her desk read 12:03. Her horrible day was over.

There was nothing to watch on television except infomercials, so Richard turned it off and looked at the clock. Hmm, four in the morning, which meant it was about ten in Paris. Plenty late enough in the day for what he'd decided to do.

He took the notepad beside him and looked at the list of numbers he'd gotten from directory assistance yesterday while waiting for Lois to get home. Four men who had worked for *La Tribune Quotidienne* six years ago, and seven others who shared Jason's middle name. Garen wasn't all that common a name in France, it seemed, and if Lois had really named the boy for his father, then one of these would know her.

If I have to argue with her again - and I just might - I'd better do my research first. If what I suspect is true, I have to eliminate all the other possibilities first.

Picking up his cell phone, he dialed Garen Lamoureux first.

Stutter Steps

Perry walked in early, secretly pleased at the prospect of lambasting Lane, Kent, *and* his nephew. Lane and Kent had both snuck out yesterday, and even though Lois had asked to leave and Richard had called after the fact to let him know, Perry could blame them for Kent's absenteeism and each other's. *Nothing more delightful than the prospect of winding up three of my best reporters and turning them loose on an unprepared world.*

But when he actually walked into the office, he saw a pitiful sight. Lois was slumped over her desk, asleep in the clothes she'd worn yesterday, just one hand and a mass of wavy black hair visible. *It's worse than I thought*, Perry mused, scowling. *Usually it's the man that gets thrown out of the house during a fight. Well, Lois never could do anything expected.* At least he had an hour before anyone else came in. That ought to be enough time to put things right...

Lois woke up very slowly, feeling as if her head was stuffed with cotton wool. Her neck and back and legs ached, too, and the arm she had laid her head on was numb. *Oh, God. Now I remember why I don't do this anymore. Eww, I fell asleep without brushing my teeth. Yuck. I'm getting old.*

She lifted her head, hair tumbling into her eyes, and focused blearily on the insulated coffee cup in front of her. Fragrant steam rose from it, smelling nothing like the over-boiled mud she usually got at work. Eyes practically crossing, she pulled it closer and took a sip.

"Well, at least we know she's alive," Perry's gruff voice said behind her as she put the cup back down. She whirled as he continued, "Your devotion's admirable, Lane, but you really didn't have to sleep here to be on time for the conference."

"Perry..."

"And don't try to weasel out of it, either. Your name plate says *Assistant Editor*, you have to go to the meetings. Most of them, anyway. I *ought* to make you go like that, only I'm too nice."

Perry looked more amused than anything else, so Lois just drank her coffee and looked at him with an eyebrow raised.

He grinned. "Olsen was kind enough to come in early and pick up your dry cleaning, so that suit Kala spewed on is here and ready for you to wear. He also got you some coffee from that froufy little shop on the corner. Now I've got him running down to the convenience store for a toothbrush and toothpaste. Loueen's on her way in, and I asked her to pick up whatever else you'd need. I don't meddle in feminine mysteries, and neither should Olsen. Besides, Loueen's more likely to accurately guess your bra size. She said you'd have makeup?"

"Yeah, I have a makeup bag in my desk," Lois muttered. "Perry, what about the twins? Who's taking them to school?"

"Richard," the editor replied. "I called him and told him you'd slept here and he needed to take the monsters in."

Lois winced. "Lovely. So how much has your nephew told you?"

"Not a damn thing, and I didn't ask," he retorted. "But I think he was glad to know you were here and nowhere else."

Ouch. "Point made, White, now leave it." Lois took another swig of the coffee, glad that Starbucks knew her usual, and raked her fingers through her dark hair. *What I really want right now is a nice long bath - I missed my morning shower. Speaking of which...* "Perry, if it's going to be a few minutes, I'm going to go down to the gym and have a shower. I feel grungy."

"Knew that free membership for the executive staff would come in handy," he muttered.

"Go on, I'll send Loueen down there when she gets here."

Lois got up, wincing when she stretched, and kissed Perry on the cheek as she went by. "Thanks, Dad," she said, and though her tone was light, her eyes were sincere.

"Yeah, like I'd admit to a daughter like you," Perry grouched, but he was smiling. "Don't pull this nonsense again or you're grounded."

Clark woke up late, having been afraid to return to sleep after that dream. His walk to work was further delayed by a car wreck on the way; he didn't have to change out of uniform to unobtrusively pop open a stuck car door and help the fortunately-uninjured driver out. The young man's alcohol-laced breath made the wreck just another statistic for the officers who were arriving as Clark ducked out of the scene.

Lois would have been amused at the number of 'unofficial' rescues he did, and the thought of her made him smile bittersweetly. That dream had been so very real, and even now he wished he could exchange this life for the one he'd led in it. *Too late*, Clark thought. *I have no idea what would happen if I turned back time that far, and it would be unforgivably selfish of me to do so just so I could have a second chance with Lois. Saving her life was one thing, and I only turned back time a little while. But more than six years... No. Never.*

At least they had promised to be civil to each other ... and he *still* had to get the info from Karla Smith-Bennett over to Lois. Last Clark had heard, no one had officially picked up the Luthor/Vanderworth investigation after he left City, so that meant Lois was most likely doing it unofficially. She never would leave a story while there was the faintest hope of getting some answers.

Mulling over the Luthor problem, Clark continued on his way to work, not particularly worried about being late. Perry had always forgiven his occasional disappearances and tardiness as long as he finished stories on time ... speaking of which, he had to wrap up the second article on the trip to Mexico...

Lois let the hot water blast straight into her face, hoping it would wake her up enough for this damn conference. She'd have to remember to refill the shampoo and conditioner bottles she carried in her makeup case...

"Hello, Lois? It's me, I'm here to rescue your silly butt. Did you really spend the night here?"

The reporter grinned. Marriage hadn't tamed Loueen, apparently. "In here. Yeah, I had a few things I wanted to look up and I fell asleep at my desk."

"Type-A overachiever," Loueen said affectionately, tucking a strand of thick chestnut hair behind her ear. She was right outside the shower stall now, and added, "I hope I guessed your size right ... I brought panties, bra, stockings, slip, and camisole. Everything matches - I figured it was the pinstripe."

"Mm-hmm. Thank you so much, Loueen. You didn't have to."

"Yes I did. That's why you shouldn't marry your boss; you get used to actually doing what he wants."

"No such worries here," Lois replied, turning off the spray and grabbing the towel of the shower door. "You're the one who wanted to get hitched, not me."

"It does have its benefits," Loueen said lazily. "Such as not having to fight over the 'official office hot chick' title anymore. A much better wardrobe. More money in the house. And it has drawbacks, too, I'll admit. He didn't tell me you didn't know about the pets until we

were at your house and he wanted to sneak them inside."

"You know," Lois muttered as she finished drying off, "one day, you're going to be a widow because of that little trick, right? The lizard is evil."

"Tell me about it. It got loose in our house and I had to chase it off the curtains with a broom." Lois heard Loueen chuckle, and then the younger woman said, "Everything's right outside the door here. I'm going to go see if Jimmy's back with your toothbrush. Somehow I don't think he'd dare come in the women's locker room even if they let him."

The black-haired reporter grinned to herself, pulling the shopping bag into the shower stall. No, he probably wouldn't have, especially since he knew she was here. Several years ago, Lois had been in the habit of quickly changing clothes in the janitorial closet, which was closer than the restrooms. Jimmy had once walked in on her in mid-change, wearing just a bra and panties, and the young photographer had been so traumatized that he couldn't meet her eyes for days. That, and the life-sized picture of Perry now plastered on the closet wall, had cemented Lois' decision to walk the extra distance to the restrooms to change from then on... "No, Loueen, he wouldn't. Jimmy's too much of a gentleman."

"Like someone else we know," Perry's wife and former secretary replied. "The two that love you the most are the two least likely to subscribe if I set up a pay-per-view webcam over that shower door."

"Loueen! You're terrible!" Lois was glad the other woman couldn't see her blushing at the mention of Clark.

"It's true. Heck, the last time I saw you and Kent together was at that Christmas party, and he saw you over by the mistletoe and didn't even *try* to trip you so you'd be under it or anything. Jimmy I understand - he'd faint dead away if you kissed him, but Kent's just too noble. Lombard, on the other hand..." Her brown eyes fairly gleamed with amusement.

"You mean the hand I broke three fingers of?" Lois said sweetly, glad of someone else to discuss. "By the way, when did you start drugging your husband with illegal substances? He *rehired* Grizzly Lombard!"

"Don't blame that on me, he's always been like that. Something you know perfectly well," Loueen shot back, laughing. "Probably did it just for the fun of watching a big burly ex-quarterback hide from someone as petite as you. All right, I'm gonna go get that toothbrush before you blame me for anything else."

"C'mon, Loueen, everyone knows that anything that goes wrong is blamed on the last person who quit. Namely, you."

"Hey, Norm quit after me!" Loueen called from the doorway.

"He didn't quit, he died! There's a difference!"

"Fancy *you* knowing that!"

Any hope Clark had of arriving unobtrusively was blown when he walked in. Jimmy and Perry had both beaten him into work, and the editor rounded on him immediately. "Kent! What the hell did you think you were doing yesterday, leaving early?"

Caught off guard, he could only stammer in reply. "Didn't ... didn't Lois tell you? I was sick..."

"Sick of working, more like! First Lois tells me she's leaving early, then Richard skips out, then you just sort of drift out without a word. Got any explanation that *won't* make me laugh?"

"I had a, um, stomach virus," Clark said, feeling much the same way he had when he and Richard were in Mexico being unexpectedly shot at. "I did ask Lois to say something..."

"Well, I was probably too busy tearing her a new one for her spat with Superman on national TV to hear her if she did tell me," Perry replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, not noticing the way Jimmy hustled to his desk out of Perry's line of sight. "Besides, *Lois* isn't your boss. You should've called me or Richard. Of course, you couldn't have reached Richard because he took the afternoon off, too! I'm not going to put up with my best reporters playing hooky just because they don't feel like working. Is that understood?"

Bewildered, Clark said, "Yes, Mr. White, sir. I, um, I'd be happy to stay late and make up the hours..."

"No, don't start that. Lois tried the same thing last night and fell asleep here. She hasn't done *that* since Superman left. Dedication's fine, but when you people start moving in, I start to worry."

"Lois stayed here last night?" Clark's gaze darted to Jimmy for confirmation. At the younger man's silent, wide-eyed nod, he continued, "But the twins..."

"Richard took them to school," Perry said, then did a double-take. "Wait a minute. You told *Lois* you were sick? Thought you two weren't speaking. Didn't she drive you out of City?" He folded his arms and gave Clark a challenging glare. Behind him, Jimmy's eyebrows rose speculatively.

"Mr. White, I left City for my own reasons," Clark said, beginning to get a little testy. *I'm beginning to remember why I thought this could never work. Everyone's always poking their nose in.* "And Lois and I are both professionals. I happened to see her yesterday as I was leaving and asked her to pass on the message."

"Well, that explains why I never got it," Perry muttered. "Kent, in the future, call me. Lois didn't get any less vindictive while you were gone."

"Mr. White, I don't think you're being fair to Lois..."

"Fine, fine. She didn't get any less absentminded, either." Perry turned away, making Jimmy quickly start rustling through the papers on his desk in an attempt to look busy, and then the rest of the employees started to arrive. Grateful for the reprieve, Clark hurried to his desk and found the notepad on which he'd written Ms. Smith-Bennett's contact info, and all the background information he'd been able to gather on her in such short notice. As soon as Lois got back, it would make a nice peace offering...

Other reporters trickled in, and Clark's keen hearing was more liability than asset as he heard them *still* discussing Lois' behavior yesterday. *My God, the gossip mill never stops. Don't they have anything better to discuss? They're supposed to be journalists, why are they so excited by hearsay and supposition when the actual facts come down to so little?*

Lois swept into the office with Abigail Montgomery, Caroline Biste, and several other reporters. Clark watched her carefully, but he saw no signs of her overnight stay at the office. Only her hair was still slightly damp, curling into a mass of raven waves in the absence of a hair dryer. It relieved him to see that Lois didn't seem as harried as she had been just before he left for Mexico.

Now is as good a time as ever to face her. I just hope Perry hasn't riled her up too much...

Lois glanced up from her desk, ready to snap at Perry for bothering her about the damn conference again, and saw Clark sidling into her office instead. He was watching the editor as if concerned that Perry might catch him out of his department, and then turned to Lois with a nervous smile. "Um, hi," he said.

She had a brief moment of *déjà vu*, his coming into the office like that, most especially due to the way that her eyes seemed to no longer acknowledge the disguise. Only that goofy smile stopped Lois' suddenly train-wrecked feeling, the reminder that both the men she had always cared for were behind those glasses. Her heart ached suddenly then, too strongly to ignore, to just forget the consequences and go to him now. Forget Richard, forget the audience they'd have. Just tell him everything, right here and now...

And then she felt like an idiot.

They had promised to leave all that mess behind; she had given her word yesterday that they would get past all of it, not to mention last night's decisions on the matter. For a moment, she couldn't look away now that they were in the same room, but shook it off. Glancing away, she murmured to her former partner in almost her normal tone, "Good morning, Clark. Thank you for coming by. Close the door, would you?" There was a pause as he did so, then Lois dropped of management pretenses to ask cautiously, her gaze averted, "Hi. Feeling any better? No worlds to save on the way home?"

"No, not this time," Clark replied, still a little unsure of where he stood with her. "I... While I was in Mexico, this attorney, Karla Smith-Bennett, called me about the Vanderworth case. I guess she got my number when I worked in City and then took two months to call." He shrugged and laid the notes on Lois' desk. "Did a quick background check, she seems legit. Here's everything I could find on her in a hurry, and her callback numbers. I think she could help."

A fresh lead on Luthor's trail could be invaluable at this point, most of her own having gone dead a while back. And his resources were usually better, whether she had ever wanted to admit it or not. At least these days she knew why. Nonetheless... Lois arched an eyebrow. "Thanks ... but I'm not exactly a beat reporter anymore, you know."

Clark smiled at her knowingly. Sarcasm he could handle. "Uh-huh. That's why no one else is investigating the Vanderworth case, right? And that's why I saw your car parked up the street from the mansion a few days before I left."

Lois tried to look outraged, but it was too true. What did you say to someone who could check up on you with remote vision? At last she simply muttered, "Shut up."

He grinned and chuckled. "You're running it down on your own time, aren't you? Lois, you've never quit on a case. Never. If you think Perry wouldn't let you take it, you just won't tell him. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, isn't that your motto?"

His reaction to the entire thing was a million miles from what Richard's would have been. His light, taunting tone startled a laugh out of her, and for a moment it was like old times. It had been a rare moment when he'd scolded her very hard, she remembered, even when he caught her in a dangerous situation. Even as Clark, her most skeptical critic at such moment, he had always been just a bit exasperated. As Superman, he would only chide her gently, usually touching her cheek. He had always understood her so well, better than anyone else ever had. That was what she had missed the most, if she was honest.

At that laughter, so free and for once without the bitter edge he'd grown used to hearing, Clark's heart broke a little more. Once upon a time, he could've coaxed a laugh from her two or three times a day, been blessed by her fond smile as often. Lately, though, he had missed her happiness...

"All right, smart guy," Lois said in a mock-warning tone, a little half-smile lurking around her lips. As much a soft touch as she felt for letting something so simple affect her, she couldn't dismiss the relief it afforded her. Which she *tried* to dismiss. Although, there was one thing she

need to know...

Reaching for the manila folder, she opened it and glanced at the contents before drawing, "I take it then that you don't plan to rat me out Perry or Richard then? Or make any dire pronouncements about putting myself in danger? Something like that? I mean, it *is* part of your job." Her hazel eyes came up to look into his, waiting somewhat anxiously for his reply in spite of herself.

"Well, if you already know what I ought to be telling you not to do, and I already know you won't listen, what's the point of actually saying the words?" he asked almost rhetorically. Lois shrugged, lowering her gaze to the folder again. Clark felt almost as though he was pushing his luck to continue their good-natured banter, especially considering what he wanted to ask her later on, when he had figured out how to frame the question. *So, Lois, are they mine?* just seemed too bald a query. Instead he kept on with the repartee for which the pair of them had once been infamous. "The same goes for telling Perry. You wouldn't listen to *him*, either; you've had selective hearing as long as I've known you."

Those hazel eyes rocketed back up to his with a hint of affront in them. "I beg your pardon, Emperor of Eavesdroppers, you said something about *my* hearing?"

Clark wasn't sure if the remark was just mock-vicious or truly venomous, and he hastily backtracked. "I'm sorry, Lois, I had no right to presume..."

"Clark, stop," and her voice was gentler. "I did call truce, didn't I?"

His blue eyes widened at that, the memory of her voice in the night haunting him even after he had woken. "You ... you really said that? I thought I was still dreaming..." Remembering the subject of that dream, of her delicate hand on his arm, her voice so warm and knowing, Clark suddenly blushed and looked away.

What on earth...? Lois thought, her own eyes widening. *No, it couldn't be.* "Uh-huh. Yeah, well ... I really said 'truce.' Not that it'll be easy, but..."

He suddenly glanced over his shoulder at the door and frowned. "Richard's on his way in. Lois ... I'll talk to you later?"

"Sure," she said, glancing out the door as well. "That's *all* I need right now. Thanks for the info, Clark."

He was already at the door as Richard walked in on the opposite end of the bullpen. "You're welcome, Lois," Clark replied as he stepped out of her office, pitching his voice to carry. "I know you'll see it gets to the right person."

Lowering her voice so that only he could hear, Lois caught his gaze and whispered, "No, really ... *thank you.*"

The only reply he could make was a smile as he left, followed quickly by a little wave to Jimmy and an innocent, friendly, "Hi," to Richard. Lois, watching him head back over to International, saw the speculative look on her fiancé's face, saw also how exhausted he looked. *Jerk*, her mind growled with a momentary lack of sympathy for Richard, and she turned resolutely back to her morning's work.

Richard's eyes felt gritty, and his temper frayed, but he showed up for work anyway. At least the twins had been reasonably good that morning, only squabbling once and briefly; Lois' absence seemed to have turned them somber.

His mood was not improved by the sight of Kent leaving Lois' office as he walked in. But Richard replied to his greeting with what he hoped was a natural smile, and headed for Lois' office.

Perry waylaid him, though, and practically dragged him into the center office. "Just what the hell did you think you were doing yesterday, skipping out like that?" the editor barked.

Richard's eyes narrowed, and the calm façade began to crumble. "Uncle Perry, I do not need this right now."

"Yes, you do, and knock off that 'Uncle Perry' crap when I'm giving you a lecture," Perry snapped back. "Don't think you can get away with giving yourself a half-holiday just because you're my nephew."

"I don't think that, *Mr. White*," Richard growled. "I think I can take half a day off because I'm the managing editor who rescued your whole International department, *and* because I haven't called in sick in three years, *and also* because if I'd seen Lois yesterday we probably would have had our extremely ugly fight *here* in front of the rumor mill!"

"*That* wouldn't have been a problem because Lane wasn't here, either!"

"Oh, and I don't suppose you yelled at *her* like this, did you?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I didn't," Perry replied hotly. "One, she *asked* to leave - to get the kids. Two, she came in early today to make it up. Actually she came *back* last night, but regardless, she was here before me this morning, and you're not. And three, I never yell at Lois like this. For her I yell a hell of a lot louder and I use more profanity, too!"

Richard felt all of the anger and frustration and sorrow rise up in his throat like bile, but he bit his tongue and held it back. This was his uncle *and* his boss, after all. Perry didn't deserve the emotional equivalent of being puked on, no matter how much of a jerk he was at the moment. "Fine. Fine. I shouldn't have skipped out and I won't do it again. Happy?"

Perry crossed his arms and furrowed his brow. "No. I wish I knew what the hell was going on with you and Lois. Better yet, I wish I knew how to fix it." Then the paternal concern vanished beneath the editor's scowl. "I'm getting sick of my best reporters being off their form."

Exhausted, everything he had learned and suspected warring inside him, Richard gave up. *You're not the only one who's sick of it*, he thought, and offered Perry a crisp Air Force salute. "Sir, yes sir. I will no longer pursue a personal life if it affects my career, sir. Permission to go apologize to my fiancée, sir?"

Perry sighed heavily. The boy had been through the ringer, from the looks of him, and he was now apparently beyond everything but tired humor. "Fine, go on. But don't ever try this b.s. again."

Richard left without another word, glancing over at the international department as he did so. Clark was there at his desk, starting work as usual, looking as if everything was perfectly normal. Richard didn't know whether to envy or pity him, or some mixture of both. Sighing, he went to Lois's office and closed the door behind him gently.

She looked up, hazel eyes stormy, mouth tight with anger, and her whole body gone defensive. "What do you want? Here to take another couple potshots at me?" Lois said in low, even tones that still conveyed her tension.

Holding up both hands, Richard counted to five before he answered. "I'm here to negotiate a ceasefire." *Mainly because it's the only way I'll ever get you to tell me who the twins' real father is. And because I discovered I don't sleep well without you in the house at least.*

His only answer was a fine dark brow, arching up questioningly.

"Look, Lois, I was a jackass, okay? Sometimes I wonder if you really do care about me or not, especially when you don't tell me things, but that was not the way to start talking about it.

I apologize. Can we just sweep last night under the rug and try again?"

Lois groaned, letting her head fall into her hands. "Richard, I wouldn't have moved in with you in the first place if I didn't care about you. I wouldn't have let my *twins* anywhere near you if I didn't care about you."

He bit his lip again at *my twins* but let it pass, coming closer to lightly touch her shoulder. "I had a bad day yesterday, and you had an enormously awful one. Let's just let it be for now, okay? For the twins' sake? They were mostly quiet and well-behaved this morning, and they didn't ask where you were. I think they heard us fighting; neither of us wants them exposed to that."

She closed her eyes tightly, knowing Kala had to have heard it. Had to. Nothing else on earth could make her want to curl up in a shivering ball of tears and self-pity quite like the thought that she was being a bad - or even a mediocre - mother. "Fine. I was a little sharp with you, too. Let's just forget about it and move on." She looked up at him, a sheen of moisture in those eyes, but he saw the deep steel in her underneath that. "Richard, no woman *ever* tells a man *all* her secrets. If you care about me, stop digging."

"Okay. I love you." For the moment, he would stop. But Richard's mind was filled with the image of his father trying to patch up the spreading crack in his wall, plaster drying on his forearms, cussing the thing under his breath. They'd known all along that patching it was just a temporary solution; the wall would never be sound again with the growth of the tree and the weight of the house both pulling it in opposite directions. "I just worry about us, Lois..."

Lois sighed heavily. "Here, you still want an answer? Yes. Yes, it was romantic. No, we never actually dated, I wouldn't have called him my boyfriend, but yeah, we were more than just friends. Then he left me without even a goodbye, and it was over. There." Even as she looked up at him, she kept her thoughts from showing on her face. *In the middle of that, I found out my crush and my best pal were the same person, and we were both so giddy with the end of secrets that we did something a bit stupid, and being together almost cost us the world, literally, so we broke up and he stole my memories. Two months later he was gone, and eight months after that I had his twins. Kal-El's twins.*

Some of it showed; Richard knew she was still hiding something, even had an idea what it was. *And then you went to Paris to find him, and you found someone else there. Someone who comforted you when you were lonely. And his name wasn't Garen; I proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt this morning.* He had lost his taste for confrontation, though, and let it pass. Not that he wasn't still heartsore, still feeling that vague dread like freefall way too close to the ground. Richard just didn't want to fight anymore. He kissed the top of her head and said, "Thank you for telling me."

Lois had reached a similar state of mind, and remembered with an ironic twist the way she had whispered *truce* to the wind. "You're welcome."

Just then, Perry stuck his head in the door. "Time's up, nephew, if you haven't made up by now you won't succeed at it today anyway. Lane - where's that article on the fire yesterday?"

Lois opened her mouth, froze, and then slowly closed it with an expression of dawning horror. "Oh, *shit*." She smacked her palm against her forehead, feeling a terrible kind of betrayal - *I never miss a deadline, I never let anyone else get to the scene first, and I never sleep with anyone I work with. Now I've screwed up two out of three - nice going, Lane.* "Goddamn *idiot*. Perry, how much time do we have before the afternoon edition deadline?"

"You haven't even *started* yet?" the editor asked incredulously. "When you were here *all night*?"

"How much time, Perry?"

He glanced at his watch. "About two hours 'til we have to leave for the conference. You better type *fast*, Lane. And God help you if I hold a space on the front page for you and you don't get it finished."

In her precarious mood, she didn't dare to answer. Lois only swung away from both of them, booted up her computer, and got out her notes in silence. After a moment, Perry nodded, and took Richard's elbow. "C'mon, son, time to let Lois earn her keep. Something you might want to think about doing today, too."

Two hours later, Lois' eyewitness account of the fire was finished *and* proofread, and the reporter herself was on her way out of the city room with Perry. The editor was oozing with smug satisfaction; not only had he goaded his three best reporters into seriously putting their noses to the grindstone, he'd scared the Olsen kid into getting some work done as well. Best of all, Lois was going to an executive conference and for once not complaining about how she was a *reporter*, not a pencil-pushing middle manager.

He didn't see Kent glance up as they passed International, didn't see Lois meet his look for a heartbeat and then turn away almost shyly, without the frigid glare she would've given him before. Nor did he see Kent's eyes follow them both out of the room and to the elevator, unhindered by doors and walls, though Lois felt his gaze still on her.

None of them saw Richard in his office, watching Kent watching them. He was not entirely happy with the way things had gone this morning; he needed more data before he would let his suspicion become a theory. And then Richard saw the perfect source of info walk past the doors. *Olsen. I bet there's not much he doesn't notice about Lois. All three of them were thick as thieves back in the day.*

Clark, still looking after Lois and worried by her somber mood, heard Perry ask as they entered the elevator, "Just what *were* you working on all night if not the fire?" And as the doors closed, Clark saw the wide-eyed look she turned on him, all but saw the words *uh-oh* flashing neon over her head as she demurred. But he didn't have long to contemplate that incident, because he heard his own name from the city room.

He didn't need his particular vision to see trouble brewing this time. Richard was over at Jimmy's desk looking down at the hanging files full of photos, trying to seem casual but failing. "Looks like you have a bunch of office pictures from way back. Is that Perry before his cardiologist made him stop smoking cigars? Mind if I look?"

Storm Warning

Jimmy Olsen was in the throes of one of his rare fits of organizing. In theory, a better filing system would make finding photos simpler and faster, which in turn would leave him more time for actually taking the shots that would advance his career. In practice, the more organized he got, the harder it was to find things that weren't in their long-accustomed places. That didn't stop the young photographer from occasionally succumbing to the siren call of brand-new file folders with color-coded tabs, however, and at the moment Jimmy had several years' worth of pictures sprawled across his desk as he tried to update his filing system.

At first he didn't even see Richard walk up to his desk, and the international editor's voice startled him. "Looks like you have a bunch of office pictures from way back. Is that Perry before his cardiologist made him stop smoking cigars? Mind if I look?"

Jimmy looked up quickly, almost dropping the handful of folders he was trying to fit into his filing cabinet, and then smiled. "Sure. Some of these go back to before Clark started working here." *Go on and look, but don't be surprised at what you see.*

Richard started leafing through the photos on the desk, ostensibly looking at his uncle (Perry had never been without a cigar in the old days, even if he didn't always light it, he always had one), but really looking at Lois. Jimmy knew he probably had more shots of her than anyone without a crush ever needed, and Richard noticed that, too.

"You've got a lot of Lois here," her fiancé said offhandedly.

"She's a good subject," Jimmy replied just as casually, twitching an office candid out of the stack. "See here? Terrible lighting, but with her coloring she still shows up well. Good contrast. Besides, Ms. Lane never runs from the camera like some people." He showed Richard a picture of Lois smiling broadly, while Perry tried to skulk out of the frame with a scowl. "She's such a ham sometimes," he added, pulling out a few more.

As if by accident, Jimmy chose another that showed Lois grinning at his lens, having hopped up on a desk and crossed her legs to better show off her white skirt. It happened to be Clark's desk, and the edge of the shot captured his face. His expression was a complicated mixture of surprise and a touch of embarrassment, but his appreciation of the view was also quite clear.

Richard's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned, but all he said was, "It's amazing how much leg she has for someone so petite."

Jimmy didn't smile. He liked Richard well enough; he was a good guy, great with twins, and he adored Lois. But he wasn't Clark. Since realizing Lois thought of him as a cute little brother, James B. Olsen had always secretly hoped that his best friend would finally win her. *Have a good look, Mr. White. See what you interrupted. Well, actually, Clark interrupted it himself when he left for six years, but if you hadn't come along and pestered her into going out with you, I bet they'd already be back together. Clark's a lot less shy since he traveled the world, and I've seen some pretty intense looks going back and forth between the two of them. Besides, he loves her so much it practically surrounds him like a halo. If anyone here deserves Lois, it's him.*

Jimmy filed several shots of just Lois into their own folder, which was unlabelled. He had to remember to show some of those to Clark, just in case he needed to replace either of the snapshots Jimmy had given him years ago. Even with the best and most attentive care, pictures that old tended to yellow. The newer photo papers lasted much longer.

Richard was now investigating the group candid, what Jimmy thought of as the family photos. There were a lot of shots of Clark, Lois, and Perry in that stack, along with people

from all the Daily Planet departments. A majority of them had been taken at various company Christmas parties and other functions. The infamous 'premonition' snapshot was in there, Loueen kissing Perry under the mistletoe, the editor trying to look annoyed but not succeeding in the slightest.

And Richard saw it, smiling as he picked it up, but the smile melted off his face as he caught a glimpse of the shot immediately below it. This was the same Christmas party, from the year just before Clark left, and the same bunch of mistletoe hanging by the door. Lois was caught in the act of dodging away from it, her hazel eyes glaring up at the parasitic plant. At the edge of the frame, Grizzly Lombard scowling in disappointment at having missed her.

Much closer, Clark watched Lois, beginning to laugh at her adept evasion. He wasn't trying to maneuver her under the mistletoe like Lombard had been, just watching. Jimmy sat back and said nothing as Richard perused the pictures, seeing how many of them had Lois either grinning devilishly at Clark or Clark smiling wistfully at Lois. The two years they'd worked here together were chronicled in those snapshots, and they painted a picture of another relationship Richard knew nothing about.

"Wow. I never realized how close Lois and Clark were," Richard said to Jimmy.

"Well, they were best friends," Jimmy explained. "Didn't people tell you about the stories they ran down together?"

"The stories, yeah," Richard muttered. Then he looked seriously at the photographer and said, "You know them both better than anybody, Jimmy. Did you ever think ... something else was going on?"

Jimmy just raised his eyebrows and looked completely innocent. "Something else? Like what?"

"Like maybe they were more than friends." Richard was looking at the pictures now, avoiding Jimmy's questioning gaze.

"Oh." *Now how do I handle this? Tell him I don't think there was ever more between them, but I always thought there should've been? Back in those days, Clark was the only one here besides me and the Chief who really cared about her, and Perry and I were disqualified by age. The rest of the guys here just wanted to get in her pants. Clark cared - he still cares. He's the only one who deserved to be with her. But it's not like I don't know that Richard loves her, even if I don't think they're perfect for each other.* Jimmy took a deep breath.

"They were *best* friends, Mr. White. They had to be, to work together the way they did. And they cared a lot about each other." He paused, then shrugged. "Clark probably liked her, you know, more-than-friends liked her, but he's always been a gentleman."

"What about Lois? Do you think she liked him, and maybe nothing ever happened just because they had to work together every day?"

No way am I going there. "Hey, if I could read Lois' mind, Mr. White, I wouldn't get yelled at so much. Maybe she did. Maybe she just thought he was a nice guy, and the only one around here she could trust."

"Hmm."

Clark was bent over his desk, pretending to work, while listening to Jimmy's conversation with Richard. He was also looking at the same photos, thinking that Jimmy's pictures of Lois were clearly framed by Love's eye, and all but reliving the memories those snapshots carried. Jimmy even still had the full picture from which the one on his desk - hidden behind the photo of Ma - had been cropped. That one was from the last Christmas party, Lois lounging in a chair

after a couple of drinks, a sweet unguarded smile on her face, that incredible red dress...

She'd walked into the party, fashionably late, wearing that long black coat that covered her from neck to ankles. Someone laughed, someone else kidded her, "A trench coat? Some party dress, Lane!" And then Lois had smiled wickedly and shrugged the coat off her shoulders, letting it land on someone's chair. The exclamations and wolf whistles had startled everyone who wasn't looking her way, and Lois stalked to the punch bowl like a queen moving through a crowd of her adoring subjects. Hair down and wavy, lying night-black over her pale, bare shoulders, the vivid crimson of the dress in high contrast. It wasn't really all that racy; it was just that she wore it so very well... Clark had almost forgotten to breathe while he watched her, love and longing wrapped so taut around his heart he thought it would burst... And as everyone was leaving, she had hugged him tightly enough to leave the scent of her perfume on his clothes, and kissed his cheek...

The phrase "more than friends" yanked Clark's attention back to the present. It made him uneasy to hear them talking about him, especially with the direction Richard's questions seemed to be leading. Jimmy seemed to be avoiding a straight answer, for which Clark was grateful.

While he was wondering what would be the best way to distract Richard from his current line of thought, his phone rang. Momentarily startled, he answered it. "Daily Planet International Department, Kent speaking, can I help you?"

"Kent? C'est Henri Archambault. Parlez-vous français?" The reply had a heavy Quebecois accent, and this was the source he'd been trying to reach for his newest article. The man was notoriously difficult to get hold of ... no way he could pass up this call.

"Oui, je parle français. Merci pour retourner mon appel, Monsieur Archambault. Je voudrais vous demander..."

Clark soon found himself so absorbed in the call that he had to tune out Richard and Jimmy. Hopefully, the photographer wouldn't say anything incriminating...

Several minutes later, he hung up the phone with a sigh of relief. In addition to the immigration story, he now had an extremely knowledgeable source to quote for Quebec's continued desire to secede from Canada.

"I didn't realize you spoke French so fluently," Richard said from the other side of the desk, and Clark jumped.

"Gosh, I didn't even hear you walk up," he replied, keeping his face open and innocent while his stomach churned. "I took French in high school. And college. I like it a lot."

"Your accent's flawless," Richard told him, and there was that intensity about him, that slight narrowing of his eyes. "You'd sound right at home in Paris. Ever been there?"

"Oh, a couple times."

"I used to visit all the time when I lived in London," Richard said. "Hey, what years did you go to Paris? We might've just barely missed meeting each other."

Clark panicked a little then. He'd been to France many times, actually, but not as Clark Kent. The only time he could remember actually using his passport was the time he'd gone to the French observatory outside Paris to see what everyone had thought was Krypton. So he stammered a little as he named the year. "That was my first stop, you know, on my big trip around the world."

Richard's eyes lit up with an almost savage expression of triumph, but he damped it down quickly. For a moment, he'd looked almost like Lois when she'd shot him... Chills ran down Clark's spine. *He knows. He knows something. The last public save I did as Superman was*

that woman who fell into the Seine - how could I be so stupid? How could he not make the connection when I practically drew him a map? Oh, dear God, what am I going to do now?

But Richard's voice was very calm as he replied, "Yeah, I was in London then. Couldn't get away 'til summer, though. Oh well, I guess it's better we met working here, right? I hear enough crap about being Perry's nephew, it'd be worse if I'd been friends with the star reporter years ago, too."

Clark tried to chuckle, but it sounded a little rusty to his own ears. "Oh, no, I'm not the star reporter. Lois is."

"Lois isn't a beat reporter anymore," Richard replied, a glint in his eyes. "A lot has changed about Lois while you were gone."

Clark met his gaze with a faintly puzzled expression, trying not to remember Lois' mouth on his only yesterday, nor the things both hurtful and truthful she'd said to him later.

Perhaps they would've said something else, perhaps something they would both regret, but Clark's eyes went unfocused as he picked up a sound he was beginning to dread. *Fire engines? Not again!*

A moment later, someone monitoring the police bands yelled, "Holy crap! The French consulate's on fire!"

Perry and Lois were both gone. Richard gave Clark a twisted grin. "You're the one who speaks French, Kent. Get down there."

Clark just nodded, grabbing a tape recorder for the look of it. He was running for the air shaft before the reporters in City had even figured out who should go. Richard stuck his head in the bullpen and called out, "Jimmy! Head down to the consulate - I bet Superman will show up there pretty soon. One of you guys from city go, too - I've got Kent covering the international angle."

"Kent?" someone grouched. "Great, there goes the whole story. I'm not wasting my time. He's too damned good."

"The international angle?" someone else complained. "What international angle? This's Metropolis' arsonist!"

"Yes, the international angle," Richard said sweetly. "Because the French consulate is technically foreign soil. Your precious pet Metropolis firebug just targeted another nation for the first time. I'd say that's news, wouldn't you?" Into the utter silence that followed his chiding, he continued, "No volunteers? Gil, go for it. Get moving!"

He turned back to his own department just a second too late to see the look Ron had been giving him.

Lana left Agi's office smiling. One minor detail in the write-up of her fashion show had needed to be changed, something the event organizer had gotten wrong, not the *Daily Planet* staff. Ms. Vega had been very professional about it, promising to take care of the correction immediately, and getting that done so quickly left Lana with a large blank space on her schedule for the day. On a whim, she decided to go see Clark.

She arrived, unfortunately, only a few minutes after he'd left to catch the consulate story. "Sorry you missed him," Richard told her. He had just happened to be by Kent's desk, not nosing around at all, when she walked up. "I don't expect him back for an hour or two, but I can give him a message for you if you'd like."

"Oh, no, that's all right," Lana demurred. "I was just hoping he was free for lunch. I've only got an hour or so to kill."

"Hey, my lunch offer still stands," Richard said impulsively. It would be nice, for once, to spend an hour with someone who wasn't connected to the *Planet*, its rivalries, its demands, its gossip... "We can call it a business lunch and put it on the expense account; you're going to have shows in Paris and Milan, right?"

Lana laughed. "I don't think that quite qualifies as international news, Mr. White..."

"Please," he replied. The more Richard thought about it, the better the idea seemed. Lana was pleasant company, and he needed to talk to someone with whom he wasn't involved. "My uncle is Mr. White. I'm Richard. Although around here I mostly answer to Hey, You."

She smiled, and asked a trifle shyly, "Are you sure your fiancée will understand?"

A brief flash of something in his eyes, anger or annoyance, and then Richard chuckled. "At the rate things are going, I doubt she'd notice. Besides, this is business - you're a news source, Ms. Lang."

Against her better judgment, Lana let that handsome grin sway her.

Superman had never made any distinctions between nations; when the need of him existed, he answered it. The fact that the French consulate was technically foreign soil didn't slow him in the least.

This time, he was on guard, listening carefully for anything that might be a timer. *Same nitromethane, but no bombs so far. No delayed ignitions either. Why is his M.O. so different each time?*

He had little time to ponder it, though. This fire involved fewer people, but they were less amenable to the idea of fleeing the building and leaving their precious documents behind. All in all, he was kept too busy to wonder about much more than how many people were left inside, and whether the fire had smoldered into life again.

After it was all over, while dodging the press, his worries returned. *This arsonist is unlike any other in Metropolis' history. Some of his targets are much more elaborate than others; some seem political, others just seem calculated to create the greatest havoc possible. I'm beginning to wonder if this is the work of one man...*

Of course, there's always the possibility that Luthor's mixed up in it somewhere. Though I would expect Luthor's plans to have more rhyme and reason to them.

Boredom lay on Lois' skin like a swarm of ants, making her irritable and frustrated. The investments representative had been going on for more than ten minutes about the side of the business that interested her the least, and she found herself wondering if there was any way to escape the meeting. *If I see one more bar graph, I'm going to find out how far up that guy's nose I can stick this pen. Maybe if I pretend to have a migraine ... or the flu ... or Ebola...*

Her cell phone suddenly vibrated in her pocket, and Lois glanced at it under the table. "New text message," the screen read. Intrigued - even a wrong number would capture her attention at that point - she read it.

MS LANE. FIRE, FRENCH CONSULATE. SUSPECT: YSTDY'S ARSONIST. And it was sent from Jimmy's phone.

Lois leaned a little closer to Perry and hissed, "The French consulate is on fire! Jimmy just texted me. Looks like our firebug is at it again!"

"Damn," he muttered. "And I'm stuck *here*. Well, they'll send somebody."

"What if they send someone like Polly?" Lois whispered. "Neither one of us are there to make sure it's done right!"

"I could've been there if I'd trusted you to come to this thing without me," Perry replied out of the side of his mouth. "Ask Jimmy who went."

WHO COVERING? Lois tapped the little keys rapidly, and got a reply in seconds.

CLARK, GIL, ME.

"Clark? Clark?! He's bloody International!" she muttered. Not quietly enough, apparently, for several of the large men in suits sitting around the table glared at her, and Perry's elbow caught her ribs.

"Continue on, gentlemen, I've got Lane monitoring the pressroom for me," he said aloud, then grumbled, "It's an *embassy*, Lois, its International's baby."

"It's *in* Metropolis though."

"Technically, it's on foreign soil..."

"Bullshit," Lois growled. "It's surrounded on all sides by Metropolis, so it's City."

Perry was looking over her shoulder at the tiny screen. "Hell, one reporter from each department and a photographer. What more do you want, Lane?"

Lois glared at him and thought of another question. WHO SENT?

It took Jimmy a minute to work out what she was asking, then he responded, RICHARD SENT US.

Hazel eyes narrowed, and Lois glared at Perry. "I could've been on this one if only..."

"Hell, no, you couldn't," the editor growled. "Last time you went after a story you forgot your car!"

"That was different!"

Just as Perry opened his mouth to reply, he noticed how the rest of the board was watching them instead of the Powerpoint presentation. "Well? Is this a meeting or a spectator sport?"

Richard found Lana very easy to talk to. Perhaps *too* easy to talk to. "I just think, if you really love someone, you shouldn't keep secrets from them," he said, and speared a piece of grilled chicken.

Lana leaned on her palm and looked at him wryly. "So you want a dating resume? A list of everyone she's ever seen, all the way back to her first kiss? What would you do if she asked that of you? You went to college after the Air Force - don't tell me your list wouldn't be longer than hers, *if* you could remember all the names."

Richard paused, thinking, and then said, "Okay, you got me there. I was a stupid kid in college. But I don't want to know everyone she's ever been with, just the important ones."

"Oh. Just the *famous* ones." Lana chuckled and had a bite of her salad. "Has it ever occurred to you that she might not be trying to keep secrets? She might just be trying to respect his privacy."

"His *privacy*? He's *Superman*, he shows up on *radar*, Lana!"

"I know, that's precisely my point," the redhead replied, gesturing at him with her fork. "*Everyone* knows Superman. They know everything about him, they think. Don't you hate reading about celebrities in the tabloid papers? Don't you pity the people who have to live like that, everyone taking pictures of them at six AM when they're just trying to run to the corner store for some milk? And if they look awful doing it, the pictures get even more coverage. He has *no* private life, except with her. Can't you see why Lois would *never* talk about anything that happened between them?"

Richard opened his mouth to reply, then slowly closed it. Lana soldiered on.

"Furthermore, how could they ever have a real relationship? It's not as if he can take her to a movie or a restaurant. He's a six-four hunk in a bright primary suit. Not exactly unobtrusive, Mr. White. It had to be a very strange relationship, one that probably doesn't fit into any easily-labeled pigeonhole. If she really cares about him, she'll never talk about what happened. Not even to you - not that it's your business, either."

"It's none of my business?" Richard's voice rose slightly.

"None. That was years before you met her. She's not trying to leave you for him, is she? Seems like she's pretty upset with him still, from TV yesterday." Lana leaned forward to make her point more firmly. "*He's no threat to you, Richard.* You're smart, you've got a good sense of humor, you're handsome, you have a good job and lots of other great stuff going for you. Just let it be! Stop being a reporter for five minutes and ask yourself how you'd feel if she started grilling you about all those awestruck college girls."

Totally nonplussed by the question, Richard could only sit back in his chair and stare at Lana. The litany of his good points was very helpful to his ego, even if it was unexpected. "I ... I guess you're right..."

Lana rolled her eyes heavenward. "The man sees sense! Just don't harass the poor woman into doing anything stupid, and you'll be all right."

His eyes narrowed. "There *is* one more thing, though."

"Oh, dear God, what now?"

"The twins' father."

Lana peered at him over her glass of iced tea. "What about him? You *knew* they weren't yours. And he's clearly out of the picture, too. Unless... You don't think..."

"Nah, they're not *his*," Richard said. "She told me she'd never ... you know. And I kind of believe her. Anyway, he's an alien. I mean, come on. Nobody ever thinks about that because he looks just like us, but who knows if he could successfully hybridize with a human? Even if he could, I doubt the kids would be so normal. Other than being precocious and having some health problems, they're just regular kids. No picking up cars, no laser vision, none of that."

Lana just looked at him interestedly. "Okay, so if *he's* not the father, why are you so determined to figure out who is?"

Richard sighed. "Because I have a pretty good idea already who it is, and I think he deserves to know. It's no one from the *Quotidienne*, I know that. She said the father was a guest columnist, and she hinted that Jason's middle name is for him, but that paper has never had a Garen in its byline. The only Garen in Paris that even heard of her worked in the office across the street and happened to meet her for coffee a few times."

"Just *how* do you know all this?"

"Because I called them all. That last one, his boyfriend of the past twelve years answered the phone, so I know it's not him."

Lana dropped her fork and put her head in her hands. "My God, Richard, if she ever finds out about that, she'll kill you. You do know that, right? I only met her yesterday, and *I* know that."

"I know Lois," Richard said. "Like I said, I'm pretty sure I know who it is. But before I confront her, I have to prove to her that I know all her explanations are lies. Lois will never back down as long as there's a shred of chance she can brazen something out. I have to have evidence."

"Okay, fine, Sherlock. Who is it?"

Richard sipped his coffee, a beverage he believed complimented every meal including

dessert. "Nope. I'm not telling anyone until I know for sure, and then I'm telling *her*."

The redhead glared at him. "You mean after all that, you're not even going to share your suspicions? It's not like we know any of the same people!"

"I thought you said you hated gossips," he replied.

Lana's green eyes narrowed still further. "Oh, that's low. That's really low. Fine, Mr. Holmes. I *was* going to split the check, but since you made me eat my own words for dessert, *you* get to pay."

"I already planned to," Richard chuckled, "I'm putting it on the expense account."

Richard made it back to the office first, dropping Lana off on the way. Gil and Jimmy were next, claiming not to have seen Clark at the fire at all, but about fifteen minutes after they left to work on the article and develop photos, Clark turned up at Richard's desk with a typed rough draft of his own take on the events. He seemed puzzled that Gil and Jimmy hadn't seen him; he'd certainly seen them, and told Richard that Jimmy's photos would probably be front-page stuff.

Things had barely settled down in the office again when Lois and Perry got back from the meeting. Richard heard their raised voices before they ever got into the bullpen, and steeled himself for a confrontation with one or both of them. *The world would be a better place if I spiked the coffeemaker in here with Xanax*, he thought.

"Oh, bite me," Lois snapped as she shoved open the door.

"I can't, my cardiologist told me I had to give up cheesecake," Perry retorted.

Lois came to a sudden halt, and whirled to look at him incredulously. Half the reporters in the room instinctively buried themselves in their work, hoping not to attract notice. Perry just walked on by Lois, adding, "I knew there was a reason I don't take you out in public."

After a few minutes, she laughed, surprising everyone who expected to hear another extensive recital of profanity. "Nice one, White," Lois chuckled, a hand on her hip as she leaned against Jimmy's desk. "You're still a jerk, though."

At his office door, Perry shot a glowering look over his shoulder at her. "*You're* the one who brought the whole meeting to a screeching halt because you couldn't go chase a firebug, Lane. After scaring everyone half to death and then leaving early yesterday, don't be surprised if I start locking you in your own office!"

"Try it and die," she muttered, but she still had half a smile on her face. Once the old man had entered his lair, Lois stood up with every intention of going straight to her own office and getting some work done with what was left of the day, when something caught her eye. On her way out earlier, she had heard Jimmy comment that he was going to try to get some of his older exposures in some semblance of order. Seems he'd been in the middle of that when the story broke. Unable to help her curiosity, she leaned closer for a better look.

Once she did, it was clear that it was old pictures of the *Planet* employees, from before the twins were even a thought. In a couple of the photos on the top of the pile she spotted a familiar dark-haired girl and smiled. *Well, since there are pictures of me in here, not to mention him and Perry, I doubt he'd mind if I looked.*

What she saw made a small thoughtful smile come to her lips. As she shuffled the photos around, recalling the events of the pictures, memories of the past rose around her. One snapshot half-buried under the others fell out, Clark's face captured in a moment of absolute shock tinged with moral horror, and it provoked a particularly vivid flashback...

Right after Perry's infamous "most important interview since God talked to Moses"

meeting, Lois had been thinking about various ways to snag an interview with the mysterious flying man who had saved her life. Perhaps if she lay down on some train tracks...

Clark's voice, hesitant: "Ah, Lois ... about tonight..."

"Mm? What about tonight, Clark?"

She'd only been giving him half her attention, and he smiled shyly. "Our date. Well, our dinner. Don't you remember?"

Damn. She needed to get that interview before anyone else did. "Sorry, Clark. I must've forgot."

His face fell, and she felt like a heel. The poor guy, it had probably taken every ounce of nerve he possessed to ask her in the first place. "Gee, I planned on it all week..." he said resignedly.

She'd sighed, not having much resistance to the sad, hopeful puppy-eyes, and said, "All right, Clark. I'll go out with you. Might as well get it over with."

Clark had brightened immediately. "You're wonderful, Lois. Where would you like to go?"

Teasing a little, she'd grinned and said, "How about the Gold Room at the Park Towers?"

He'd gulped. "The Gold Room? But that's the most expensive place in town."

Seeing his expression, she'd been ready to say she was joking, to suggest someplace else, but Jimmy Olsen had just walked by, and heard enough to turn a very impressed look on Clark.

"Wow, Mr. Kent, are you really going to take Ms. Lane out to the Gold Room?" His voice had been full of admiration, with just a touch of envy.

Lois had watched with amusement as Clark realized he was trapped. Then he shrugged, and trying to sound suave (not precisely succeeding), he replied, "Oh, I don't know, Jimmy. Maybe ... if she's a good girl..." He dropped a wink to emphasize the last two words, but the poor man had no idea who he was dealing with yet.

When playing poker, Lois always upped the ante, no matter what her hand. Mimicking his self-satisfied wink precisely, she shot back, "And if I'm not a good girl... Let's let Jimmy take the pictures, okay?"

*As she walked off, smirking with delight at Clark's sudden blush, she heard Jimmy ask, "Boy. What do you suppose she meant by **that**, Mr. Kent?"*

Ah, old times. Good times. Still chuckling to herself over the memories, Lois continued on her way to her desk, only glancing into International once.

Richard was bent over his desk, reading something intently, and didn't even see her. But he was watching, and though mind-reading wasn't one of his talents, thank God, he seemed to smile at the same thought.

Spinning Wheels Turn

An excited yip, the clatter of claws on tile, and Talia caught up her new toy, bringing it back with her chest fur fluffed out proudly. Kitty whispered, "Good girl," as she threw it again, and the tiny Pomeranian raced to fetch it back.

Is it possible to go completely out of your mind with boredom? Kitty smiled bitterly as Talia pattered after what now looked like a disheveled mop, getting both drool and shed fur on it along with the dust from being thrown to the floor. But the woman and her dog were both amused by their sport, which was more than anyone else here was doing for them.

Lex had spent most of the last three days in the testing chamber with the new crystal console. The few times Kitty had wandered by, she'd heard Jor-El's voice droning on and on about something technical. It was creepy, listening to a dead guy - a dead *alien* guy - all day. That left Kitty with absolutely nothing to do.

Even if Lex would've let her leave the compound, she knew all too well what was above them. Miles and miles of desert, baking sand relieved only by a few puny bushes. Somewhere nearby were canyons with their own sources of water; the occasional hermit lived in them. Of course, none of them had running water or electricity, and they never noticed the partially-shielded EMP's created by Lex's experiments. But they were no more interesting to Kitty than the recording of Jor-El and his endless lectures.

She was bored, lonely, and beginning to be a little frightened, since Lex refused to tell her anything about his ultimate plans. Using his favorite toupee to play fetch with the dog seemed fitting payback to Kitty.

The phones over in International were still ringing off the hook as Lois got ready to leave; it looked as though Richard would be the one staying late today, while she got the twins. The dark-haired reporter stopped by her fiancé's department just long enough to let him know that, smiling briefly at Clark on the way out. He also had his hands full with the day's story.

Lois drove through the city, content with life - for the moment. Her working schedule meant that she normally left about an hour after the kids' school day ended, but luckily she'd found someone who would pick up the children and watch them until she or Richard could get off work. *What would I do without Barbara?* Lois mused as she headed uptown to the Thomas' house. *All she originally signed up for was giving piano lessons, and she's become the only person outside my immediate family I trust with those two. Thank God for Barbara's generous heart.*

The Audi seemed to skip through traffic, expertly driven as it was, and Lois was soon at Barbara's door. The woman who answered her knock was a pretty brunette of about Lois' own age, with an easy smile and the endless patience common only to saints and teachers. "Well, hello, Lois," Mrs. Thomas said. "I wasn't really expecting you this early, with what was on the news."

"It was the consulate this time, Barbara. We think it's the firebug again. Damage was bad, but thankfully not as bad as the last one. But Richard's department's handling this one, so..."

Lois replied with a shrug as she walked in. Kala immediately ran toward the sound of her mother's voice, trailed by Barbara's daughter Ashlyn. The dark-haired little girl did her best to tackle her mom, while Ashlyn hung back a bit, smiling shyly. Lois laughed, picking Kala up, "Hello, munchkin. Mommy missed you."

Kala hugged her neck fiercely, whispering, "Missed you, too."

Lois took a moment to just hold her daughter close, sighing with relief. There were no

words for just how much the twins' mere presence calmed her. Then she turned back to Barbara and the little girl half-hiding behind her. Tilting her head to the side, Lois grinned and waved at the child, "Hi, Ashlyn darling."

The blonde smiled adorably, but quickly ducked her head, making Barbara chuckle. "Still shy. Jason's practicing; he probably hasn't heard you yet." The two women and their girls headed for the music room, but Lois froze in the hallway when she heard what Jason was practicing. Her eyes widened as her skin paled, making Barbara ask, "Lois? What's wrong?" But the reporter couldn't answer, swept up in a flashback.

"Heart and soul, I begged to be adored; lost control, and tumbled overboard." Ella Fitzgerald's voice, Kal-El's arms around her, that fateful night ... the notes Jason was picking out on the piano with increasing confidence brought it all back. The memories overwhelming her, and almost kissing Clark in front of a thousand journalists. That terrifying, longing moment when she knew their feelings hadn't died, not completely. That song...

"Lois, are you all right?" The concern in Barbara's tone brought Lois back to the present.

She tried unsuccessfully to laugh it off, ignoring the way the hair at the nape of her neck prickled to still hear him playing it. Shaking her head comfortingly, Lois shrugged. "It's nothing, it's just ... I don't have the best associations with that song. It's silly that I reacted that way, honestly. I didn't even realize Jason knew it."

At that, her friend looked upset. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. He heard Ashlyn learning it and he wanted to play it with her. If I'd realized..."

"It's okay, really," Lois reassured her. "It's nothing terrible, just ... a reminder I hadn't quite expected right now. Don't worry. Knowing Jason, once he has it down pat he'll play it until all I can associate with it is him." *And boy, am I looking forward to **that**.*

As soon as the thought entered her head, Jason finally noticed her and looked up into hers with *his* cerulean eyes as he grinned proudly.

Lois could only smile back, even as her heart ached while recognizing it.

That little kiss you stole, held all my heart and soul.

When the story of the day seemed to be over at last, Clark headed up to the roof and took out his cell phone, hitting the first speed dial number. The way Martha's social life went, he doubted she'd even be home...

"Son! There you are. How are things in Metropolis?"

Clark had to close his eyes for a second. Just her voice, so warm and always welcoming, soothed his heart tremendously. "Hi, Ma," he replied, smiling. "Busy, that's how things are. What about you?"

"Oh, the usual," she replied. "Nancy got loose this morning and ate a pair of Ben's boots that he left on the porch. We had lunch with the new family staying at the pioneer center; they've got three children. The oldest is a very sweet, shy girl, and the two little boys, well, they're a handful."

"Ah, yeah. Speaking of children..." Clark fell silent for a long moment. How on earth did you tell your mother something like this?

"Clark? Are you there?"

"Yes, Ma," he replied, and sighed heavily. "Listen, I found something out last night, and I ... I don't know what to think now. I need to talk to you."

"Do you want to come over, son?"

This was hard enough on the phone; he doubted he could find the words face to face.

"No. Not right now, anyway. Things could get busy again soon. It's just, well ... kinda hard to talk about."

"So, start at the beginning and tell me what's happened. You know I love you, son, and nothing could ever change that."

He took a deep breath, and slowly told her about dinner with Lucy and Ron, and the revelation of Kala's name. "All of a sudden, Ma, I'm not sure. I mean, I confronted Lois about it - she was so angry with me for leaving, and then she has this fling in Paris less than a month after I'm gone? She didn't argue with me saying that; she's the one who told everyone that story. But now I realize that she probably named Kala after me, and it makes me wonder. I never thought ... I'm not even..."

"You think they might be yours?" Martha asked, so gently.

"Well..."

"You did say 'speaking of children.' And if Kala is named for you - for your other name - that's a pretty strong hint."

"But Ma ... it shouldn't be possible. It just ... I'm not *human*," his voice dropping to a whisper on the last word. "And the twins were born ten months after, you know. Shorter than nine months is common, longer is very rare. Most doctors would've induced labor well before the ten-month mark."

"Clark," Martha said, and he could almost see her rubbing her temples. "You have no idea how long a normal Kryptonian pregnancy is."

"Yes, but why would she let me say that about her affair in Paris? If it wasn't true, Lois would've corrected me. We had talked about everything else, practically."

"Son, is there a reason she would want to hide it from you, if they really are yours?"

"I don't know," Clark groaned. "I can't imagine why she would. It just doesn't make any sense to me."

Martha's voice was clearly reluctant as she brought up the other possibility. "Do think she might've had an affair - since she didn't correct you on it - and maybe she's not entirely sure whether they're yours or not?"

Silence. "It could be," Clark admitted at last. "She's ... Lois has a quick temper. It's something she might've done in revenge. I just ... I don't want to think she'd do that."

"Does it change how you feel about her if she did?"

Another long pause. "No. No, it doesn't. Ma, I love her, but I *know* her too. Lois is fully capable of being that vindictive - just like I was fully capable of being that blind. I should've known stealing the memories would infuriate her."

"Well, I just hope she realizes how lucky she is. Most men *would* be angry with her for that, whether they were the ones to leave or not," Martha opined. "But we're left without a clear answer. The twins might be yours, they might not."

"How am I going to find out?" he asked in frustration. "I can't just walk up to Lois and say, 'By the way, are those my kids?' Especially not at work."

"Clark ... have you thought about what you're going to do after you get an answer?"

He frowned. "What do you mean, Ma?"

"Well, what if the twins *are* yours? Have you thought about what that means?"

"It means I'm not alone," Clark replied, and his voice held a depth of longing that Martha had long suspected but never heard expressed. "It means Kala and Jason are probably going to need me. If they take after me at all, their lives are going to be very confusing, very difficult. They'll need my help to come to terms with whatever ... powers ... they may have."

"But what about their mother?" Martha asked gently. "Even if they are yours, she may still decide to stay with Richard. She's been with him for three years, she's wearing his ring. And it's her choice to make, Clark."

"I know, Ma," he replied wearily. "As long as she's happy... I want to be with her whether the twins are mine or not, but I know that may not happen. But if they are mine, I have a duty to them. It's ... it could get very hard, especially now that I know ... she still cares... I have to do what's right for Jason and Kala. And that might mean standing by and pretending to smile while Lois marries Richard. I'd do it for them." He ignored the way his throat seemed to swell at those words, the picture of that future all too clear: Richard kissing Lois before an altar, while Clark forced a faked smile and offered to watch the kids during the honeymoon. *That would be the hardest thing I could ever do ... but it may be what's best for everyone, especially the twins.*

Martha was quiet for a long while, knowing the sound of grief in his voice, and then she said decisively, "That's it, I'm coming up there."

That startled Clark out of his contemplation. "What? No, Ma, you don't know Lois..."

"Relax, son, I'm not going to walk up to the woman and demand to see my grandkids. But it sounds like everything is getting to you. Clark, you need someone sane around to keep you company."

At that, he smiled. "Ma, I love you dearly. But you'd hate it here in the city. Besides," and the words burned his throat slightly, "Ben would miss you."

"My son, always thinking of everyone else before himself," Martha sighed. "Well, if you're absolutely certain..."

"I'll be okay. I've just got to find my way through this on my own. But talking to you helps a lot."

"I love you, son," Martha said, "and I wish I could help you more."

"I love you, too, Ma," Clark replied. "I need to go somewhere and think. I'll call you back later on, though, if I get a chance to talk to Lois."

"You do that, Clark. Until then, take care of yourself."

"Yes, Ma," he replied, laughing slightly, and hung up the phone.

As he did so, he noticed the little icon on the screen that meant he had a voicemail message. "Now if I can just figure out how to listen to my messages," Clark muttered as he started scrolling through the phone's menus.

As she drove the twins home, Lois was lost in thought. Barbara had looked at her oddly when she had thanked her for looking after the kids so often, and it got Lois' keen journalistic mind running.

Normally, Lois would pick up the twins on Wednesdays when school let out early, and then bring them back to the office. The rest of the week, Richard got them when he left work, or Barbara got them and Richard or Lois picked them up as they left for the day. Since Clark's return, however, Lois hadn't wanted them around him, in case he figured out that they were his. Maybe Barbara had simply gotten used to having the twins over every Wednesday afternoon, and didn't think of it as a burden.

"Mommy, I'm hungry," Kala groaned pathetically in the back seat, trying to act as if she hadn't had a snack at Barbara's house. Jason chimed in, too, and the pair of them managed to distract Lois fairly efficiently.

Up ahead, she saw a sign that read "Mr. Dragon," a popular chain of Chinese food

take-out restaurants. "How about Chinese?" Lois asked Jason and Kala.

The response was unanimous and vociferous. Next to Mexican, Chinese was the twins' favorite food. Jason suddenly decided to change his mind, however, declaring, "I want Japanese, Mommy."

Kala glared at him. "Eatin' Japanese won't turn you into a big dumb ol' ugly radioactive lizard!"

"Kala! Stop pickin' on me!"

"Stop bein' such a dweeb, then!"

"Mommy!"

"Enough!" Lois said loudly. "Stop that, right now, or we'll go straight home and you can have chicken soup with no noodles."

The silence was, for the moment, golden, though punctuated by Kala's icy glare and Jason's furious scowl. Lois managed to park the Audi before the twins started mouthing names at each other, and as she got them out of their seatbelts she carefully kept one twin on each side of her. *This is why the Middle East peace talks never amount to anything*, she thought, holding Kala's right hand and Jason's left. *If they ever want to make some progress, they need to send a mother of twins up to Camp David. I spend every day trying to negotiate an end to hostilities between two rival powers; I've got to be better at it than a president.*

With the way the twins were glaring at each other hatefully, and the short line at the counter, Lois paused just inside the door to catch their attention. "You will both behave while we're waiting, is that understood? One whine, one name called, and we're leaving. I don't care who started it, it stops *now*."

Kala and Jason both nodded, trying to look as cute and innocent as possible. They knew from experience that Mommy meant it. She'd only once had to walk them out of a restaurant and make the unruly pair wait while Richard finished his meal and boxed hers up. Made to sit in their car seats for fifteen minutes (or forever, to three-year-olds) and then sent directly to bed with no supper, the twins had learned their lesson forever.

Lois sighed. "You're both good kids when you wanna be, you know it? Mommy loves you." After a pause, she added under her breath, "Even if you make her crazy."

"We love you, too, Mommy," they chorused. Jason tried his best to give her a winning smile, but it looked more like a shark on Prozac.

Kala suddenly cocked her head and turned around, her hand slipping from Lois' loosened grasp easily as in a nightmare. As her daughter ran to the front of the line, the dark-haired reporter had only a moment in which to gasp before Kala called out, "Mr. Clark!"

The man at the front of the line turned just in time to catch the little girl who leaped at him, trusting him to catch her. Clark's surprised but very friendly chuckle sent ice down Lois' spine, and she barely registered Jason pulling away to run to him as well.

Oh, my dear God, Lois thought with disbelief. *This has got to be a nightmare. He's only met them twice! When the hell did he get so familiar with my kids?!*

Clark could tune out the full range of his hearing; he'd have gone mad long ago if he couldn't. Especially when talking to the soft-spoken young woman behind the counter, unsure of her English, he needed to concentrate on that conversation only and ignore the thousand other things he could hear. Only sirens or a sharply raised voice would've gotten his attention.

But Kala's delighted call did reach him, and Clark whirled, shocked to see her. *I was just talking to Ma about the twins... What on earth are they doing here?* Surprise turned to

happiness as Kala jumped at him and he caught her, laughing at her boldness. A moment later Jason was at his side too, demanding attention as Kala hugged his neck. Only then did Clark realize that he'd been hearing Lois' heartbeat - even her voice - for a few minutes.

The woman herself was walking toward them now, looking at him in wide-eyed disbelief, and the sight of her pierced him. Around the office these days, Lois always had something of an edge about her, a steely aura of competence and drive that kept all but a chosen few from getting too close to her. But now, with her hair down, earrings off, and that predatory news-hawk look replaced by surprise, Lois looked much softer, much more approachable...

"Ah," the young woman behind the counter said, smiling at Clark holding the grinning black-haired child. "Daddy's girl?"

Clark's eyes widened and he stiffened slightly, while Kala turned to glance at the woman with a puzzled frown. Lois all but skidded to a halt, her face going slightly paler, though she didn't say anything. Her reaction wouldn't have been noticeable to anyone other than Clark, who saw her so very clearly.

Well, if that isn't suspicious... Clark thought, but he smiled at the cashier and said gently, "No, I'm just a good friend of the family." And watched as Lois unfroze with a tiny sigh of relief. *Hmm...*

"Are you gettin' Chinese for dinner too, Mr. Clark?" Jason asked curiously.

Kala rolled her eyes at him from her perch. "Of course," she said disdainfully. "Don' ask him if he likes Japanese; he doesn' wanna be a lizard."

Jason scowled, but hearing Lois' heels deliberately tapping toward them, he refrained from calling his sister any names. Instead he looked at Clark with a long-suffering sigh.

"Yes, I'm having Chinese," Clark said, casting an apologetic look at the people in line behind him. "What do you two want?"

"Cashew chicken," Kala said promptly.

"No, Kala, you can't have nuts," Clark replied, not seeing the look of shock that crossed Lois' face at that casual remark. "What about Moo Goo Gai Pan? It's really good, I've had it from here before. And nothing in it to make you sick." To Jason, he added, "What about Beef Broccoli for you? It's got your favorite vegetable."

The twins chorused approval, and the cashier added their dinners to Clark's bill. Lois had reached the three of them, and controlled her increasing confusion. "I'm surprised you know their tastes so well," she said smoothly.

Clark knew that tone and what it portended, but chose to ignore it for now. A slightly crowded restaurant wasn't the place to confront her. "Hi, Lois," he said awkwardly. "General Tsao's for you?"

He saw her start to reply, saw her expression soften slightly, and thought for a moment that perhaps they could discuss things. And then he heard a voice he'd almost forgotten about.

"Sorry about that, Clark, did you already order?" Lana asked as she came out of the ladies' room. Seeing Kala, and Jason, and Lois, she halted, and said quietly, "Oh."

For a moment, Lois stared at Lana, then turned to Clark with shock and a hint of betrayal written largely on her face. In the next instant, she glanced down, and a veil seemed to fall across her emotions. "Well, hello, Ms. Lang," Lois said politely. "Fancy meeting you here."

"I'm surprised to see you, too," Lana replied just as sweetly. "Clark and I were just going to have dinner and catch up."

That seemed to remind Lois of something, and she turned to Clark with the same overly courteous tone. "By the way, Clark, why are you buying my kids dinner?"

Because I forgot for a minute who I walked in with? Oh, my God. "It's all right, Lois," he said, trying to be casual. "I'll just add it to your tab from all the times I bought you lunch at work. You only owe me about twenty pizzas. And I lost count of hamburgers, hot dogs, salads..."

"All right, all right," Lois said, dropping it. For now. "Hmm, they have a lot of things I haven't seen in a while. Make mine a Bang Bang Ji, then, and a Mu Shu Pork, too. Those two and the Beef and Broccoli and the Moo Goo Gai Pan are dinners - white rice, no eggrolls."

"What about you, Lana?" Clark asked, feeling terribly uncomfortable and trying not to show it. He wasn't even thinking about the fact that Lois had ordered four dinners.

"Sweet and sour chicken for me," she said, glancing at Lois from the corner of her eye.

"Here or to go?" the young woman behind the counter asked.

"Here," Lana and Clark said, while Lois answered firmly, "To go." After a moment, the cashier got the two orders rung up separately, and Clark paid for both.

While the adults did boring adult stuff, Jason looked up at both women with wide eyes, his head swiveling like a spectator at a tennis match. Kala just slithered down out of Clark's arms so he could pay, peering up at Lana curiously. "Who're you?" she asked.

The redhead was momentarily nonplussed, looking into those eyes so like Lois'. "I'm an old friend of Clark's," she replied. "We went to school together. You must be Jason and Kala. I've heard a lot about you."

Clark saw Lois' head whip around fast as a cobra. But it was Jason who asked, puzzled, "From who?"

"Well, actually," Lana stalled, glancing up at Clark, her eyes wide.

He read her look accurately, and covered for her. "Oh, Richard talked about you guys while we were waiting for our luggage at the airport," he said smoothly. It was technically true, though Richard had mentioned them only in passing. Lana must have seen him since the other day in International to have that guilty expression.

"Oh, okay," the twins said in unison, turning their minds to other matters. Their mother, however, was not mollified.

"Really?" Lois said, too pleasantly.

Embroidering only slightly, Clark continued, "Well, I've probably mentioned the twins a time or two myself on the way here. Little rascals do make an impression." He ruffled Jason's hair casually as he spoke.

Lois raised a dark eyebrow as Jason grinned up at Clark. The unpleasant tension continued while they waited for the food, mostly unnoticed by the twins. Kala and Jason were preoccupied with the forbidden lure of fortune cookies, which were made with wheat flour and thus their mysteries were forever unattainable.

Clark felt distinctly uncomfortable, with Lana on one side of him and Lois on the other, trading looks that ranged from guilty to icy. The twins, oblivious to it all, tried to find out if Clark or Lana happened to be carrying any candy or other assorted snacks. "But Mommy an' Nana an' Aunt Lucy an' Aunt Loueen *always* have sugar-free candy in their purses," Jason told Lana sadly, as if he'd discovered a major character fault.

"You'll be eating in a few minutes, Jason, I promise you won't starve," Lois muttered, facing away from Clark and Lana deliberately.

"But Mommy," Kala started to say, and then the food arrived, blessedly quick.

Taking her bag, Lois smiled thinly at Clark. "Thanks for buying all of us dinner, Kent. See you tomorrow." The twins chorused their goodbyes, demanding a hug each, and only then

would they follow Lois out.

Even as Clark carried his and Lana's plates to the table, he glanced over his shoulder at Lois' departing figure. At the door, she turned, and for a moment their eyes met, his troubled, hers stormy and unreadable.

Lana saw Clark meet Lois' gaze as she left, and the redhead couldn't help an ironic little smile. *This is one of those moments in life that needs a soundtrack. A little snippet of the romantic theme, abruptly fading away as the Unattainable Woman exits stage right. I guess that casts me as the Sympathetic Friend slash Girl Next Door.*

I don't think so. As Clark sat down with their meals, she looked up at him, assessing the changes. Of course, she realized when they ran into each other at the airport that the lanky, shy teenager she'd known had filled out, but now Lana looked more closely.

Clark was actually quite a big man, over six feet and broad through the shoulders, and under the slightly out of fashion suit was a muscular frame. No wonder he always carried himself with that somehow apologetic air; he'd be intimidating otherwise. Rather than capitalize on that as some men would, he'd chosen to make himself seem harmless, just a geek in glasses. It seemed that his essentially gentle nature hadn't changed, and Lana couldn't help smiling wistfully.

Seeing that look on her face as he got ready to take the first bite of his Ginger Beef combo, Clark hesitated. "So, what's on your mind, Lana?"

"You're in love with her," she said plainly, and dipped a piece of chicken into her sweet and sour sauce.

The shocked expression on his face was priceless. "What? How - Lana, why on earth would you think something like that?"

Because I'm a lot smarter and more perceptive than most people think pretty girls should be, she thought, but out loud she only said, "Clark, you forgot I was here when she walked in."

The poor man actually blushed. "Um, Lana, it wasn't that..."

"And you adore her kids," Lana pointed out. "They like you a lot, too. But then, so does their mother." She chuckled, remembering Lois' quickly concealed look of pure venom, and added, "If looks could kill, she'd have shredded me when I walked up to you two."

Clark was totally at a loss for words, staring as Lana nibbled at her eggroll. At last he said, "Lana, nothing like that is going on. I mean, really, it's preposterous..."

She couldn't help snickering. "Please, Clark. We may not have kept in touch, but we've known each other for years. We both grew up. I'm not the fool who kept going out with Brad just because it's some kind of natural law that the head cheerleader has to date the quarterback. I'm not that blind anymore." Green eyes catching his intently, she continued, "If I'd had a little more self-confidence, maybe I would've admitted what I saw in you back then. Maybe things would be different. But that's long ago and far away. *She* doesn't have my hang-ups; I get the impression Lois Lane has spent her life avoiding doing all the expected things."

"Yeah, pretty much," Clark murmured, toying with the beef.

Lana pointed at him with her fork. "She's awfully possessive of you, she obviously cares a lot about you, and you love her. So why is she engaged to another man? What happened there, Clark? With the looks you two were giving each other at the takeout counter, it has to be one heck of a story."

"I'd really prefer not to talk about it," Clark finally admitted. "We ... I made some mistakes, in the past, and... Besides, I'm just not comfortable talking about this. Lois *is* engaged to another man. One I happen to admire, not to mention I work for him."

"I know: Richard," Lana said. "But even he realizes how much she cares about you, Clark."

That brought blue eyes up to meet hers sharply. "I don't recall him saying anything like that at the airport."

Now it was Lana's turn to blush. "Well ... I was trying to find you today to see if you wanted to catch up, and, um, Richard wound up taking me to lunch."

Clark continued to give her his best reporter stare.

Lana sighed heavily and leaned back. "Clark, I can't help it. I like the guy. I'm not trying to steal him from Lois any more than you're trying to steal her from him. We were both raised better; thank God for Smallville."

"I know," he replied. "And it doesn't help that they seem to be having problems. But I still don't think it's right for us to talk about it."

The redhead poked at her chicken for a moment. "I guess I just feel better knowing there's someone else in the same predicament, you know?"

"Yes, but even so, what can we do about it?" Clark replied sadly. "Nothing, really. Just ... hope for the best, I guess."

"You're probably right," Lana said. "The best for who, though?"

"All of us," he told her, and turned the conversation to safer topics.

Lois found the traffic leaving the city slower than usual, and her mind churned as she waited for other cars to move. *God, I'm such an idiot. What the hell was I doing, letting my guard down like that? And of course, the minute I turn my back, he's out with the damn cheerleader. Just another in a long series of Incredibly Stupid things I've done over **that man**.*

However, with four boxed dinners sitting in a bag beside her and slowly perfuming the Audi with the smell of delicious Chinese food, Lois knew she had to distract the twins or they would start pleading to break the no-eating-in-Mommy's-car rule. Just this once. Wrenching her train of thought away from Clark and Lana, she glanced in the rearview mirror and asked, "When we get home, let's learn how to use chopsticks while we eat dinner. How would that be?"

The twins glanced at each other and broke into identical grins. "Swell!" they chorused, and broke into giggles.

Swell. Swell? Swell?! Lois gripped the steering wheel and gritted her teeth. Only one person she knew used that word... "Hey, did you guys learn that from Mr. Clark?" she asked lightly.

"Uh-huh," Jason said cheerfully. "He's really nice, Mommy. He even brought us special no-wheat cookies!"

"Wow," Lois said, still keeping her tone deliberately light. "How did you guys get to know him so well?" In the backseat, Kala had cocked her head and furrowed her brow.

"Daddy brings us up to work on Wednes... Ow! Kala, stop that!"

"Shut up!" the little girl snarled, hitting him in the shoulder again, hazel eyes blazing.

"Shut up, Jason, you dummy! *That was supposed to be a **secret!***"

The leather steering wheel cover creaked under Lois' hands. *Richard, you sonofabitch.*

You've got my kids keeping secrets from me! From me, you bastard! How dare you! Not to mention, I've been scared to death of Clark seeing these kids and getting ideas, and he's seen them every week! No wonder Barbara looked at me like I was crazy. I thought she had to watch them while I went to those stupid editorial meetings.

And that's another thing! I started going to the weekly meetings to have a reason for not bringing the kids up to work anymore, and Richard's been doing it behind my back anyway. That's two hours of each week spent bored to tears for no damn reason! Oh, I'm gonna kill him...

"Ow! Mommy! Make her stop! Kala, quit it!"

"Dummy! Boogerhead! Igg-nor-ay-mouse!" Kala punctuated each word with another punch to the shoulder.

It didn't hurt Jason's shoulder as much as his pride. "Mommy asked!"

"Daddy said not to tell, stupid-face!"

Lois took a deep breath and got ready to verbally break up the fight in the backseat. Thank God they generally listened...

Just as she glanced into the rearview mirror again, her lips forming the word *enough*, a red blur flashed in front of her car. Lois whipped her head forward and felt every hair on her body stand straight up as the low-riding sportscar from the next lane cut in with only feet to spare. Smashing the brake to the floor, she just barely managed to avoid clipping the idiot's bumper. A credit card might've been able to slip between the two vehicles, but nothing larger.

That was too much stress for the reporter after the last half-hour. Her window was already down; Lois leaned out and soundly cursed the driver and his entire family tree, unto the seventh generation. The young man unfortunately had his convertible top down and heard every word, turning to look with amazement at the pretty, delicate-featured source of that profane fury. His girlfriend in the passenger side was equally shocked, but seemed to be in support of Lois' assessment.

"Get that fancy-ass wanna-be racecar piece of shit off my road, or else *learn to fuckin' drive!*" Lois roared, and sat back down in her seat, still incensed. Traffic opened up in the lane beside them, and she gave the jerk an example of how it should be done, neatly shifting over into the available space without causing anyone to jam on their brakes.

In the long, fuming silence after that encounter, Jason finally whispered, "Oooh, Mommy said a bad word. Mommy said the *really* bad word."

"Mommy said a lot of bad words," Kala replied in hushed tones, slumped down in her seat and peering over the back of the chair with wide eyes.

Shit. If she hadn't been driving, Lois would've smacked her own forehead. *Nice going, Lane. So much for not cussing in front of the kids. Get your mind together before that man and everything connected to him drives you totally insane.*

Aloud, she told the twins, "It's okay, you two. Mommy just got freaked out. That guy almost made me hit his car, and somebody could've gotten hurt." *Like him. Jackass. Well, at least it made the twins stop fighting.* "It's all right, I'm not mad at you."

"You're sure?" Kala asked, and Lois' heart broke at her tone.

"Of course I'm not, sweetheart," she replied. "Jason, Kala, Mommy never talks to you like that. Mostly because you're a lot smarter than that guy in the convertible." They seemed to perk up, and Lois added, "Of course, Captain Jack would probably be a better driver than *him.*"

"He'd need Gazeera to reach the pedals though," Kala said instantly.

"Nuh-uh. Ignatius can drive, your weasel can push the pedals," Jason shot back.

Lois wished she could close her eyes and rub her temples to forestall the huge headache she felt building. *Is it too late to take back wishing to be rescued from that helicopter? God. My life, ladies and gentlemen.* "No more fighting, you two. I mean it."

The pair hushed up, still in awe of their mother's vocabulary.

Later that evening, Lois and Richard sat on opposite sides of the couch with the television on and the sleepy twins between them. They had barely spoken ten words to each other; Lois was striving valiantly to keep the tentative truce, not wanting a repeat of last night. The kids didn't need to hear another argument.

Both of their minds were elsewhere. Richard was wondering about everything he'd learned and suspected, but given how tense and unhappy Lois had seemed since she got home, now was not the time to discuss it. He was also thinking about Lana, and thinking that he really shouldn't be thinking of her. Lois was still worried over how much Clark knew, and she kept trying to tell herself not to be so upset that he had taken Lana out to dinner.

When Jason and Kala started yawning, Lois and Richard carried them upstairs and started to tuck them in bed. Almost immediately, the kids whined that they wanted Mommy. "You're not gonna leave again, are you?" Kala whimpered.

Richard touched Lois' shoulder gently, feeling the tension rise sharply as he did. "Go on, hon. Take them to our bed. I'll bed down on the couch."

She looked at him briefly, her eyes unreadable, and then nodded as if she didn't trust herself to speak.

Half an hour later, Lois and the twins were sleeping, exhausted. Richard was lying awake on the couch. Staring across the room.

Staring at Lois' laptop in her office.

Playing With Fire

The next few days were a whirlwind for everyone involved. Richard found himself both relieved and disappointed that he couldn't figure out Lois' password, but then a fresh spate of violence in the Middle East happened to coincide with possible nuclear testing in Asia, and the two stories consumed the entire International department's time.

That included Clark, of course, who found himself working too hard at both jobs to spare even a moment to question Lois further. At least there were no more fires, for the moment. He missed seeing the twins, though - Richard had come in fuming one day after going to get the twins and finding out that Lois' mother had picked them up. Apparently their long afternoons wandering the International department were over.

Lois wasn't idle, either. Things with Richard were tense and prickly, but after working so hard all day, both reporters were more than glad to leave each other be. Perry was watching her more closely than ever, as if forgetting one's car once was a sign of imminent senility, and Lois could barely steal time to run down leads on Luthor. At least she managed to learn the specifications of the Vanderworths' security system.

Lana had her fashion show to organize, and as the actual opening drew nearer, all of the talented, creative people she worked with began to behave in the stereotypical manner of artists confronted by absolute deadlines: they panicked. She spent more time than she would have believed possible soothing egos and damping down tempers, and more time than she would have liked to admit wishing Richard was around.

Of course, none of the hectic events stopped anyone's mental wheels from spinning.

The long, frustrating days were getting to Lois. Her temper was starting to fray, and she knew that before long, she'd say something she would regret. Luckily, she had a cure for that.

Letting Richard know that she was going out for lunch and he'd have to fend for himself, she headed to the garage. For once he hadn't questioned her, and Lois was profoundly grateful. Her sarcasm wasn't needed at the moment, not at all. Things with Richard were barely hanging on as it was...

But do you really want them to hang on? Lois bit her lip as that voice whispered in her ear as she got into the Audi; her conflicting thoughts had been mercifully quiet of late. It was just the one whisper, though, so perhaps she'd be spared the endless rounds of arguing with herself.

Driving through the city was hardly stress relief, and when she reached her destination the raven-haired reporter was wound as tightly as she'd ever been. But she still managed to show her ID and speak politely to the desk sergeant. Lois was a frequent enough visitor that he let her through with no difficulties.

She left the bustling precinct above and headed downstairs, into cool dim corridors. Her heels echoed off the cement walls; the firing range was a place most civilians never saw, and no effort at decoration had been wasted on it. Functional space, nothing more.

There were forms to sign, ear plugs and protective glasses to borrow, but at last Lois was standing in a narrow booth looking down a long aisle. Overhead, a cable with a clip on it ran between two pulleys. Lois fastened the paper outline to the clip, and ran the cable out to fifty feet. *Pretty close, but I need the warm up*, she thought, removing the Ladysmith from her purse and unloading the deadly hollowpoint bullets.

As she replaced them with softnose lead ones, another set of footsteps came up the corridor behind her. Flats, hard-soled, a distinctive sharply-striking stride... "All you cops walk

like you're British Royal Guards," Lois muttered, clicking the loaded cylinder back into place.

"Better than mincing around like reporters in stiletto heels," Maggie Sawyer replied. A series of metallic clicks came from the booth next to Lois as the lieutenant loaded her service revolver with target ammunition. "So, you wanna see how it's done?"

Lois grinned to hear that competitive edge in her friend's voice. "Please, Sawyer. My Dad had me plinking cans with a .22 while you were still playing cops 'n' robbers with toy guns."

Her answer was two shots from Sawyer's .45, to which she replied with a pair of shots to her own target. *Ah, rest and relaxation the General Lane way*, Lois sighed.

At least, it was while their guns did the talking. As both women stopped to hang up fresh target outlines, Lois noted that her shooting was a trifle better than Maggie's. However, they were both on the mark every time. It was then, while Lois finally felt the tension melting out of her shoulders, that Sawyer asked casually, "You've been wound pretty tight since he came back, haven't you?"

No use asking which *he* she meant. They both ran the new targets out to a hundred feet while Lois answered, "Maggie, you're misconstruing things. If I'm wound tight, it's because *Luthor's* running around."

"That's part of it," the lieutenant replied, placing two bullet holes close together and smiling at her work. "But most of it predates that. You're surly and you throw away a lot of ammo down here lately. Now, terrorists and reluctant sources you can handle, but relationships are apparently something of a challenge. You wanna talk about it?"

Lois answered by drilling two shots through nearly the exact same space in the paper outline's chest. "Sawyer, your cop instincts are wrong. I'm not tense over anything dealing with *him*."

Maggie sighed, and stepped back out of the booth. While Lois was still looking straight ahead at the target, she reached around and hit the runback button on Lois' side. That made her target suddenly race toward them with a loud whirring of cables.

It startled Lois, and her finger tightened on the trigger, sending a wild shot somewhere up at the roof. That brought an immediate blush to her cheeks, thinking, *Idiot! It's just a freakin' piece of paper!*

Still, her body had been tensed for an attack for the last two months, and she reacted the way she'd long planned to. No input from her conscious mind was necessary to aim for the middle of the onrushing target and fire twice, pause, and follow up with a shot toward the head area of the outline.

As the paper target came to rest in front of them, both women looked appraisingly at it. Two holes in the center of the chest, and one through the forehead.

"Yeah, Lois, you're not tense at all," Maggie said coolly, and the reporter grumbled under her breath, vowing to show *her*.

Neither of them noticed the young officer at the other end of the range who had been watching them. His name was Smith, and he knew Lois only by reputation as a hotheaded, nosy journalist. He'd heard the rumors; her idea of self-defense was more like pre-emptive offense; she did unto others before they could do unto her. The wild shot had surprised him, and he looked to see where it had gone.

Clark dropped his latest copy on Richard's desk and paused. The International editor had an envelope from Sears Portrait Studio on his desk, and Clark couldn't resist a quick glimpse inside.

Of course, he immediately wished he hadn't. A happy family portrait, with Lois, Richard, and the twins. Though it looked like an older shot - a reprint, maybe - it still wounded him. *Even if they might be, even if they are, what gives me the right to hope?*

He walked back to his desk in a mournful mood. The role of home wrecker didn't suit him; even though Lois and Richard were having problems, even though he knew now that she still loved him, he couldn't silence the low voice in the back of his mind that said, *Breaking up an established relationship is just plain wrong. No matter how much you love Lois, no matter how much better you think you are for her, if you actually succeed in breaking them up, you'll feel the taint of having done it for the rest of your life with her.*

I have got to start thinking about something else. That was just too difficult a topic, even if he was obscurely pleased by the way Lois had reacted to seeing Lana the other evening. Clark sighed as he opened his desk drawer to get out his notes on the next story.

And there was a good distraction. Jason's drawing of Clark, which he had shyly presented to him a few weeks ago. The reporter grinned; the boy really liked him. *And I like him, too,* he thought, looking at the picture. *Reminds me a little of myself as a kid, even if I never wanted to be a giant lizard. Some of his quirks are Lois', but his seriousness ... his kindness ... his fondness for math and science... I wonder if he gets that from ... me.*

What if he really is my son? Is that why we get along so well?

But what if he isn't, and all of this is just wishful thinking? What if I'm just trying to convince myself that my fondness for him is some kind of sign, when really it just means that I desperately want his mother to come back to me?

And where does all of this leave the man he calls Daddy?

Feeling a headache start, Clark realized that no matter how delightful Jason was, he probably wasn't the best distraction from his current situation.

The heck with this, it's past lunchtime. Ma always says I get moody when I don't eat enough. I'm running out for a sandwich.

Lois was positively light-hearted as she headed back to the office. Wiping the floor with Sawyer helped a lot - Lois' aim had improved dramatically when she began envisioning Luthor's face on the silhouette target, though she wouldn't share *that* little fact with the lieutenant. And both women's natural competitiveness had forestalled any further discussion of Lois' ex. She was practically whistling as she headed back to the office, taking the elevator up from the basement garage.

A sizeable crowd squeezed into the elevator cab with her on the first floor, and Lois flattened herself against the back wall, momentarily disappearing behind several tall men. The majority of people got off on the twenty-second and twenty-third floors, though; as she expected, they were all one group. No one else would be coming back from lunch this late...

As the last of the crowd left, though, Lois' train of thought came to a screeching halt. The one person she'd least expected was now the only one left in the cab with her.

Clark.

He turned, and surprise lit both their eyes as the doors clicked shut.

A moment, in which that last little secret rose up in Lois' throat and she nearly choked herself with the effort of keeping it down. *Not like this ... not yet. Wait, see if you can figure out how he'll react - he broke your trust once before, and broke it badly. And it was nearly as important to you then as this is now. You can't give in to your feelings for him again, not when you're still not sure. Not when the twins are at stake.*

"Um, hi, Lois," he said quietly, glancing at her. Something was on his mind, she knew that much, but she couldn't tell what.

"Hello, Kal-El," she replied as if her mind wasn't a whirl, keeping her tone unruffled, and saw him flinch slightly.

"Wow. I keep forgetting how much it surprises me when you do that," he told her, his voice slightly reproachful. His mind was full of questions with no good way to ask them, and it didn't help that she caught him off guard like that.

Lois couldn't resist a smile at him. He really was thrown off by it, almost the same way his mere presence continued to throw her for a loop. She supposed it was only fair. Then, trying to keep him off-balance, she asked almost too lightly, "So did you take any stunning models out to lunch today? That never seemed a habit of yours before. Going for a different image, now, *Clark?*"

He did a double-take, and laughed at her a little, his nervous Clark chuckle. But two could play at this game, and he was better at it than she suspected. After all, he'd had a master to learn from - Lois herself. "You really *are* jealous, aren't you? Jeez, Lois." Clark didn't even try to keep the genuine astonishment out of his voice.

"Me, jealous? Of the cheerleader?" It was his turn to surprise her and that he did. It was so very straight to the heart of the problem, yet so incredibly unlike him to call her on it. It was all she had not to blush at being caught. Unsure what else to do, Lois looked up at the ceiling grillwork and tried to laugh. "What on earth are you talking about, Kent?"

"You, Lois," Clark replied. Suddenly it was clear why he was such a good reporter; once she'd shown weakness by looking away, he bored in and refused to drop the topic, but kept his tone factual, not accusatory. "The other night at the Chinese restaurant. And that day we got back from the airport, too. You really shouldn't be so threatened by Lana, you know."

Lois sniffed, crossing her arms as she made herself look at him. *I have every reason in the world to be jealous. You loved her once and she's free to have you now. Even if it means that she can only date **half** a person. Even if it means living a lie. Which I don't have the luxury of doing.* "What makes you think I'm threatened by *her*?"

"For one thing, the way you won't use her name," Clark said. They were rising past the fortieth floor now, and no one else seemed to be getting on the elevator with them. "And the way you look at her - Lois, the look you gave her when she walked up to us at the restaurant almost peeled paint off the wall. I never thought I'd see you so possessive over me."

Speaking of deadly looks, she glared a killer of one at him then, crossing her arms and jerking her eyes from his. "Don't flatter yourself, hero," Lois said, trying to be cold and kicking herself for having been so obvious. It just wasn't in her nature to give her feelings away like that, regardless of the thousand other reasons not to let this man know how much she still loved him. When had she started to get so lousy at this? She just kept breaking cover and showing her face for the stupidest reasons...

Clark raised an eyebrow at her skeptically. *I know I'm right, and I won't let go,* that look said. After a moment, he continued, "Lois, come on. You're really a lousy liar."

Again she had to remind herself that he couldn't read thoughts. Mentally, she just resumed kicking herself. *You idiot.* "What's *that* supposed to mean?" she asked frostily.

"You were really jealous of Lana, and you have no right to be. I mean, she's a nice girl and all, but it was just two old friends going out to dinner. It's not like I'd cheat on you..."

Hazel eyes flew wide as they met his, and Lois's expression went from sarcasm to shock to panic. And then to something else. Clark, realizing he'd said that *out loud*, tried to stammer

his way out of it. "I didn't mean ... Lois, I..."

"Kal-El," she began, but couldn't finish the sentence. *He left me, but he never cheated on me. Oh, dear God.*

Into that moment, where they might have spoken, might have resolved some of their tensions and questions, the *ding* of the elevator doors intruded.

Both reporters turned wide-eyed, and saw Jimmy Olsen. Coming from the darkroom on the fifty-eighth floor, he seemed just as surprised to see them.

"Wow, hi, guys," the photographer said brightly. "Hey, you've got to see these latest photos. Here's *my* Pulitzer, right here..." Still talking excitedly, he boarded the elevator and started rifling through the stack of pictures he carried, riding up to the *Planet's* floors with them.

Lois and Clark could only look at each other briefly, sharing a moment of mingled relief and dismay. True, they were avoiding a confrontation ... but also prolonging the tension. And as usual, the agent of chaos that kept them apart was James B. Olsen. *Some things never change.*

Ella had both twins when the phone rang, and she sighed at seeing Richard's number. Lois had warned her that he was nosing around the Secret Which Must Not Be Revealed, and it infuriated her daughter that he'd been taking the twins to work without telling her. *I'm not exactly pleased about it either*, she thought, heading into the living room to answer the ringing phone. "Lane residence," was all she said, however.

"Hi, Ella," Richard said. Was that a note of contrition in his voice? Ella's arched eyebrow showed exactly where her daughter had gotten the expression from. "Listen, I wanted to ask you a favor."

Ella leaned her shoulder against the wall, keeping her eyes on the other room where the twins were busy coloring. There was a hint of used-car-salesman wheedle in Richard's voice now; these children constantly forgot that she knew all their tricks, had tried to play them herself years ago. And had had about as much success fooling her own mother. "Mm-hmm. And what favor would that be?"

"Could you watch Jason and Kala overnight? Or at least, until pretty late."

The eyebrow climbed a little higher. "On a school night, Richard?"

"Well..." His voice trailed off, and Ella smiled knowingly. *Here comes the semi-truthful plea, dripping with sincerity. My own parents must be looking down and laughing themselves hysterical.* "You know Lois and I haven't been, well, getting along," Richard said, and the embarrassment was real. "I was hoping, maybe if we took a night off ... went out somewhere for dinner ... we could maybe patch things up a little."

My daughter is very close to slapping you senseless, and you want to take her on a date? You're either very sure of your charm or not half as smart as I thought you were. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Richard? She is not very pleased with you at the moment."

"I know," he replied. "But I have to try. I love her ... Mom."

Unfortunately, he also knew the one thing that could soften Ella's heart against all reason. "Fine, I'll keep them ... *son*. Go ahead and play with fire, but if she gets upset with you, don't come crying to me."

Richard actually chuckled at that. "Don't worry. I'm taking her to the Kasbah. No way can she be temperamental in the face of a pomegranate martini."

"Don't be so certain," Ella warned. "Richard, I'm not joking. You're treading awfully close

to the edge with her right now."

"I'll watch myself," he promised. "Remember, I've met Lombard. I know what happens to guys who cross Lois Lane, and I don't fancy any broken bones."

"All right," Ella replied, stamping down on the last of her misgivings. She hung up after a few more pleasantries exchanged, and headed into the living room to give the twins the news.

But by the scowl on Kala's face, she'd already heard the news, and thoroughly disapproved.

Richard hung up the phone and sighed. *She's right. I really ought to just drop this while I still can. No matter how carefully I plan this evening, Lois has proven time and again that I don't know her well enough to one hundred percent predict how she'll act.*

He leaned his forehead into his palms, trying to rub away the incipient headache. Work had been an absolute beast lately, and living with Lois was no picnic at the moment either. It would've been nice just to let go, relax, stop worrying... But he'd bitten off a huge hunk of this mystery, and to stop chewing was to choke.

*I'm a reporter, I can't let something like this go... I know she's lying. Furthermore, I know that the father of the twins is one of two men I admire, and whichever of them it really is - and I think I know - he **deserves** to know that he even **is** a father.*

*Hell, I've been a Superman fan for years. I've even got the tie with the S-symbols on it, but I don't dare wear it around Lois. There are times - usually when we're fighting - that I wonder if half the reason I'm attracted to her is that she's the ultimate Superman collectible. 'Yeah, I have his autograph, the starter jacket, the tie, the 'I circle back for Superman' sticker on my plane, and I've even got his girlfriend, too!' Although I was in denial for years about the fact that she really **was** his girlfriend. It didn't help that she kept saying it was nothing like that, the media gossips just made a mountain out of a molehill...*

Maybe Lana's right. Maybe she had a right to keep that secret from me. I mean, things between us would've been a lot different if she had said stuff like, 'My last boyfriend flew me to Venice for dinner. At about the speed of sound.'

*But this - the twins' father - can't be kept a secret. I know if one of my college flings had secretly had my child, I'd be mad as hell to find out I was a father and never knew my own kid. If it's **him**, well, I can see why we can't exactly announce it to the world, but maybe that's a secret Lois and I can share, one that will bring us closer. It's not as if Superman can really be a father or a husband, not with his life.*

Of course, if what I suspect is true, then it isn't the caped wonder I have to worry about. My problems are a lot closer to home, and I have this feeling like something's going on behind my back.

Richard sighed again, and picked up the phone to make dinner reservations. *No, I can't drop this. Maybe I'll get to the bottom of all of it tonight.*

Jason ignored Kala's grumbling. Privately, he sometimes thought that some of the things she claimed to hear were imagined. At least the conversations of kids in other schoolrooms had to be made up; nobody could hear *that*, nobody except Superman.

That was who he'd drawn and was now coloring. Finding the exact right shade of blue for his uniform had been hard, but the rest of the drawing had gone pretty well, and Jason was happy with it. Maybe Nana would put this one up on the fridge; he didn't want to bring it home. Daddy had been pretty unhappy every time anyone mentioned Superman lately. That

made everybody else unhappy, and Jason wished the grownups could act more, well, grown-up. They were supposed to be in control of things, not arguing like two kids with one toy.

The little boy deliberately thought of something else, though, because those ideas made him sad. As he added the finishing touches to Superman's hair - careful to draw the special little curl - he hesitated, black crayon hovering over Superman's face. Someone else might've thought he was contemplating drawing a mustache on the hero's face, as a naughty kid might.

Jason was thinking of something far different, though. Just two little circles. Well, and a change of clothes. Put a pair of glasses and a gray suit on, and you magically had Clark Kent instead of Superman. He'd first realized it one day at Mommy and Daddy's job, seeing Clark standing under a big TV screen that was showing Superman. The face was the same, the absolute same. The shock of realizing that Superman was *right there* in the room with him - and not even the *grownups* knew it - had caused an asthma attack.

His shortness of breath had kept him from blurting out the obvious to everyone around him, and Jason figured that was a good thing. Superman had to have a reason why he wanted people to think he was Clark Kent. After a while, he realized that he'd never heard of Superman doing normal things, like going out to dinner or watching a movie. So Clark Kent was who Superman was when Superman wanted to be just like everybody else. Jason could see the attraction in that - special could be a burden. Sitting by the sidelines watching the other kids play dodgeball, he'd often wanted to be just like everyone else.

Glancing at Kala, he grinned. Jason was often mistaken for the good twin, but he could be just as devious as his sister. He just wasn't as brazen about it. And he was sure she didn't know that Clark Kent and Superman were the same person. Hah, she thought she knew something special... Girls. She probably just knew something dumb like what his cape was really made out of. Jason felt like the only person in the world who shared Superman's secret...

Except Mommy. Mommy had to know. She knew practically everything anyway, except how to play piano. Besides, she'd told them why she was mad at Superman, but never told anybody why she was mad at Mr. Clark. It had to be because she knew they were really the same person.

Yup, he and Mommy were the only people in the whole world to know Superman's secret... Jason glanced at Kala again, and starting humming smugly as he finished his picture, leaving off the glasses. No way did he want to give his stuck-up sister a *hint*.

Lois hadn't seen Richard leave work, and that was fine with her. Tired, having lost the benefit of her target-shooting session, all she really wanted to do was go home and unwind.

So when she got to her car and found Richard leaning against it with a bouquet of hyacinths and a hopeful smile, Lois at first simply halted in shock. He smiled at her, that old charming smile that had worn away her defenses years ago, and proffered the flowers. "Any way I can talk you into going on a date with me, Ms. Lane?"

The sudden wash of memories was almost painful. *Have I really been thinking about just giving up on this man and the life we've built? Richard loves me. Sure, we have problems, but he's been there, every day and every night. He's been there for me, and he's been there for the twins. He's the only father they know...*

Her expression softened, and she came toward him, taking the flowers. "That's sweet of you to offer, but we do have children to take care of," she replied, tilting her face up for a peck on the cheek.

Richard wasn't content with that; he caught her lips for a quick kiss that still spoke of the attraction between them, and then lightly placed another kiss at the corner of her eye. It was his trademark move, his secret way of saying *I love you and no other*, and it nearly broke Lois' heart again. "Nah, beautiful, your mom is watching them. She said it's okay for them to stay late. I want to take you out somewhere, Lois. We haven't been spending enough time together lately, and I miss you."

She had to close her eyes. *If you're going to try to make this work ... if there's any chance left for you and the twins to have a normal life ... you'd better take the peace offering.* "Sometimes you're too nice, Richard," Lois whispered, but her sharper side couldn't resist adding, "when you're not being a nosy jerk."

Instead of yelling, he hugged her. "I'm a *reporter*," he breathed against her hair. "It's what we do."

Luckily he couldn't see her blush. She had been just as persistent, just as exasperating, in trying to prove that Clark was really Superman. At least Richard hadn't gone to those extreme lengths in his little investigation. "All right, all right," Lois sighed. "So where are we going?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," Richard teased, and she couldn't help smiling at him as they got into the car. She was driving, of course; the Audi had rarely known anyone else's hands on the wheel since she'd bought it. With the recent exception of a certain lieutenant with car stealing skills...

The drive was made pleasant by the odor of the flowers, and as Richard called out turns, Lois admired them. She wondered if Richard knew that they symbolized apology ... probably the florist had told him so.

At last, they arrived at a pleasant little restaurant set back from the street behind a courtyard. Lois liked the look and scent of it; mouth-watering aromas of spices and something else, something sweet, reached the street.

As Richard followed her in the door, into the warm embrace of flavored smoke and Mediterranean cooking, his expression momentarily hardened. *A glass of wine, a martini or two, and we'll even share one of those hookahs - the smoke's a lot safer on your lungs than her cigarettes. I **know** she's been smoking, but I won't call her on it. Then maybe once she's relaxed, I can get an honest answer or two...*

And if we just have a wonderful dinner that reminds us why we're together, that's fine, too. I have almost all the evidence I need to make my point.