

Little Secrets, Act Four

by **Kala Lane Kent**

© 8-Jul-06

Rating: T

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Everything Burns

Is that a shadow, or a flaw in the paint? Lois stared up at the patterns of the ceiling and wondered, as she had the last half hour. She was wide awake and sober too soon, the last of the alcohol having burned out of her system. Unfortunately, the soothing effect of the nicotine was gone as well.

I should've known something was wrong the minute Richard offered to let me smoke, she thought. Her gaze shifted to Richard's slumbering form, but she found it difficult to be angry with him. Not after the last several hours, anyway. Herself, was a different matter.

Dinner had been wonderful. The restaurant was fantastic, candles in low red glasses on every table, all the wood stained dark with time and use, everywhere the mellow gleam of candlelight and brass and glasses full of delicious wines.

They'd sampled a variety of Middle Eastern fare: hummus with olive oil drizzled atop it, spicy falafel, swordfish kabobs, and delicious meat pies in flaky pastry. Lois had eaten far too many olives, and downed several glasses of delightful wine. The highlight of the evening for her, of course, had been the hookah. Filled with rose-flavored shisha tobacco and filtered through rosewater, it had lifted the simple act of smoking to a sublime ritual of relaxation.

Combining the joys of the thick, cool hookah smoke with an assortment of sweet baklava and a bottle of chilled ice wine had elevated the evening to exceptional heights. Lois looked back on her behavior and winced; now the pattern of Richard's conversation was easy to define, but then he had seemed innocuously curious. He always circled back to Clark, and like a fool, she'd spoken too freely, her tongue loosened by liquor and nicotine. Lois had reminisced fondly - she cringed at the memory - over the many stories she and Clark had hunted down together, all of the good times they'd had. Even the memory of their first awkward meeting, admitting with a sly smile that she had been testing him with the soda bottle trick.

Was I really that blind? Did I really say all that? Dear God. What kind of moron was I to fall for this, hook line, and sinker?

At least she'd managed to keep the secret of his alter ego. And at least she had made it very clear that, though Clark certainly had feelings for her, she'd kept him at arm's length, kept him guessing. Only when Richard asked about the last time she'd seen Clark did Lois actually stop. The haunted look on her face she hadn't been able to conceal and her muttered comment about not knowing he was taking extended leave had convinced Richard to end that line of questioning for the night. *Thank God for small favors.*

More wine, sweet and golden, thick with flavor. More shisha, this time flavored with mint. Thick cups of sweetened coffee, and then it was finally time to leave. Lois felt pleasantly off-kilter, though she wasn't precisely inebriated. Just the combination of vices had relaxed her to the point of lightheadedness, and Richard helped her to the car. She'd laughed easily, leaning on his arm, and that laughter had been precious to them both.

The restaurant was set back from the street behind a courtyard full of potted plants and trickling fountains. They'd had to cross in front of traffic to get to the parking lot, which was dimly lit. As Richard tried to unlock the passenger side door, Lois had leaned heavily on him, feeling as though the lovely evening had somehow melted her bones. It was also quite a funny feeling, and she couldn't stop chuckling as she pressed closer to him to hold herself up. Which threw her off-balance and she had slipped just as she was afraid she'd do. But Richard caught her easily.

Now, lying in bed and remembering that moment, Lois still couldn't be sure that she

hadn't kissed him first. It was like in dreams, where the scene changes abruptly with no transition, and she found herself pressed against the car, kissing him hungrily as if the last taste of the coffee in his mouth was ambrosia. And Richard clearly felt the same about her, his hands running possessively up and down her sides, pinning her against the car door and kissing her hard enough for her lips to feel bruised.

As his passion became tangible, Lois' mind started to disconnect. *Do you really want to do this?* the Romantic whispered. *With him? With the way you're feeling about someone else right now? It's not right, Lois. Didn't we do this once already, and who felt guilty afterwards?*

Shut up, Lois growled back, determined to block the voice out. Shut up, I'm not gonna ruin this... Who cares if it's right? It's no more wrong than those damn dreams I've been having about him. I don't care ... it feels so nice after so long...

And it *was* nice to just forget about everything else, Richard nuzzling her neck, feeling warmth suffuse her body. Lois murmured incoherently, tilting her head back and letting him kiss her throat with a low moan. So very nice, drifting in a haze of warm pleasure...

Which suddenly shattered. Richard ran his hands down to her thighs and lifted her, pinning her at a more convenient height. An icy shiver of déjà vu ran through Lois as her eyes opened wide; that was a car door handle poking her in the back instead of the drawer handle of a filing cabinet, but the comparison to the other morning couldn't be clearer. And recognizing the similarities, admitting to her feelings for both men, she couldn't go on. *Damn you, Kal-El.*

"No," Lois whispered, almost moaning with frustration and resignation. "No, no, no, we can't. Not like this, not now, no..." She pressed both hands against Richard's chest as she dropped her head, tormented by memories and promises. "Richard, no, stop."

Richard sighed heavily against her neck, and Lois shuddered at his breath on the sensitive skin. "Why?" he asked. "Why not?"

"We can't," Lois whispered back, not daring to look him in the eyes. Her body ached with craving, but her mind was frozen. "Not here."

Richard let her down gently. "Well, no, not here," he said with a breathless chuckle, desire making his voice rough. "But later..." He kissed her earlobe, letting his warm breath tickle her.

Shivers ran up and down Lois' spine and she leaned toward him, then suddenly pulled back. "No," she said more sternly, clamping down hard on the lightning-quick desire in her veins. In that way at least, he knew her so very well. "Richard ... it's the wrong time." Lois blushed as she offered that last-ditch excuse. *Oh, for God's sake, Lois! You couldn't come up with anything better than that?*

For a moment, Richard looked confused, then understanding dawned. "Oh," he said, crestfallen. But he didn't question her; no man ever would question that particular reason. However, Lois was acutely aware that even six months ago he would've known she was lying - only their recent estrangement made the excuse plausible.

He kissed her brow, sliding his arms around her gently. "Another time, then," he murmured, and Lois was still enough under the sway of caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol to cuddle against his chest and let the rest of the world spin as it would.

Lying awake in bed beside him now, the reporter didn't know exactly what to damn herself for. Part of her wished she'd accepted the affection she craved, having missed it for quite some time. Another part felt that doing so would be a betrayal of Kal-El, who had woken feelings in her heart she could no longer deny regardless of her fears. And still another part felt

that making love to Richard now would be a betrayal of Richard as well, since she could no longer make herself believe she loved him the same way.

To make things even *worse*, Richard chose that moment to roll over in his sleep and slip his arm around her waist with a blissful murmur.

What am I going to do now? Just what the hell am I going to do? How do I get myself into these things? And just how am I going to get myself out of it this time, without destroying everything? Staring up at the ceiling, still unable to decide whether it was a shadow or stain, whether semblance or substance.

As Richard drove the twins to school the next morning, Kala leaned against the window, staring out and upward. She couldn't see much sky now that they were downtown, only glimpses between Metropolis' concrete canyons, but those few stretches of blue captivated her interest. Had Lois, still in bed miles behind them, known what Kala was thinking, she would have been wide awake and terrified.

Wonder if I'm gonna ever be up there? Kala mused. *Maybe I can fly, like Daddy. That'd be really cool.*

Several days after overhearing her Nana's urgently whispered conversation with Mommy - *Have you told Superman about his twins?* - Kala had been up at her parents' job, and talked Uncle Jimmy into walking her down to the break room for some flavored water. They had passed the rows of front-page stories, framed and mounted, which Kala had seen dozens of times before. At six years old, she couldn't read much past the headlines, and had always dismissed them as sort of boring posters. But that day, with Nana's electrifying words still floating in her mind, Kala had skidded to a halt in front of one the stories.

I Spent the Night with Superman, she needed no help with that. The biggest word was one every child in Metropolis knew well. But what Kala had never quite noticed before was the byline beneath it. *By Lois Lane*, she read, and her hazel eyes grew wide. "Uncle Jimmy, my Mommy went to a sleepover at Superman's house?" she had asked, impressed.

The photographer had chuckled, and explained that the two had spent the evening flying around, which Kala found incredibly exciting. She'd managed not to tell Uncle Jimmy everything she knew, though.

Superman's my daddy, Kala thought, remembering the incident warmly as she gazed up at the brief flashes of sky. *My Mommy was in love with **Superman**. That's the most special-est ever.* Then another realization hit, and she sat bolt upright in the back seat. *That means Mommy kissed Superman! Maybe more than once! **Wow!*** New respect for her mother shone in the little girl's eyes.

Jason was looking at her like she'd lost her mind, and Kala just glared at him. ***He** doesn't have a clue. Boys. They're all so dumb ... except Daddy. Both daddies, Richard and Superman. They're pretty smart. Hey, Superman was **in love** with my Mommy! That's **so neat**.*

Such pleasant and intriguing thoughts kept her occupied all the way to her classroom.

It had not been a pleasant morning for Lois. She'd woken in the wee hours from a dream that left her clammy with sweat. In it, the life she'd worked so hard to build had continued on just as planned. She'd married Richard, they'd lived in this house, and they had come to know each other very well after all and to enjoy each other more with each passing year. Their lovemaking had become more tender than passionate as time went by, and they spent more time together in silence because everything was known between them. But it was a good life,

one happier than many women could ever dream of.

So why had she woken up shivering with fear? Lois asked herself that as she crept to the bathroom and rinsed her face, trying to shake herself back into reality - and out of the sudden urge to call Clark.

Staring at the dark shadows under her eyes in the pitiless fluorescent light, Lois had to admit that she wanted more. More than happiness, more than comfort, more than stability. She wanted that level of intimacy that was almost painful in its intensity; she wanted awe and wonder and the occasional feeling that her life was out of her control. For a moment the reporter tried to scold herself, thinking, *Life is not a fairy tale, you don't always get magic and princes.*

But another voice replied softly, *Once upon a time you did - and it's not too late, if you're brave enough to try again. Brave enough to call the whirlwind into your own life and let it blow away everything that isn't bolted down tight. Make the choice, dare to say the things you've been thinking, and when it all dies down you'll see what's left is what's strongest. And you already know what that is - the love you can't deny, can't excise from your heart.*

Still she hesitated. Even if her own heart - and finally her mind - were clear on what she wanted, Lois wasn't making a decision just for herself. *The twins. Which is best for them: the security of the life they've always known, or the constant uncertainty of life with their real father?*

It hadn't been the kind of question she could answer that early, so Lois had crawled back into bed and eventually slept. Later that morning, after Richard left with the twins, she decided to make time to investigate the Vanderworth estate a second time, now armed with both the information Clark had passed on and additional tidbits passed on from Karla Smith-Bennett during their phone conversation. She'd stop briefly by the office, of course, but only briefly. She had to at least show up in the morning, but it would be best if she didn't run into either of the men today...

One of those mornings, again. Maybe the arsonist planned to plead not guilty by reason of insanity if he was ever caught, or maybe he was inspiring copycats. Clark privately thought it could be either one as he hurried in to work. Certainly this morning's fire was nonsensical, in some respects closely following the firebug's usual M.O., in others widely different.

The same model airplane fuels, but this time the target had been an abandoned warehouse. Virtually no risk to human life, but the same timed ignitions. Of course, the other arson targets didn't fit an easy pattern, unless maximum mayhem was a pattern...

He changed in the ventilation shaft and headed into the newsroom the back way, as if he'd just come down the secondary stairs from the corrections department above. As Clark walked in, something made him look up and across the busy city room to the front doors.

Lois was on her way out, though she couldn't have been in long at this hour. Even across the crowded room, their eyes met, and for a moment Clark couldn't move. He had once stood next to the great bells of Big Ben as the clock struck noon, just to see if the chimes would dampen the thousands of other sounds he could hear. It hadn't worked, but the vibration shocked him into immobility. Standing that close, every cell in his body seemed to resonate in answer, even his pulse and breath keeping the bells' time.

That feeling returned to him as he met Lois' gaze, seeing a kind of stricken look on her face. The sight of his beloved drove everything else out of his heart and mind for a moment,

and from the unthinking way she took a step toward him, Lois felt as much for him. *What are you thinking, Lois?* he couldn't help but wonder.

Then the moment was gone, Lois shaking her head slightly as she turned to leave. *What are **you** thinking?* Clark scolded himself as he headed to his desk. *Stop it. Just stop it. How much you miss her doesn't matter; what she wants, and what's best for her, does. How the heck can you manage to put the **entire planet** above your own needs, **except** when it comes to her?*

But he knew the answer to that. *Love has its reasons, that reason never knows.*

Clark didn't have long to contemplate, however. He'd been at his desk barely ten minutes when he heard a fire alarm. *Not again...* It might just be a school testing the system; it might just be a homeowner who'd let the bacon sizzle a little too long. He listened a moment longer.

And heard the alarms in one of the main fire stations go off, shortly followed by sirens. *I have got to catch this guy,* he thought, hurrying out again. *Or else he's going to make me lose my job.*

Lois's heart had stopped beating for a moment, catching Clark's glance. There was so much she needed to say to him, her stubborn defiance gradually being won over by the desire to end this secret-keeping. In spite of her resolutions, every time she saw him she wanted to simply confide in him, to take him back into her trust. *What are you thinking? Are you really as torn over all of this as I am? Do you really want me back or do you want me just because you don't have me?*

Do you dream about me at night, the same as I do about you, and then lie to yourself in the morning?

*Is it even **possible** for us to have another chance? Even now?*

They would talk soon, set the record straight on everything, but now wasn't the time. Not with all that was going on at the moment. *Soon,* she promised herself. *For better or worse.* Closure or new beginning, it had to be done. But for now, she forced herself to leave, remembering that she probably wouldn't get out of the office at all if she didn't do it before Richard got there.

Thankfully, the Vanderworth alarm systems had a few vulnerable points - vulnerable to someone who didn't mind climbing the property fence and getting in the basement via a cellar window, anyway.

The basement was dark and dusty, forcing Lois to suppress a sneeze. She kept close to the wall, listening intently. Somewhere in the mansion, she could hear the dull roar of a furnace, but there was no other sound. For the moment, she could risk a light. Lois always carried a small electromagnetic flashlight in her purse, the kind that needs no batteries. All she had to do was shake it briskly, and it gave her a strong bluish LED beam.

Dusty was an understatement. Every surface was cloaked in pale powder, giving the room an unsettling shrouded appearance. And it wasn't all the normal dust of neglect - quite a lot of it appeared to be from cracking and shifting concrete, since the floor and walls were buckled. The extent of the damage was incredible - apparently there had once been some kind of train set down here, but now it was in ruins. The powerful light showed toppled buildings, derailed trains, flattened mountains, and everywhere the figures of miniature plastic people lay knocked over and broken.

Lois felt a premonitory chill run down her spine. *Whatever caused this destruction, I **really** hope Luthor hasn't figured out how to scale it up.* She couldn't, however, immediately

divine the source of the EMP. A great many wires lay tangled in a heap under and around the jumbled remains of the train set, but they could have all been part of the set itself.

Suddenly, a glint from under one of the piles of debris caught Lois' eye. She had to pick her way across to it carefully, stepping over miniature bridges and roads and trees, but finally the reporter knelt in the dust and examined her find.

A tiny chip of glass... no, crystal, no bigger than a grain of rice. Lois sighed disgustedly; it could be part of some kind of timing device for explosives, or a piece chipped out of someone's watch face. *Why can't life be more like a novel? Why can't I find a nice big clue, like a book entitled "How to Cause a Massive EMP with Easily-Traceable Materials"? Yeah, open to the page that would tell me how he did it, with his fingerprints on the cover.*

Oh well. This might mean something, it might not. Either way, I'm taking no chances. Lois took an envelope out of her purse and sealed the fragment inside. Then she set off to continue her exploration, carefully avoiding the windows so she wouldn't be caught on the exterior security cameras. She wasn't worried about the interior; the specs of the alarm system hadn't mentioned indoor monitoring.

After dropping the twins off, Richard stopped for coffee. He hated that stuff Perry brewed at the office, it looked and smelled like tar - and tasted worse. He preferred to get his cup of steaming black wakefulness from a corner doughnut shop, at which newsmen from several papers liked to congregate.

As Richard was paying for his coffee, he overheard a wisp of conversation from somewhere in the back of the dingy, dough-scented room. He could only make out a couple of words, but they electrified him: "Lane ... drunk ... Pulitzers..."

The International Editor drifted toward the voice, pretending to be preoccupied with the selection of doughnuts in the large glass case. The speaker was a heavysset reporter Richard had seen here often, but whose name he didn't know. He gestured with a powdered, jelly-filled doughnut, then took a bite, spraying powdered sugar all over the table. "I'm tellin' ya, she was drunk off her ass."

The man across from him at the small table leaned back in distaste. "You obviously don't know Lois Lane. There wasn't enough liquor there to get *her* drunk. She's made of iron..."

"Nah, she ain't," the large man replied. "Dunno who she thinks she is anyway..."

"She's the next editor-in-chief of the *Daily Planet*, Harry," his companion replied sharply. "And she knows it perfectly well. Lois Lane won the Pulitzer; she got the first Superman interview back in the day, too. I'd be careful what you say about her."

The other man harrumphed, and sipped his coffee noisily. Richard acted as though he was fascinated by the crullers. "Yeah, right," Harry said. "I'm not scared of her. What's she gonna do, break my arm?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," the other replied. "Don't underestimate her. She looks pretty and sweet and vapid right up until she scoops your story and steals your sources. And don't forget her boyfriend."

Richard kept his face turned away, but he soon realized they weren't talking about him. Harry sprayed more crumbs as he laughed. "Yeah? That guy in International, the pilot? So what, Dan?"

"No, the *other* flyboy," Dan replied, dusting off his sleeve and glaring at his companion. "The caped one. He wouldn't take kindly to you disparaging his lady love."

Another shower of crumbs. "Hah! Superman? Please. It's been six years and she wrote a

bitchy article about him. That's the first time PMS has won anybody a Pulitzer."

"Tone it down, Harry. I'm serious."

The heavyset man seemed not to hear, and Richard began to suspect there was more than creamer in his coffee by his slightly slurred words. "Besides, he's got a lot more to worry 'bout than me. How thrilled you think he's gonna be when he finds out she almost kissed *Kent* at the Pulitzers?"

"*Kent*?" Dan's disbelief was clear, and Richard felt frozen in shock. "Clark Kent? Mr. Milquetoast? Her old partner?"

"Yup," Harry replied, relishing his moment of glory. "Kent. Told you she was drunk."

That effectively ruined Richard's day. *Kent. She kissed Clark at the Pulitzers? Why am I the last one to find out these things? What the hell else have they all been hiding from me?*

Oh, Uncle Perry's in for it now... He stormed out, seething, and headed right back to the office to confront Lois, Perry, and Clark ... whichever of them were around.

Perry White never quite minded his own business. Everyone else's was so much more obviously in need of experienced minding. At the moment, he was peacefully monitoring what his employees thought were private emails ... in spite of the notice in the handbook that said all emails sent to and from the company server were subject to managerial review.

Grinning at some of the less than savory descriptions of himself - wouldn't they be surprised when he casually remarked on the inaccuracies - he was completely unprepared for Richard to burst into the office. Perry raised a grizzled eyebrow and looked skeptically at his brother's son.

At least Richard let the door shut completely behind him. "What the hell happened at the Pulitzers, Perry?" he demanded immediately.

The editor sat back in his chair, for once in his life stunned. *Ah, shit. I knew this was coming. I just hoped it wouldn't be so soon.* "What're you talking about, Richard? And don't take that tone with me."

"I'm talking about my fiancée and Kent." Richard leaned across the desk, and completely ignored the warning about tone. "Don't play stupid with me, Perry. You were there, and nosy as you are, you had to know about it."

"What about your fiancée and Kent? What kind of rumor-mill bullshit have you been listening to? And watch your goddamn tone, Richard - you're not too old to feel my belt."

"Oh, come off it," Richard scoffed. "Stop screwing around and tell me what the hell you know about Kent and Lois making out at the Pulitzers."

"Making out? Are you smoking something?" Perry was relieved to be on safe ground here. "I don't know who you were talking to, but they don't have their facts straight."

"So what *really* happened?"

The editor hesitated, then plunged on. "Dammit, *you* told her there'd be an open bar. You practically told her to drink."

"So she got plastered?"

"She didn't get *drunk*; she got a little bit tipsy. I chased them out onto the dance floor so she could finally talk to Kent - which is what we all wanted, so they'd quit fighting all the damn time - and it worked. They were bickering like they used to. Problem is, she almost kissed him at the end of a slow dance."

"She *kissed* him?" Richard hissed.

"*Almost*," Perry growled. "Stop calling yourself a reporter if you can't quote a source

accurately! She quit and pulled back well before she actually kissed him, though."

"And you weren't gonna tell me?!"

"Of course not!" Perry barked. "You'd just make an ass of yourself, like you're doing right now!"

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really! She'd had a few and she was dancing with the guy. So she almost kissed him. There's a shrink in Chelsea who did a whole lot more than kiss her a couple years before you showed up, if you want to be a jerk to someone who deserves it."

"Well, I have good reason to believe she did a whole lot more than kiss Clark," Richard replied hotly. Before he really knew what he was saying, he spilled everything. "I'm pretty sure I caught them making out in the damn supply closet the day we got back - they sure looked guilty as hell. But it shouldn't surprise me, considering that he's the father of the twins."

"*What?*" Perry stared at him incredulously. "Richard, son, you have completely and utterly lost your mind. Clark Kent no more slept with Lois than I did."

"I'm serious," Richard said, regaining a little of his composure. "Look, Uncle Perry. You sent them to Niagara, posing as newlyweds. Those Kryptonians try taking over the world, Lois is a hostage, Superman shows up in the nick of time to save the day. Next thing we know, Clark's acting all kinds of pained, and Lois is being a little flaky about remembering things. Boom, Superman vanishes. Clark goes on leave the same time - *to France*. To Paris, actually. Lois heads out looking for Superman, and she winds up in Paris."

"So you're saying they met in Paris? Richard, there was nothing romantic between them before they left. I would've known. Besides, she was nuts about Superman."

"Yes, and thanks so very much for telling me that when I first met her," Richard replied sharply. "Anyway, she was in Paris, just realizing that Superman was gone indefinitely. And then suppose she met Kent, just by coincidence. Kent, who's always had a thing for her. Who's always been there for her. The one man she trusts more than anyone, except you and Superman. You know Lois - can't you see it? When she needed someone who was comfortable and reliable more than anything else, he was there."

"Okay, okay, it's plausible. But what about Garen what's-his-name?"

"No such person," Richard retorted. "I checked. The name Garen never appeared in a *Quotidienne* byline, as first, middle, or last. The only Garen who ever worked in the area had a stationery shop across the street, and his boyfriend didn't appreciate me calling."

"You *called*..."

"*Furthermore*, of the four guys who worked there at the same time as Lois and who claim to have slept with her - none named Garen - none of them actually *have*. At least, none of them have ever seen her naked."

"*What?* How the hell do you know that?"

"Because they can all describe, in detail, a birthmark she doesn't have," Richard told him.

Perry stared. Slowly, he said, "If she ever finds out you've been investigating her, Richard, she'll kick your ass. I mean she will literally beat the daylights out of you."

"Yes, well, this is what happens when you lie and evade to the point where someone doesn't trust you to answer a direct question," Richard replied hotly.

"Still..."

"Perry, look me in the eyes and tell me you think I'm wrong," the younger man demanded. "It's the only explanation that makes sense. *He* was gone, Clark was there. You know Lois better than I do - *everybody* knows her better than I do, apparently - tell me I'm

completely wide of the mark. Go on, do it."

Perry sighed, dropping his face into his hands. For a moment, just a moment, he looked his age, careworn and tired. His voice was low and resigned as he said, "Richard, listen to me for once in your life. Which do you want, the truth - or Lois? Because you're gonna lose her if you keep this up."

His nephew leaned forward, eyes intense. "What if she was never mine to begin with, Perry? Just answer me."

"Fine, shoot yourself in the foot if you want to," Perry barked, some of the old fire coming back. "I didn't want you to get hurt, but I can't stop you if you're this determined. Yeah, I think it makes sense. I don't one hundred percent believe you've hit on the truth, but it's plausible. If you're happy now, do me a favor."

"What?"

"*Don't* talk to Kent. If what you think is the truth, that's *her* job. Don't you *dare* spring this on Kent."

"Why ... not that I'm gonna, but why not, Perry?"

The editor glared. "Because if you're wrong and he never slept with her, you'll probably kill him by suggesting he did."

Richard rolled his eyes, got up, and left the office without a further word. A few moments later, Perry saw the switchboard monitoring program on his computer pick up a call from Richard's cell phone to Troupe in International. *At least the boy's figured out he better let someone know when he leaves this office*, the older man thought, sitting back in his chair with a troubled glance into Lois' office. She and Kent had both just barely missed meeting Richard, and Perry was damned glad they had. That was not a scene he cared to witness.

Lois arrived back at the office after Richard had shown up and left again. Perry was giving her a strange look, but he didn't call her into his office, so she ignored him for the moment.

Richard stayed gone, and Clark eventually made it back. *Seems like this is the morning for wandering in and out. Typical Friday*, she thought, but it was probably better this way. Lois had a chance to work on her editorial due tomorrow, and the Vanderworth story as well. A few minutes of searching on the internet quickly told her that she'd have to find an actual expert to ask about the crystals; half the people online were more concerned with whether a given stone could open your chakras or help you remember a past life. The way testimonials were worded, she couldn't weed out those kinds of search results even by adding *explosive, detonate, destruction* and similar search terms.

By lunch time, she'd given up in disgust. *I'm going to have to talk to an actual geologist. Lovely. Forget this, I'm going to go get something to eat. And no break room vending machine for me today, please.* She waved to Jimmy on her way out, and he smiled at her, instantly lightening her mood.

Ten minutes later she was back, her heels striking the carpet sharply, and Jimmy looked up questioningly but knew better than to ask what was wrong. Lois headed to her office without a word and called her car insurance company. "Hi, this is Lois Lane," she said pleasantly, but there was that edge to her voice, the one that those who knew her well learned to hear exquisitely - and fear. The operator replied politely, and Lois continued, "I've got an Audi A3 covered by you guys... Yeah. It won't start."

The man started going through what was clearly a checklist, and Lois replied impatiently.

"Right, I tried that... Uh-huh. Nope, it has fuel, I checked the distributor cap, spark plugs are tight. Battery's only a year old..." That seemed to be the end of it; Lois rolled her eyes and suppressed a sigh as the operator finally agreed to tow the car. "Yes, please, take it to the dealership for me. It's in the *Daily Planet* parking garage, space B12. First floor. Have them call me and I'll meet the tow truck driver at the car... Thanks... You too."

She hung up the phone, sighing in disgust, and then called in an order of pizza. After that she dialed Barbara, "You'll definitely be picking them up today, hon."

"Really? What happened?" Someone was practicing the piano in the background, probably one of her adult students.

"My stupid car died. I have a \$450 a month lease and the bloody thing just won't start. I love that car, but right now I could just kick the hell out of it."

"It's no problem, really. I'll get them. You just be glad the car didn't break down while you were driving it, Lo."

"Very true," Lois chuckled. "Thanks, hon. No, really. Thank you. I guess I'd better get back to work..."

The student hit a blatantly sour note, and Lois envisioned Barbara flinching as the woman sighed. "Yeah, me too. See you later."

"See you. Bye." Lois hung up and dropped back into her chair, glaring out the windows. *Just another lovely day in the life of Lois Lane. And to think people envy me...*

Things in the office had seemed unusually tense that morning, and Jimmy wisely chose to spend it in the darkroom, away from everyone's line of fire. He came up in the afternoon with justification for his pay, plus a couple more pictures from the recent fires to run with an article on the arsonist.

Jimmy was at his desk, keeping a weather eye out for Perry and Richard. One of the other photographers had muttered something to him about a very intense discussion between those two. Sarah Olsen hadn't raised any fools; the way things had been lately, the discussion could only be about Lois, and Jimmy didn't want to be interrogated again.

The coast looked clear, though Perry and Lois were in their offices. Richard had been gone for a while, though Clark was finally back. Maybe nothing was up ... this place was a giant rumor mill, and what the gossips couldn't dig up they *made* up, the juicier the better.

Still, Jimmy kept an eye on Lois. Anything that went wrong around here would either center on her or drag her into it, always had. Lois was a magnet for controversy.

Her office door was partly open; it wouldn't close all the way unless you tugged it, which Lois blamed on damp weather and Perry blamed on her slamming it. So Jimmy heard her phone ring, and having finished setting up the photos for tomorrow's article, he glanced her way with mild interest.

The raven-haired reporter smiled at first, but then that pleasant expression fell from her face and shattered, like fine china falling from the shelf with a splintering smash. Jimmy sat up, worried, and watched as Lois' expression went from shock, to fear, to absolute terror. And then rage swarmed up to join the horror, and Lois dropped the phone. It swung beneath her desk from its cord, smacking the wood, while she snatched up her purse and bolted for the door.

Uh-oh, Jimmy thought, panicking. He'd never seen her look like this; even when the Kryptonians threatened them and hurt Perry, she'd been furious, but not this frightened. And again, he'd seen her scared, but not simultaneously so wrathful.

As Lois stormed past his desk, her eyes glazed and fixed on the door, Jimmy yelled for help. "*Chief! Clark! Somebody stop her! Clark!*"

Perry was already out of his office, calling her name, but Lois didn't turn around. No one else seemed willing to get in her way, and Jimmy started to follow her as well. *Someone's got to stop her; there's no telling what she'll do when she's like this*, Jimmy thought. *Where the heck is Clark when...? Oh, thank God.*

As he and Perry reached the still-swinging doors, they saw Clark outside, standing between Lois and the elevators. His shoulders were set, but his entire posture spoke of reluctant resignation. "Lois, wait," he said in a low, firm voice neither of them had ever heard him use before.

"Get out of my way *now*, Kent," Lois growled, and Perry and Jimmy were both shocked by the panic in her tone. The panic, and the fury.

She tried to shove him aside, but he caught her arm. "Lois, you can't do this. You can't run headlong..."

Even if the newsroom doors hadn't still been swinging back and forth after she slammed them open, they would've heard her voice suddenly rise almost to a shriek. "*Don't tell me what I can't do! Luthor has my twins! And I'll do whatever I have to do! Now get the hell out of my way!*"

*She sits in her corner
Singing herself to sleep
Wrapped in all of the promises
That no one seems to keep
She no longer cries to herself
No tears left to wash away
Just diaries of empty pages
Feelings gone a stray
But she will sing*

*Til everything burns
While everyone screams
Burning their lies
Burning my dreams
All of this hate
And all of this pain
I'll burn it all down
As my anger reigns
Til everything burns
Watching it all fade away...*
-Ben Moody and Anastacia, "Everything Burns"

Cinders on the Wind

Lois had smiled when she picked up the phone, hearing Barbara's voice. But before she could say more than, "Hello," her expression began to slip.

"Lois, listen," Barbara said, and the tension in her voice was enough to send a chill down Lois' spine. In the background, she could hear Ashlyn crying, and Todd's voice trying to soothe her. "Ashlyn's class got held late, so she came out five minutes after everyone else. When she got to the bench where Mrs. Mosley normally waits with the twins, nobody was there."

"What?" Lois' voice was a tiny, strengthless whisper.

"Todd and I got there right after; we found Mrs. Mosley. Someone hit her in the head and dragged her into the bushes; Todd called an ambulance and the police. She's gonna be okay, I hope... She doesn't remember what happened."

Ashlyn's voice rose in the background, petulant with trauma. "I want Jason an' Kala!"

Barbara sighed, and her tone made it clear how much she hated giving this news, how deeply she understood the horror she was about to voice. "Lois ... the twins are missing. They can't be gone long; we already called the police..."

But the reporter heard no more. At those four words, *the twins are missing*, her vision went abruptly white, her ears deafened by the sudden roar of her own blood beating faster, faster. "Luthor," she whispered, and came back from the brink of fainting, burning with fury. *Luthor. You sonofabitch, I'll kill you. Touch one hair on their heads, and I swear, if it takes my last breath to do it, I will kill you.*

She wasn't aware of dropping the phone, letting it thud against her desk as it twisted on its cord. Lois just grabbed her purse with the reassuring weight of the Ladysmith inside, and headed for the doors. She tried to keep her emotions locked down inside, but it was little use. Part of her was wailing in sheer terror, howling for this to be merely a nightmare. Another part screamed for Luthor's blood, enraged and knowing instinctively he had to be behind the kidnapping.

Dimly, Lois heard Jimmy yell, sensed him and Perry following her. She had one goal in mind: hunt Luthor down before he could harm her children. *God alone knows what he's figured out*, she thought, storming toward the doors. *I'm not going to let the twins get hurt because of me, because of what I had with their father. I'll strangle that bastard Luthor with my bare hands if he hurts them... Jason, Kala, Mommy's coming...*

She was barely aware of her surroundings until she nearly reached the elevators, and then he was there, barring her way. "Get out of my way *now*, Kent," she growled, his voice unheard. Not even Superman could stop her when her children were at stake...

Clark had been minding his own business, working on a story and worrying about the arsonist, when he became aware of the absence of a sound that he knew and loved. Lois' heartbeat.

His head snapped up, his expression intense enough to give away his secret if the right people had seen his face. But then her heart began to beat again, and for an instant he relaxed.

The beat was too fast, though, too hard, and it only accelerated. Clark hadn't tuned into the phone conversation yet - he spent most of his time trying *not* to hear private discussions - but he did so then, catching only a woman's voice as she called out, "Lois? Are you there? The cops are coming ... the twins could be anywhere..."

And his own heart stilled in its great steady rhythm. *The twins. Oh, my God. No...* Lois went steamrolling across the office, Jimmy yelling for the Chief, yelling for *him*. Clark forced

himself to move past the shock and the horror, and as soon as he was up he found his own pulse hammering. He sped out of the side door that lead to a long-disused hallway to some conference rooms, and beat Lois to the elevators in a blur of super-speed. "Lois, wait," he said, and she was nearly incoherent with terror and rage as she snarled a reply and tried to push past him.

Clark caught her arm, held her fast. "Lois, you can't do this," he said as gently as he could, his heart breaking for her. "You can't run headlong..."

She whirled on him, punching his elbow in a vain attempt to make him let go that probably numbed her hand. Her voice rose as she shouted, "*Don't tell me what I can't do! Luthor has my twins! And I'll do whatever I have to! Now get the **hell** out of my way!*"

Lois was hysterical. Clark had never thought he'd see her this far gone into that particular madness, but he couldn't let her go. She'd likely run blindly into some trap of Luthor's, and how would that help Jason and Kala? Clark grabbed her upper arms and lifted her off the ground slightly, setting her down again squarely in front of him so that she had to look into his eyes, not at the elevator doors. It was done so smoothly and swiftly that Perry and Jimmy probably hadn't seen or recognized the immense strength behind that simple move. "Lois, get hold of yourself," he told her firmly. "You can't go running off like this; Luthor has a trap laid for you if you do."

She struggled in his grip, her hazel eyes brimming with tears. "Damn you, let me go!" Her voice was near breaking with the extremes of emotion, but she knew all too well that he was far stronger than she was. She had only one way to hit him hard enough to make him release her, and it was with words. "What if it was *you*, huh? What if Luthor had *your* kids, what would *you* do?" Lois glared up at him defiantly, practically spitting the words into his face. While part of her was reeling in disbelief over how close to the truth that was, the majority of her mind and heart hoped it would startle him into letting her go. Nevermind that he was faster, or that he was probably right. Gripped in the vise of panic, all she cared about was chasing down the maniac who had her twins.

And it did shock Clark, but not as badly as she hoped. *I suspect he does*, Clark thought distantly, but he held her and let the certainty in his blue eyes calm hers. "If it happened to me, Lois, I'd pray you were around to stop me from doing something like this."

That stopped her; Lois' eyes went wide as she stared up at him, both of them all too aware of the implication in their words, Lois realizing the inevitability of it. Neither she nor Clark noticed Jimmy whispering to Perry, both men turning away from the doors and shooing the other reporters back to their desks. Clark continued softly, "Getting yourself killed won't help them, Lois. Jason and Kala need you alive and free to act."

Then the tears began to spill from Lois' eyes, and she choked back a sob. "It's my fault, Kal-El," her voice low and trembling, and Clark pulled her close, cradled her in his strong arms, and she was unsurprised at that moment to finally feel at home at last. Closing her eyes at the momentary relief it gave her, she could only close her eyes and hold tightly to him.

"We'll find them," he whispered, and guided her out of the hallway, into the maintenance corridor, where the toughest reporter on the *Planet* could weep brokenly to the one person who had ever seen her that vulnerable.

Richard had found reasons to stay out of the office. The consulate fire needed following up, some other stories needed a bit of fact-checking, and it never hurt for the International editor to have lunch in the café across the street from the U.N. building. He'd picked up quite a

few leads there in the past.

One more thing required his attention, and in the afternoon he went to Centennial Park. A tent city had sprung up in the meadow, and Richard worked his way through the dispersing crowd. He'd timed this just right, arriving after Lana's show was over...

Flashing his press pass got him backstage, where the slim redhead was shaking hands and accepting congratulations from a crowd of admirers and fellow designers. Richard waited, smiling a little; Lana was unfailingly nice to everyone, even the one or two who were clearly jealous of her success and trying to offer a backhanded compliment. He couldn't help comparing the two women: Lois would have had a scathing reply delivered in the same falsely sweet tone, but Lana acted as if the compliment was sincere and defused any potential insult.

*What a genuinely nice person, he thought, mentally kicking himself in the next instant. What are you thinking, Richard? And while we're on the topic, what are you **doing** here anyway? You're engaged!*

For how much longer? Was that his conscience, speaking so coldly? Richard shook off the thought, silencing his doubts for the moment. He was just here to congratulate a source on her successful show. Nothing more than that. Really.

The press of people abated somewhat, and Richard was able to make his way to Lana's side. "Hi," he said, turning that winning grin on her. "I wanted to be the first to congratulate you on the show, but it looks like I was a little late."

The redhead seemed startled to see him, but her lips curved up in a smile that lit her green eyes. "Richard! What a pleasant surprise," she said with real warmth. Perhaps she had shaken hands with too many fans and rivals in the past few minutes, because Lana automatically reached out and took hold of Richard's hands.

The spark that leapt between them was tangible to both, and their eyes widened simultaneously. His fingers tightened on hers for an instant ... and then Lana dropped his hands as if she'd been shocked, chuckling nervously. "Well, it is good to see you," she said, and the comment sounded lame to her own ears. Lana scolded herself, *Quit fawning over him, you idiot! He's engaged to be married, remember?*

Even if he's unhappy... The traitorous little voice that whispered in her ear spoke the truth, but Lana didn't want to listen. He was a nice man and a good reporter; that was all. She couldn't let herself get close to him. "So how are Lois and the twins?" she asked, quickly trying to put some distance between them.

Richard flinched; that was pure icewater, there. "They're okay," he answered automatically. Then he remembered whom he was talking about, the conversation he'd had with Perry that morning, and went on. "I learned something else I wish I didn't know about Lois, but that's to be expected by now."

Lana smacked his arm. "Don't talk about your fiancée like that," she said sternly. "She can't be ... the way you make her sound, or you wouldn't be with her."

Her frankness surprised an uncensored reply out of him. "I might not be for much longer."

Dark auburn eyebrows rose questioningly. "Oh? Did she find out about your extensive background check?" *Darn it, can you be any more abrasive? What are you trying to do, make him feel at home? Thank God he couldn't hear the thoughts whispering in her mind. Did I just think that? My God, that was catty.*

Richard gave her back a look that was just as cool. "No, I found out she kissed another man," he replied. But this was Lana, so he amended, "Almost kissed him, anyway."

"What?" she asked. "Is this the guy you think is the father of the twins, or someone else?"

"Yeah, it's Clark," Richard replied, and bit his tongue a second too late. *Aw, damn. I can't believe I just did that.*

"Clark?" Lana's voice rose. "Clark Kent? You're out of your mind! I've known him since grammar school!"

"Keep your voice down," Richard hissed. "Yes, that Clark. Think about it, Lana. Have you ever seen the way he looks at her?"

"I've met her once," Lana replied, "and she was too busy tearing your head off for me to notice anything ... else..." *No, wait. He **was** watching Lois - and that scolding was as much for him as for Richard. She pretty much stalked over and marked them both as hers... Not to mention that day in the Chinese restaurant. Textbook definition of awkward there - and the look she shot me just screamed 'jealous.' Dear Lord, I think Richard's right.*

*Clark is the twins' father. That cashier didn't know how right she was - **Daddy's girl** indeed! And oh, what Richard just said he found out... Clark's been fooling around with an engaged woman?*

Martha Kent is going to kill him!

There was no more time to talk, or to think, however. Richard's cell phone buzzed, and he muttered, "Let me check this." The screen displayed Perry's desk, and little as Richard wanted to take the call, he knew he should. "Hello, Uncle Perry, I'm with a source... What? *What? Who* has them? Wait a minute - *Perry, where's Lois?*" He listened a moment longer, his complexion going pale as chalk, and Lana caught his arm, afraid he would faint. "Thank God. I'll be there as soon as I can," he said into the phone, and snapped it shut.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Lana asked. She didn't need to know exactly what was going on; his face and voice told her it was terrible, and her compassion moved her.

Richard looked at her blankly, as if he'd forgotten who she was and where he stood. Then his wild eyes focused, and she saw a little relief in them. "I don't know, but if there is, I'll call you. Lana, I have to go."

"I know," she replied, and everything left unspoken between them could stay that way for now. Whatever he'd just heard overrode all else. "Is it Lois or the kids?"

"The kids," Richard replied. "They've been kidnapped. Thank God Clark stopped Lois from running after them or she'd have been taken by now, too."

Sympathetic pain tore through Lana, and her sea-green eyes filled with fear and grief. "My God, Richard," she whispered, and squeezed his shoulder gently. "Be safe - and call me if you need me."

Richard placed his hand over hers briefly, mute gratitude in his glance, and then he was gone. Lana was left feeling suddenly alone in a sea of people, her mind in turmoil. *It doesn't matter that he's not their biological father, he loves those kids. And to have come so close to losing her as well... My God, please, don't do this; he doesn't deserve it. None of them do. Please, please, let the twins be okay...*

Jason cried out as the big man shoved him into the room, making him stumble and fall. Kala writhed in her captor's grip, kicking at his shins with as much accuracy and force as she could muster. He said a bad word when she connected, and dropped her. Before the girl could whirl on the man who'd pushed her brother, the other man put his hand between her shoulder blades and shoved her hard. She staggered into the room and hit Jason just as he was getting to his feet again, and both twins tumbled to the ground.

It took them a moment to disentangle themselves and get up, and during that time they

heard metallic noises on the other side of the heavy door. "They locked us in," Jason said in affronted tones.

Kala muttered one of Mommy's bad words, trying to keep a brave face. "They better leave us 'lone, or I'm gonna bite 'em next time. You okay?"

"Uh-huh," Jason said, looking down at himself. His knees and palms stung from where he'd caught himself in the fall, but the boy had hurt himself worse on the playground. His brand-new shirt was another matter, though. It had a rip in the sleeve, which he picked at sorrowfully. "What about you, Kala?"

I'm really scared and my arm hurts where the bad guy grabbed me, she thought, but she only shrugged and said, "I'm fine." The school fire drills and Officer Safety and her parents had told her again and again to stay calm in any kind of emergency, so that was what Kala would try to do. She needed something else to think about besides the bad men hitting Mrs. Mosley like that, and then picking her and Jason up like they were bags of groceries or something. Some way to keep calm until they could get rescued. *If Mommy was here, what would she do?*

Look for a way out, maybe. Kala looked around intently. This was a very large room, almost as big as the bullpen at her parents' job. It was hard for her to remember that all of this, and lots more, was actually on a *boat*. Not much else in it besides the two of them, a piano on a raised dais at this end of the room, and some couches and tables at the other end. This looked like the kind of room where grownups had really boring parties where they danced slow and drank too much. She did see one other door over by the seating area, and started toward it.

A sudden low throbbing caught her attention, and she turned in a slow circle. That noise sounded *big* somehow, and to her sensitive ears it was quite loud even in the insulated ballroom. It was almost like the roar of a furnace, or Daddy's plane engine...

They felt the movement at the same time, Jason turning to her with wide eyes. "They're takin' us out to sea!" he said anxiously, and his voice hitched as his breath grew shorter.

Kala had had enough asthma attacks to recognize the beginning of one, and she hurried to her brother's side. Those other doors were probably locked, anyway - grownups weren't usually as dumb in real life as they were in the movies. "It's gonna be okay," she told Jason, hugging him. "Mommy and Daddy are gonna find us, and they're gonna beat the snot outta these guys and take us home."

Jason locked his arms around his sister and hugged her back tightly. The painful knot in his chest started to ease a little; as long as the two of them were together, everything would be okay. "Yeah," he replied with false bravado. "An' I won't let them take you 'way from me, Kala. We're safe if we're together."

"Right," she said forcefully. "We'll always be safe as long as we're together. No ugly bald bad guy's gonna getcha while *I'm* here, either."

In spite of their courageous words, the two children clung to each other, desperate for comfort.

Richard made it across town in record time, his palms slippery on the steering wheel. The elevator at the *Daily Planet* seemed incredibly slow, and he paced the confined space. Finally, the doors opened on the sixtieth floor, and Richard rushed out.

Jimmy was waiting for him. "They're in the conference room in back," he said in a low, urgent voice. "Perry's already told everybody we're not rolling on this one 'til the twins are home safe, so it's none of their business."

"Good call," Richard muttered, but his mind was focused on one goal. He hurried down

the disused hallway, making Jimmy stretch his legs to keep up, and was at the door in moments. The international editor twisted the doorknob, not slowing down until he was past the threshold.

Lois was sitting at the big conference table, looking very fragile and frightened. Everything he suspected, everything he knew, everything he feared, shattered in the moment that Richard met her gaze. *None of that matters now*, he told himself as he crossed the room with quick strides. *The twins are all that's important*.

He had almost reached her when he realized who was standing behind her, his hand on her shoulder. Clark saw Richard, and started to step away, but Lois covered his hand with hers even while her eyes were locked on Richard's. He stayed, and squeezed her shoulder gently.

For the moment, Richard ignored him, ignored Perry at the other end of the table, ignored Jimmy closing the door behind him. He dropped into the chair beside Lois, caught her free hand, and cupped her cheek. "Lois," was all he could whisper, words failing him.

"Richard," she sighed, leaning against his hand on her cheek. "Thank God. Perry told you?"

"Yeah," he replied. "I'm so sorry..."

"It isn't your fault," Lois said, and the guilt in her eyes was heartbreaking.

"Okay, kids," Perry said gruffly. "Save the blame game for later. Right now we need to get those kids back. Any ideas where they are?"

Lois rubbed her temples briefly. "Not a clue. We need to check the Vanderworth and Luthor property records, although I doubt he'll make it that easy. The sonofabitch could be anywhere."

"Are we totally certain this is Luthor?" Richard asked gently. "I mean, Lois, you're a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. You've made other enemies..."

The raven-haired reporter was already shaking her head. "No, it's him. It reeks of Luthor. The timing, the precision, the sheer bastardy of hitting me through my kids - it's Luthor."

"But why now?" Perry asked. "He hasn't made a move since he threatened you at the Pulitzers, and you've left him alone."

Lois bit her lip, her gaze skittering away. Then she sighed heavily and tilted her head back, her raven curls blanketing Clark's hand that was still on her shoulder, still anchoring her. "I went to the Vanderworth estate this morning," Lois said.

"You *what*?" the four men said simultaneously.

"I checked all the specs on the security system," Lois said sharply in her own defense. "There's no way he should've known I was there. *And* I picked up an important piece of evidence."

"Evidence is for cops," Perry growled. "What the hell did you find?"

Now she hesitated. "A piece of crystal. Very small, but it was out of place. I wonder if it's part of a detonator or..." Lois trailed off as Clark's hand tightened on her shoulder, and she turned to look up at him, seeing his face, seeing his eyes suddenly full of horrified recognition. It was only then that a possibility occurred to her as well...

"But what does crystal..." Jimmy started to ask, and they were interrupted by Lois' cell phone ringing.

That wasn't the normal ring tone, however, and Lois clawed it out of her purse. Just as she'd suspected, it was a text message, and she hurriedly pressed the buttons to view it.

The first thing that appeared on the tiny screen was a grainy picture from a camera phone. Lois' breath froze in her chest, her lungs squeezed painfully tight, as she looked at Jason and

Kala being held roughly by their upper arms, forced to face the camera.

Clark and Richard saw the photo at same moment, and both drew in sharp breaths. That image held all three frozen in shock, fury, and terror, but it soon began to scroll upward. The message that appeared beneath was, if anything, more horrifying.

"Greetings Ms. Lane,

Such lovely children you have. They're fine, for now. Don't involve the police or the military if you want them to stay that way. Come looking for me yourself - or bring the Boy Scout. I've got a little present for him.

It might take you a while to find my island hideaway, but don't worry - I'm aware of your children's special needs. Nobody will feed them peanuts while your back is turned.

Just a reminder: Get your father's military contacts on this one, and I'll mail them back to you in pieces. First Jason's right pinky finger, then Kala's left ear.

Yours,

An Old Friend"

Lois' free hand trembled, and the text began to blur. "Oh, God, Clark," she whispered in a choked voice, holding his hand all the tighter. "The twins... Oh, God, he really does have my babies."

"We'll get them back," he told her, and his voice was firmer than the others had ever heard it. There was an underlying anger to the words as well, something that didn't bode well for Luthor. "In the meantime, let's get started tracing him down. Perry, Richard, and Jimmy can start looking at the property rolls - I'll see what I can do about tracing the phone he placed the message from."

The other three men glanced at each other speculatively; was this Clark Kent, taking command of the situation? They'd seen him protective of Lois before, but never like this.

He wasn't finished, however. "As for you, Lois, I think you need to get in touch with Superman. We can really use his help."

"After what happened last time, do you think he'll be easy to get hold of?" The question came from Richard, clearly reluctant to ask it but voicing all of their concerns.

"Superman would never deliberately abandon Lois Lane," Clark said seriously, meeting the other man's eyes steadily. "Especially not now."

Hearing those words, Lois' hazel eyes met his again, this time with gratitude and something else warring in her expression. Something a lot like love.

A child's sense of time is flexible. Joyful, exciting moments flash by too quickly to capture, and must be repeated again and again for their impact to be felt. The boring times, however, drag along forever and ever. The five minutes between each query of "Are we there yet?" can seem like five hours - or five years - to an active young mind spinning its wheels while the equally active body endures forced idleness.

Jason and Kala had no idea how long they were left alone. Long enough to thoroughly explore the ballroom, try to take a nap on the leather-covered couches, explore again in the hopes that their first search had overlooked something useful, and then sit for an interminable length of time staring apprehensively at the doors. After a while, the sheer boredom grew so oppressive that the twins felt as though they had always lived in that room, in that state of tension, and always would. There would never be an end to the waiting and wondering.

And then, suddenly, something changed. Kala's exquisite hearing captured the sound of the locks being turned, and she sat bolt upright, facing the potential threat, her heart

hammering. What she wanted to do at that moment was bawl, but she screwed her face into an approximation of her mother's best scowl. As the door opened a crack, the little girl made her voice sound angry and employed a threat she'd once heard Lois make. "Th' next one who pushes me or my brother 'round gets a kick in th' jools!" Kala didn't know exactly why the words had such an effect when their mother used them on Grizzly Lombard, but she hoped that it would impress whoever was opening the door.

Jason hadn't heard the sound, but when Kala sat up, he did, too. The person who came through the door wasn't scary except for being a stranger, though, and so he asked curiously, "Who're you?"

The dark-haired woman seemed a bit taken aback by both of them, but she recovered quickly, rushing into the room in a clatter of high heels and closing the door behind her. "My name's Katherine," she said, and her voice had a hint of false cheer in it. That tone is to a child's hearing what cherry flavoring is to cough syrup; instead of sugarcoating the bad thing, it makes it more obvious by contrast. "What are your names?"

Both twins scowled. Probably no one here could be trusted ... but they had been raised to be polite. "I'm Kala," the girl said warily.

"Jason," he answered.

Kitty frowned; these two were much more suspicious than she expected. Luckily, she had a trump card handy. "I'm sorry I can't let you out," she said, and that had the ring of truth behind it. She sensed them defrosting a little, and continued, "Lex - the guy you saw when Grant and Riley brought you on board - he's ... he's not a very nice man."

"He's bald," was Jason's blunt reply.

The twins looked at each other for a moment, and Kala wrinkled her nose as she added, "And creepy."

That startled a laugh out of Kitty, which she quickly stifled. "You're very right," she replied. "But you understand why I can't let you go, right? I mean, we're already at sea, there's nowhere you could go."

"Yeah," Kala said with obvious skepticism. "What do you want?"

That one's her mother's daughter, Kitty thought wryly. *I only saw the Lane woman on TV for a few seconds and listened to Lex harp about her longer than I like to think about, but I can spot that attitude already.* "Well, you could do me a favor," she said aloud. "Or we can say you're doing me a favor, anyway, so nobody gets in trouble. Do you like dogs?"

The twins glanced at each other again as if silently conferring. "All except the drooly ones," Jason replied cautiously.

"And the ones that bark all the time, even when there's nothing there," Kala added with a roll of her hazel eyes, thinking of Richard's parents and their Yorkies.

"Well, I have a little dog," Kitty said. "Lex doesn't like her - he's mean to her. And she's really lonely; there's no one to play with her anymore. Would you keep an eye on her for me, and play with her with her toys?" As she asked, she reached into the oversized purse on her shoulder and brought out Tala.

The little golden puffball barked twice and wagged her tail furiously, her inky eyes lighting up. Tala loved children; they gave her all kinds of people food, either directly or by dropping crumbs while they ate.

Kala and Jason tried to be reserved and watchful, but they couldn't help brightening up at the sight of the dog. Smiling, Kitty set Tala down, and the Pomeranian ran to the twins. Their wary demeanor dissolved as Tala jumped up on them, licking and wagging, and the twins

laughed out loud.

Kitty chuckled, smiling wistfully at them. It was the first time in a long time that she had heard such innocent laughter.

Her enjoyment of the moment would've been seriously lessened if she had known who was listening outside the door.

Lachrymosa

The air up on the roof was biting cold, and Lois pulled her jacket collar up, her breath frosting on the wind. Her mind was still spinning from all that had occurred in the past hour. Had it really been an hour? Amazing how your entire world could change in so short a time. If she thought about it much longer, she'd go insane just from being so helpless. Again, she raged at having been held back. She had to go to them...

*Dammit. Why does everyone think I have some special way to contact Superman? I don't. I never did, not even before. It's not like we had some kind of signal. He's just always there when I needed him- half the time because **Clark** was there a minute ago. No wonder I figured it out in the end.*

Rubbing her tense forehead, she closed her eyes and sighed heavily. *At least I managed to convince Richard not to come with me, which was a minor miracle.* That hadn't been easy - he didn't want her out of his sight. But she'd told him she would probably have to fly to the Vanderworth estate with Superman, maybe further afield, and it was difficult to carry more than one safely at his speed. Richard had reluctantly backed down. *That's one confrontation I really can't handle right now. I'll deal with everything, every last lie and misdirection, every mixed emotion - but once we have the twins home. There are more important things now than this little love triangle.*

Now Lois shivered, eyeing the cloudy horizon balefully, and waited on Kal-El to arrive. There were excuses to be made, an alibi to set up on his part. It would take a few minutes, she knew. *He knows something. The look on his face when I said that about the crystal...* She bit her lower lip in concentration, trying to puzzle this out. *He definitely knows something, and I'm going to get it from him. I know it has something to do with us, with the past. Luthor has to know about the twins, he was gloating too much for him not to. I've seen that kind of crystal before. And at this point, we need to be through with hiding from each other...*

"Lois." That one word nearly froze her heart. She whirled, biting back sharp words. *Talk about a heart attack. He's always so bloody quiet...* Kal-El landed and walked toward her, the brightest object in that gray November day. Why was it that she had always seen him as 'hope' on days like this? Silly, girlish, but undeniably true. "Let me see that crystal, please. I have a very bad feeling about this."

"You're not the only one," Lois muttered, bringing the envelope out of her purse. Her hands felt almost numb with cold, having left her gloves in the car, and she fumbled it. The eager wind nearly snatched it away...

Kal-El caught the light envelope, and Lois' hands, cupping them between his. The warmth of his skin flooded into her, and she closed her eyes briefly. It was only a moment, but one she needed badly. It seemed to soothe her again, in a way little else had.

Too soon, he had to let her go, examining the envelope carefully. The slight frown of concentration told Lois that he was seeing its contents as well. "Oh, no," Kal-El said softly. "Just what I was worried about."

"What is it?" Lois asked him, one brow arched, her curiosity clear. "What are you seeing?"

"I need to go," he said, his voice distracted, but she caught his arm before he even turned to leave.

"No way, you're not leaving me out of this," Lois said sharply, squeezing his forearm. Her gaze nearly nailed him in place. "This involves Kala and Jason. Wherever you're going, whatever it is, I'm going with you."

"Lois..."

"If it has to do with the twins or Luthor or both, and I can see in your face that it does, you're taking me. Or I'll try to find out for myself." Her tone brooked no opposition, eyes stormy as the cold front closing in on them.

Kal-El stalled for a moment longer, then sighed. "Okay, fine. Come here."

Now it was Lois' turn to hesitate. *God, what have you done now? Idiot, there's a reason you didn't fly with him last time. This was a brilliant idea, Lane.* But she wanted to know, had to know, so she stepped forward, letting him take hold of her waist gingerly. To cover her nervousness, she asked even though she had a sneaking suspicion, "Where exactly are we going?"

"The Fortress," he said, and his voice was a tiny bit strained. Having her in his arms again was no easier for him than for her. Kal-El rose into the air gently, and hid his own discomfort with words as well. "That crystal ... it's of Kryptonian origin," he said, not meeting her eyes. "I thought the damage to the Vanderworth basement looked familiar somehow, but I just couldn't place the resemblance. It wasn't an explosion; it was a crystal expansion like the one that created the Fortress."

She frowned at that. "I knew the shard looked familiar, but I just couldn't place it." Well, that somewhat explained the huge amount of damage at Vanderworth, although it did beg a question. "But if that's the case, it's not as if you left them lying around. Where the hell did Luthor get one?"

"That's what I'm afraid of," Kal-El replied. "He does know where the Fortress is." They were moving north now, the deceptively smooth motion belying their speed.

"But the last time he was there, both us were," she argued, trying not to think too hard on the occasion. There was a reason that event was burned into her mind. And they weren't happy memories. "He never had the chance to gain access to them, remember? You had gotten there before Luthor and the Zod Squad touched down with me. And then you were the one to take him back ... after we..." Lois felt silent then, having trapped her thoughts despite her deliberate avoidance. *We can still see each other. All the time. But it...just can't be...* Trying to ignore the pain that knifed through her, she cleared her throat and tried to pretend that there wasn't a catch in her throat when she continued, "Anyway, you would have known if he had had them on him. So the question is, how did he get them?"

"I don't know," he replied. "After I used my heat vision on the Fortress, only the rooms below ground were still anything approaching intact, and I had to move a lot of rubble to get in there when I ... well, when I built the ship."

Yes, you left me. I remember, okay? Could we drop it? Please, Kal-El, just rip my heart out all over again. Lois scowled at yet another reminder, and turned her face away from him. *Someone remind me how I keep getting myself into this mess? They passed through a large cloud, and only then did Lois realize how fast they were going, and she instinctively flinched toward him, throwing her arms around his neck.*

Kal-El stared at her in surprise, his hands on her waist pulling her closer almost unconsciously. Lois' wide hazel eyes looked up at him from only inches away, and the forbidden thought ran through both their minds at the same instant.

But after a moment, both of them turned away with an effort, Lois biting her lip. *Oh, yeah, that's how. Oh God, we'd better get there soon,* she thought, loosening her grip on his neck. *I don't know how much more of this I can take.*

Everything was progressing as planned, from the moment the hidden interior cameras had captured Lois Lane investigating the Vanderworth estate. Lex was humming along with an opera playing softly in the background, studying Stanford's notes, and generally feeling pleased with himself.

The sharp rapping of Kitty's heels down the spiral staircase, then onto the hardwood floor interrupted the flow of the music and his thoughts. Scowling, Lex stood up, wondering what was wrong with her now.

Kitty didn't give him the chance to ask. She simply stormed up to him and slapped him as hard as she could, her open palm cracking across his cheek loud as a gunshot. "How *dare* you bring kids into this? They haven't done *anything* to deserve this, Lex! What could you possibly accomplish by kidnapping *kids*?!"

"Bait," he replied shortly. "For their mother *and* their father."

"Their father? But she didn't..." Kitty's eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, my God. Lex ... those are *Superman's* children. That's why she left the blank line for the..." Her voice dropped to a horrified whisper. "Oh, my God..."

He just nodded, watching the realization hit her. "Besides, Kitty," Lex said matter-of-factly, "it's not as if they're human. Their father *is* an alien, which everyone on this planet seems to forget just because he's got blue eyes and a dimpled chin."

"That doesn't matter," Kitty hissed. "They're *children*. They're just sweet, scared kids!"

"So? Even if they were human, there are six billion more where they came from. The world can stand to lose a few," he said coldly, catching her hand as she swung a second time. "Ah-ah-ah, enough of that."

"You bastard," she hissed at him, struggling in his grip. Lex only pulled her closer and grinned. Too late, Kitty remembered that he loved a woman who hated him...

The Arctic made the *Planet's* roof seem positively balmy, and Lois shuddered as she drew her jacket closer around her shoulders as they touched down. Kal-El saw her, and wrapped the cape around her as well. That drew them a little too close together, however, and they walked the several feet to the Fortress in uncomfortable silence.

Kal-El was a little disturbed by the sight of it. It had been in a shambles when he last saw it; after losing his powers in the crystal chamber, the console had been damaged and the entire edifice subtly compromised. As he and Lois left, he'd destroyed the surface structure, knowing that the underground holding cells were secure. Zod and his cohorts had been confined there after falling from the upper levels, and Kal-El had locked Luthor in one of them before taking Lois home. He'd returned to carry the villains to the proper authorities, taking two trips to do it, and at that time the only intact section of the Fortress was the sublevel in which he'd later built the ship that carried him to Krypton.

The Fortress now looked more ... complete ... than he remembered. Unless his eyes deceived him, it had been totally rebuilt. But by whom? It was also utterly dark, and above the Arctic Circle at this time of year, that was quite foreboding.

Lois' eyebrows lifted as well. She stared up at the massive structure before her. The sheer size of it had dazzled her at first sight, the impression one of both palace and the Fortress that it was called. It had seemed quite surreal, impossibly beautiful that night. A place of warmth and light at the icy top of the world. A place perfectly fitting of her impression of him. A place where a miracle had occurred, an utterly impossible miracle. And now those miracles were lost to them. It only seemed right that they would be forced to come back here now, back to the

beginning of where the twins had come from.

She'd expected a ruin, her last sight of this place being a mist of ice and crystal shards rising from the leveled ground. Now, it was whole again, though ominous and black. Lois had never seen the Fortress darkened before. The memory of its destruction was clear in her mind. "At least you didn't leave the lights on," she joked weakly.

Kal-El guided her inside carefully, the déjà vu not lost on his companion. "They used to come on when I crossed the threshold... I don't like this. Lois, *I* didn't rebuild all this."

"You're not alone," she quipped uneasily as she started looking around, and then the end of his remark penetrated her uneasiness. "Then how...?"

Both of them fell silent, the oppressive atmosphere of the place choking them. To think that they had last stood here embracing defiantly before Luthor after the battle was over ... just over there was the spot where Lois had whirled on the de-powered Ursa and decked her, after that horrible moment when she had thought they had both been doomed ... the table at which they'd had dinner was through that archway ... and up there, beyond that ledge...

Lois felt her cheeks begin to burn even in the cold, remembering, and noticed that his eyes skipped away from the hall leading to that particular room as well. At least she wasn't the only one uncomfortable here. But when Kal-El deliberately looked away from places so fraught with memory, his eyes landed on the central section, and he gasped.

Hazel eyes widening, Lois' brow furrowed as she followed him into the central room. The last time she'd seen the console here, it had been blackened and broken by the power flux when Kal-El exposed himself to the red sun's rays. For love of her and in defiance of his father. Now it was whole again and glittering ... but the slots that had held crystals full of encoded information were empty.

Kal-El touched the surface as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Lois was watching his face, and she stepped back at the expression of wrath that crossed his handsome features. For a long moment, it seemed as if he couldn't process it, couldn't cope with the anger more than simply feeling it. Then something in him seemed to break loose. "Luthor, you thieving bastard," he muttered in a low voice, and brought his fist down sharply on the console.

Lois instinctively jumped back as the blow resounded through the crystal structure, making it chime oddly. Kal-El looked up then, and seemed to remember that he wasn't alone. "I'm sorry, Lois," he said, but that slow-burning anger still lurked at the backs of his blue eyes.

Seeing that, how furious he could actually get, made Lois suddenly wonder if keeping the twins' parentage a secret wasn't a very unwise decision. Right now, if Luthor was in this room, she wouldn't bet a nickel on his survival. All it would take would be one blast of laser-like heat from those eyes ... those eyes that were now trained on her... *Get over it, Lane, he just essentially had his parents stolen from him. And if he suspects as much as I think, he knows we've lost more than that. Tell me you wouldn't do the same.* "For what? Kal-El, stop," Lois said, trying to soothe, "we'll get them back, right? I mean, we know who has them..." For the first time since that dreadful call, she was entirely focused on something other than her children, and she didn't realize how closely her words echoed his back at the *Planet*.

Only Lois could truly understand what he had lost. And in spite of what *she* had lost, which was so much greater, she was trying to comfort him. *Is it any wonder I love this woman so much? There's no one else I'd rather have by my side on a search like this.* But he didn't voice any of that, only shook his head. "It isn't just that. To think the Fortress rebuilt itself just in time for a maniac like Luthor to rob it... The knowledge encoded on those crystal is extremely dangerous, Lois. It's like ... imagine if someone had given Genghis Khan nuclear

weapons."

"*That's one hell of an image,*" she muttered. "Scary thing is, it doesn't seem far off."

"I don't know, Khan was said to recognize the worth of his followers," Kal-El said absently, and his gaze at the plundered console was more sorrowful than savage now. *Luthor only wants the knowledge, but he has everything that's left of my birthplace, my parents, my childhood ... and he may very well have my children, as well. But this is not the time to ask her...*

Lois narrowed her eyes. *Oh yes, compare Luthor to Genghis Khan while he has our kids - unfavorably at that. Great. What a way to reassure me.* Aloud, she merely said, "Thanks, that's really what I need to hear right now."

Chagrined, he stepped away from the console and came to her. "I'm sorry, Lois. There's this - using the crystals apparently triggers an EMP. That must've been what caused the Genesis plane to almost crash. I never knew that because there's no electrical equipment for miles up here, but it means that wherever Luthor tries to use the crystals, we can find him. And the twins will probably be nearby - he won't want them out of his sight." Kal-El took hold of her shoulders gently, his eyes on hers serious. "We *will* find them, Lois. And this time, Luthor's not getting out of prison on a technicality."

"I know," she sighed, dropping her eyes, her hair falling forward to shield the worried expression on her face. *But my faulty memory was what got him out last time. And it's my fault he has them in the first place. Me and my stupid 'need to know'. God, they're just tiny babies yet. Please let Kala not smart off to him. Please don't let either of them have a panic attack. Please don't leave them in the dark.* She had to fight back tears. "It's only a matter of time."

Please be right, Kal-El, please be right.

Island hideaway. For all we know, that could be a ruse. Richard rubbed his eyes, staring at the list in front of him. The Vanderworths - and the dozen or so corporations they'd set up to dodge taxes - owned an obscene amount of property. Most of it was turning out to be office buildings, warehouses, apartments, and condominiums. None of them were islands, or hideaways for that matter. This was maddening work, but it was their best lead on Luthor so far. Too bad it was going so slowly with just the three of them, Clark having left to see if he could figure out where the text message had originated. He had figured he'd get a faster answer if he went in person, and Richard could see the logic in that. Perry was also right - they didn't really trust too many of the others to keep quiet about this. Besides, *someone* had to do the actual reporting to keep the paper in business.

But you know someone with some free time, don't you? Someone who's already volunteered to help, at that. Richard sat up, thinking. They did need all the help they could get, but he would have to be very careful... "Uncle Perry, I'm calling Ms. Lang. She's got the free time, she can help us."

"Ms. Lang? The designer?" Perry's brow furrowed, and then he scowled. "Richard, you - Olsen, get us some coffee, will you?"

"What, Chief?" Jimmy looked up in surprise, but quickly accepted the task as a way to escape the endless fine print before him.

Once they were alone, Perry sighed heavily. "You're mixed up with her, aren't you?"

Richard tried to look blank. "What? Uncle Perry, what the heck are you talking about?"

The editor glared at him, growling, "Drop the stupid act, boy. What's going on with you

and the designer?"

"Nothing," Richard said forcefully. And for the moment it was true. "Listen, she's an old friend of Clark's; we know she's trustworthy. And given the way he acted when he got the news, don't you agree I was right earlier? He *is* their father - and I think he suspects it, if he doesn't already know."

Perry considered, and Richard pressed a few more reasons into his pause. "We need some more help here. Just going through these lists - the Vanderworths have property stashed all over the place. And there's no guarantee we'll find it here. You're right, we can't pull reporters off stories, but Lana's show is over now and she's got spare time."

His uncle leaned forward, met his eyes, and said calculatingly, "Fine, call her. But I'm not saying a word when Lois sees her here."

Richard rolled his eyes as he got out his cell phone. "I'll burn that bridge when I come to it," he muttered, his mind still preoccupied with worry. As soon as the words left his lips he heard the slip and corrected, "*Cross* that bridge. I meant to say cross."

Perry just raised an eyebrow as Jimmy walked back in with the coffee. Richard glared as he opened his cell phone and dialed, thinking, *I don't need his approval anyway; what I need is help, and Lana volunteered.*

The flight back was ... interesting. He'd slipped an arm around her waist as she stood next to him this time, and taken her hand to balance her as he took off. It was much like their first - well, first *planned* flight together, with him flying leveled out and Lois held by his side.

Lois and Kal-El were both wrapped in thoughtful silence. They had each lost someone dear to them. Even if he wasn't yet certain that the twins were his, he adored them, and beyond that, Luthor had robbed him of his childhood memories. He and Lois were both feeling violated and vulnerable at the moment, knowing that Luthor had taken what they treasured. Worse yet, they were both plagued by memories: of the last time they had been in the Fortress, of their last days together before he left.

It was in that mood that Kal-El suddenly said, seemingly apropos of nothing, "I'm sorry I left you, Lois."

She turned to look at him, eyebrow rising. *Was that 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was leaving, ' or 'I'm sorry I split up with you'?*

The look was lost on him. A part of his mind was charting their course, flying low to avoid radar. The less Luthor could track their movements, the better. But the majority of his thought was centered on those last two months. *That was a terrible time for me. Lois suspected nothing - not yet anyway - and I couldn't give her reason to. I had to keep seeing her, in both guises. And every time she'd flirt with Superman, every time she'd smile at Clark, my heart died a little.*

It was almost a relief when I stumbled across that article in the back of Science Monthly. The new satellite telescope had been discovering new stars and even planets for months; it wasn't front-page news any more. Only when I saw just where this latest planet was found did my hair stand on end. And the possibility of non-natural formations on the planets surface ... a few of the new planets looked like they might have evidence of intelligent life. The majority of scientists agreed that those were probably like the supposed 'face on Mars' that everyone's been talking about for decades; just an accident of form. But on that planet, in that particular section of the sky? I had to go.

At least, that's what I told myself then.

Lois' voice brought his attention back to the present, her tone striving for merely curious. "Did you know, the last time you saw me? Not as Clark - I know you wouldn't have told me as Clark. But did you know you were leaving that last time?"

He sighed. "Not ... precisely. I kept telling myself building the ship was an exercise, that I'd have it if I needed it. I always thought that it was about fifty-fifty, stay or go..." *I really was in denial about it. I kept thinking things like that right up until the moment the ship's hatch closed behind me.* Taking a different tack, Kal-El told her, "I tried to tell you once. I went by your apartment meaning to tell you everything - this was after I'd seen the images myself in Paris. You remember, the woman who fell into the Seine and Superman just 'happened' to be there? The observatory outside Paris was getting some of the clearest images from the space telescope at the time. I kept going back there while the crystals were growing..."

Lois remembered. He'd been in Paris? Well, of course, she *knew* he'd been in Paris, he'd saved that woman not a week after the last time she had seen him. And come to think of it, he had been a little on edge at that last meeting... "Why didn't you tell me, then? The last time we talked. You say you went there specifically to tell me. Why didn't you?"

He took a deep breath, and she felt the expansion of his ribs beside her as he held her close while they flew. "I couldn't figure out how to start ... and then you, you didn't remember anything that happened. You said something sweet and flirtatious, the way you always were with me, and ... I couldn't. I just couldn't. If I'd said anything to you, I probably would've wound up definitely not going." Kal-El sighed at himself. "I'm rambling, I know. I was ... very torn, then. Seeing you hurt worse than anything I'd ever felt, but I still thought I'd done the best thing for both of us by erasing your memories." A low, sarcastic chuckle. "It took six years and an Ella Fitzgerald song to show me how very wrong I was."

"You loved me too much to tell me you were going," Lois mused, and then her tone turned a trifle sharp. "But not enough not to leave me wondering. And waiting, like a fool." *And just about the time I got over the abandonment, I started gaining weight. Surprise!*

Kal-El winced. "Lois ... I am sorry. Sorry I didn't tell you what was going on, and sorry I ever left at all."

To that she had no reply, other than to reach out with one hand as they flew close to the river, and let her fingers skim the water's surface. *Here's a miracle, a man who can fly and the woman lucky enough to have reached the heights with him ... and to the rest of the world it has no more impact than those ripples.*

Abruptly she turned back to him, and there was a flash of fire in those hazel eyes. "You hurt me," she said, and with that simple, painful declaration the last of her long-cherished anger evaporated.

"I know," he whispered, pulling her closer against his side. "I know that, Lois. And I'm sorry for it. But I also hurt myself by hurting you - I didn't forget, not even for a moment."

Lois sighed. Like a rotten tooth, her grudge had finally been extracted. Closing her eyes, she rested her cheek on his shoulder.

The hour was growing late. The twins had eaten dinner, though they had little appetite. A large man had brought it to them, not one of the ones who'd dragged them onto the boat. He had smiled and said hi, but Jason and Kala had only watched him warily. Kitty hadn't been back, and though they trusted her only tentatively, they were still cautious of everyone else on the ship.

This large room was lit by a skylight high above. Jason had played a few tunes on the

piano before he realized that it was growing dark, and he looked up with trepidation. "Kala?"
She was already by his side, looking upward as well. "It's gettin' late."

"Yeah," Jason replied. Neither child spoke of it, but they had never liked the dark. Nor had they ever had to face its coming alone. Mommy and Daddy weren't here, neither was Nana or Uncle Perry or Uncle Ron and Aunt Lucy. They didn't even have Tala to keep them company, as the little dog had eventually scratched at the door, needing to go out, and one of the men had opened it for her.

They needed something to distract them, but Jason didn't have it in his heart to play just then. Kala turned her gaze away from the lengthened shadows, and looked into the clear blue of her brother's eyes instead. "Jason, there's something I gotta tell you."

He turned away from the worrying sight and looked at his sister. "What, Kala?"

"Remember when we were fighting that night when Mommy left the house? An' I said I had a secret?"

Nodding, Jason said, "Uh-huh. I've got one too. But you wouldn't tell 'cause you were being a booghead."

Kala rolled her eyes with a long-suffering sigh. "*Anyway*," she said, "I'm gonna tell you now, okay?"

Jason just nodded.

"We're gonna be okay 'cause our real daddy's gonna come save us," Kala said softly. "That's what he does ... our real daddy is Superman."

Much to her surprise, Jason gave her a perplexed look. "Nuh-unh, he can't be! Superman's Mr. Clark. I mean, Mr. *Clark* is Superman."

It was Kala's turn to startle back, shaking her head. "Nuh-uh! Mr. Clark can't be Superman! 'Cause if he was Superman then *he'd* be our daddy..."

"Kala, *look*," Jason said. "They're the same! He just combs his hair different and wears glasses when he's Mr. Clark!"

His sister opened her mouth to reply, and really thought about it. Her jaw gradually shut, and she frowned. "But ... yeah. Yeah. But then if he's Superman why would he pretend to be Mr. Clark?"

Jason huffed. "Haven't you ever wanted to be *normal*? All that stuff you can hear, radios in other people's houses, Mommy and Daddy yelling?"

"Well, yeah," Kala admitted. "Sometimes it makes my head hurt. But that's just the way I am."

"Sure, like I'm strong. I wish I didn't hafta be so careful with my stuff all the time. Sometimes it's nice just to be normal." Then something dawned on him, and his eyes widened. "Kala! The reason we can do stuff - me being strong and you hearing really good - that's probably 'cause Superman's our daddy!"

Kala rolled her eyes. "Well, duh," she replied, never letting on that she had figured out the same thing only recently. "Just like me being so smart is 'cause Mommy is our mommy."

"D'ya think Mommy knows? That Mr. Clark is Superman?" Jason asked.

Kala sighed explosively. "Of *course* Mommy knows! She *kissed* Superman, you dweeb! That means she was in love with him. Don't you know where babies come from?"

Affronted, Jason wrinkled his nose. "Eww, that's kinda gross. Superman and Mommy kissing ... yuck."

Raising one eyebrow, Kala gave him a look. "You're such a *boy*, Jason."

"Well, *duh*."

Another few moments passed in silence, and both children eventually looked up. The skylight had grown even darker; the sky outside was now a deep blue, nearly black. Kala glanced longingly at the light fixtures above them; she hadn't been able to find a switch or a pull chain or anything. Desperate for something to say to distract them both, she wondered aloud, "How come nobody else figured out that Mr. Clark is Superman?"

Jason shrugged. "They didn't want to, I guess. People think that bein' Superman is so cool, he'd never wanna be anything else." He glanced at Kala and offered her a wan smile. "*You* didn't figure it out, and you're pretty smart. For a girl."

Hazel eyes narrowed, but in the deepening shadow Kala couldn't summon an angry reply. She settled for another of her trademarked sighs, looking elsewhere in the room.

That only emphasized the growing dark, however. Kala scooted closer to her brother, and in a small voice said, "I want Mommy."

Jason put his arm around her shoulder and whispered back, "Me, too."

Chiaroscuro

No words between them when he dropped her off on the roof; Lois turned to him mutely as he let her down, and he smiled sadly. Touching her cheek once, so lightly, Kal-El left before he couldn't bring himself to go, not trusting himself to speak.

Lois had turned her face into his palm, closing her eyes for a second to savor his touch. *Oh, yes, when all of this over, we have a lot to talk about. All of us.*

Shaking off her melancholy mood, Lois headed downstairs. She had much more important things to think about at the moment. Like where the twins were... Lois had to suppress a shudder. *God, please.*

Hurrying the rest of the way down to the *Planet* offices, Lois kept her mind turned resolutely forward. She'd no sooner stepped into the conference room, however, than she stopped cold.

Four heads turned to look at her. Jimmy, Perry, Richard ... and Lana. *Lana? What the hell is she doing here?*

For one instant her expression must have been obvious. Jimmy cringed, Perry looked away, and Richard flinched. Lana, however, met her eyes frankly.

Whatever unfortunate thing Lois was about to say was forestalled by the door behind her opening - and knocking into her arm. "Oops! Gee, sorry, Lois," Clark said earnestly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she growled, thinking *I know you could see me right through that door!* But then she realized how much of a hypocrite she was being over Lana. *What right do I have to be territorial?* "Hi, Ms. Lang. Thanks for helping us."

"If I'm going to be helping you find the twins, Ms. Lane, I think we ought to switch to Lana and Lois, don't you?" The tone was perfectly friendly, her sea-green eyes without a trace of irony. "Sit down; let's bring you up to date. Clark, what have you found?"

Perry looked a little nonplussed; having his authority usurped twice in one day - and not by Lois - was a record. Clark adjusted his glasses as he sat down, and said, "Well, the number that the message was sent from belongs to a woman in Schenectady. But when we called it back, she answered. The phone wasn't stolen or anything; apparently there's some kind of program where you can set up a cell phone to give out a different number each time it dials. The false callback number can be anyone from the network."

"So it's a dead end," Lois sighed, biting her lip. *What did you expect, Lane? The poor man only had a couple of minutes anyway.*

"Well, not totally," Clark said. "The phone he actually sent the message from is GPS-enabled. So we can find out exactly where he was."

"All right, then, let's do it," Lois said. "Who do we have to call?"

"That's the problem," Clark replied. "It's private information. Only a police officer or a properly authorized government official can access it."

"Neither of which we can contact," Richard griped. "Dammit."

"The police already know, and there's nothing we can do about it," Lois said, remembering suddenly. "Todd Thomas called them when he found the twins' teacher hurt... My God, I left the phone hanging. Barbara must've panicked..."

"I took care of that," Perry said. "The hospital's gonna keep us updated on Mrs. Mosley. And as for the cops, I told Lieutenant Sawyer about Luthor's threat. Maybe she can help with getting the cell phone information."

"Let me try first," Lois said earnestly, and glanced at Clark. "I can usually wheedle any

kind of confidential information from a source. And the less we involve the police, the better. I don't trust Luthor not to have some way of knowing exactly what we're all doing."

"Speaking of you, I assume you got a hold of Superman?" Perry asked. "What did he have to say?"

Lois managed to keep from glancing at Clark, though it wasn't easy. "Well, my hunch about that little chip of crystal paid off. It's Kryptonian - Lex Luthor has been to Superman's Fortress of Solitude. The bastard stole ten crystals containing a vast amount of information about science and technology."

That left all of them silent with foreboding; even Clark managed to seem shocked by the news. "Where?" Richard asked, and Lois shook her head to let him know it was confidential.

"His ... retreat, I guess you could call it. And no, I can't say where it is," Lois told them. "Unfortunately, the only other human being who knows the location is Lex Luthor. Superman just found out about the theft today, when he saw the chip of crystal I found."

"I know," Lois said grimly. "Taking the twins is just a ploy to buy time, I'll bet. Once Superman - or I - found out about the missing crystals, all hell was sure to break loose. This is Luthor's way of keeping us busy while he does God-alone-knows-what."

"Us?" Richard interjected. "Superman is going to help us look for the kids?"

Lois hesitated for a fraction of an instant, and this time couldn't stop her eyes from darting to Clark. A tiny mistake, but one Richard would be sure to spot. To cover it, she replied quickly, "Yes, he's forgiven me for being a complete bitch to him in print, as Toby Raines would say. And I've forgiven him for leaving the entire planet without a forwarding address. So yeah, he's going to help."

Everyone at the table shared a speculative glance. Of them, only Lois had seen Superman with any kind of frequency. Jimmy and Perry had each met him once or twice, but for Lana and Richard seeing the superhero was going to be a novel experience.

"First things first," Perry said gruffly, "we'll see if we can narrow down this list. I know he can see through anything except lead, but that doesn't mean he's got the time to look over every square inch of the city. If the twins are even still *in* Metropolis. Lane, Kent, grab some paperwork. We ought to be able to knock this out pretty quickly with all six of us."

"Okay, boss," Stanford said. "Here we go." Riley and his camera hovered in the background. Lex merely nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak.

On the lighted worktable in front of Stanford lay fragments of the meteorite. The outer pieces were black and charred, but the ones from the center of the rock were a deep, translucent green. The largest remaining piece was a smoothed cylinder about the thickness of Stanford's bicep, and it was currently fitted into a padded vise with a large-bore drill bit just touching one end.

He took a deep breath, glancing at Lex again as he started the drill. Now everything he knew about mineralogy was being put to the test; if he'd calculated the flaws in the stone, its stress lines, incorrectly, the whole thing would shatter.

And Lex would probably kill him. Trying to ignore the trickle of sweat running down his spine, Stanford touched the drill to the stone.

Slowly, slowly, the diamond-tipped bit polished its way through the kryptonite. Riley leaned in close, and Stanford bit his lip; this was *not* the moment to distract him! Didn't that idiot realize this was incredibly delicate work?

Probably not - none of these guys had any appreciation for things that required more

dexterity than pressing buttons. Not even Riley, with his camera obsession, had any true technical skill. Even as he guided the drill further into the kryptonite cylinder, slowly boring a channel into its center, Stanford couldn't quite stop himself from reflecting on the difference between himself and the other three men Lex had brought on this mission.

They're thugs, plain and simple. Hired for their muscles, not their brains. And I shudder to think too much about what goes on in their minds, anyway - never again will I try to make friends with these goons by going to one of Riley's movie nights. He suppressed a slight tremor at the memory of those films, which Riley called his little documentaries. They all followed one theme, and it wasn't one that Stanford, whose worst offense had been fraud, could possibly enjoy. *Even Brutus stays away from it, which is really saying something. Of all the 'security' guys, he's the oddest. Never talks about what he did time for; never talks about anything much, really. And he doesn't get in on all the macho strutting the rest of them spend so much time and energy on. Maybe he doesn't need to, since he's the biggest and burliest of them?*

More than halfway through, and Lex was still watching with almost reptilian concentration. Did the man ever *blink*? Speaking of people who made Stanford nervous, Lex topped the list. *I may be useful to him, more so than these guys,* he thought, slowing the forward progress of the drill even more. *But he made it plain that he takes no prisoners. 'Your life expectancy is directly proportionate to your usefulness multiplied by your loyalty.' One hell of a quote, and I bet no one else realized that the way it's worded, the minute either your usefulness or loyalty drops to zero, you die.*

*Of course, he's paying everyone well. Very well. But he asks a lot, too. No outside contact. No women at the facility in Nevada - and **that** was pretty unpopular. No fighting amongst each other, which is practically a hobby for some of them. And no questions, ever. Do as you're told and you'll end up rich. Defy Lex, and die.*

The drill bit stuttered, and Stanford hastily backed it out an eighth of an inch. Oblivious to Riley and Lex, he walked around the vise, peering at the crystal. It had only struck a tiny flaw in the kryptonite that ran counter to the rest of the planes of crystal growth. Stanford backed the drill the rest of the way out and started to blow the dust off of it.

"Don't," Lex said. "Save it. It doesn't exactly fall from the sky like manna six days a week, you know."

The mineralogist glanced at him again, but carefully tapped the kryptonite dust into a tray. As he did so, Stanford noticed that one of the large shards was missing from the worktable. The one that happened to be shaped a lot like a blade...

I'm not thinking about that, he told himself as he put in a fresh, sharp bit and eased it into the nearly-completed channel, Riley's camera practically on his shoulder. *This with using those kids for bait is bad enough, but I don't want to speculate on why Lex needs a kryptonite shiv. Questioning the boss' motives is bad for your health around here...*

At last they'd sorted the likely locations from the probable and merely possible ones. The lists were still depressingly long; there were so many places that Luthor could hide a couple of frightened kids. Many of them could even be easily soundproofed. Lois looked at the list of Vanderworth properties in and around Metropolis, and for a moment her heart quailed. *They could be anywhere ... and we still don't even know if his hint was genuine or a red herring.*

But then that fighting spirit rose. *Lex is just arrogant enough to give us a real clue. And I'll see to it he regrets that before I'm done.* "Okay, people, let's split up. We'll each take a section and start searching." In her mind she was already planning which sectors Richard

should search, which she would take, and which Clark ought to handle.

Suddenly, as everyone seated at the table reached for the lists, Lois remembered Perry's heart, and Jimmy's naïveté. And Lana - she had *no* idea what she was getting into here. But before she could even decide what to say, Clark intervened.

"We ought to go in pairs," he said. "And someone needs to stay here and monitor the situation, keep us in touch with each other. Keep checking the news and keep an eye out for Luthor's next move. Chief - there's no one better to command headquarters."

That was ... pretty damn deft for the clueless goober he pretends to be, Lois thought, but Perry accepted it for now. "Sounds reasonable. Olsen, you're here with me."

"But Chief..."

Perry cut him a glare that was somehow still fatherly. "Olsen, what're you gonna do if you're stuck alone in an alley with Luthor? Beat him with your camera?"

Jimmy glanced around the table, and replied, "Well, are Lois and Ms. Lang going?"

"Lois'll shoot him," Perry said sharply. "As for Ms. Lang..."

"I have no intention of being caught alone in an alley with a maniac," Lana said quickly. "Isn't that why we're going in pairs? At least I'll have company."

"Lana, you don't have to..." Richard began, but she silenced him with a look.

"I said I'd help you," the redhead said with quiet composure. "And I will. Besides, Lois has her gun - I've got a can of Mace in my purse. Girl's best friend in the big city. That seems to make us the only ones armed around here - although I definitely bow to Lois' superior firepower."

The four glanced at each other, and Lois realized just how this would have to pan out. "Fine. Richard, you and I will take everything on this list north of 51st. Clark, you and Lana take everything south." *At least he can keep her safe. Lana shouldn't be in on this ... neither should Richard. Neither one of them have any idea just how low Luthor will sink to get back at the both of us.*

Richard glanced at her, then looked out the window. "C'mon, let's get moving. Daylight's wasting."

Perry and Jimmy watched the three reporters - and one brave fashion designer - head out. The editor-in-chief cursed his age, but mostly his heart; cursed every steak he'd eaten, every cigar he'd smoked, every cup of coffee he'd drunk. He was paying the price for those decisions now, forced like an aging bloodhound to remain at the kennel while the younger, stronger dogs took up the hunt.

Jimmy sighed heavily. "Well, Chief, I guess it's up to us to see what else we can track down on Luthor."

"Course it is," the older man said, feeling an echo of pride and valor rise in his chest. "And I'm the best one for it, the kids know that. Nothing like an old reporter for digging up secrets. C'mon, kid, let's go down to the archives."

Lois headed for her parking spot, and then remembered that her car was out of commission. *And that seems so very coincidental now. Feels like it happened days - months -ago. Damn Luthor. He's plotted this from beginning to end.* She refused to let herself think what that meant for their chances of finding the twins. *Luthor's been beaten before. He may be smart, but he's no match for Lois Lane and Superman on the warpath,* she told herself.

Beside her, Richard was already fishing his keys out of his pocket, and she mentally added, *And Richard.* He went to his car, a gunmetal-gray Saab Aero Sport Sedan which he

adored about as much as Lois loved her Audi, and paused by the driver's side door.

Blue eyes met hazel. "Do you want to drive?" Richard offered.

Lois smiled sadly. "You don't want me behind the wheel right now, Richard. But thanks. I understand..." *What an amazingly good man he is. Offering to give me control of something, even if it's just a steering wheel. And I know how he feels about his 'born from jets' car. But no...*

"Okay," he said quietly, and unlocked the doors for both of them. "You want to head for the furthest out and work our way in?"

"Sounds good," Lois muttered, looking at the list. "Go up Bond Avenue to Neill Street, then."

Silence ruled between them for a long time, each busy with their own tumultuous thoughts. Richard was finding it surprisingly awkward to be with Lois at the moment, questions about her meeting with Superman nibbling at his mind. Lois was swinging between anger and anguish, trying to be strong for the twins, but terrified for them.

After a while, Richard asked, "So what else did you find out?"

"Huh?"

"You were gone a while," he replied, not accusingly, his voice just curious as he kept his eyes on the road. "Since we've got a few minutes, tell me what happened."

Oh, like that's not awkward as hell. My conversation with my ex is so not any of your business. Lois sighed in aggravation, and said simply, "He recognized the crystals, and I made him take me with him to the Fortress. I've never ... I never realized he could be so furious. Luthor's in for a surprise."

Richard's eyebrows rose, but he changed the topic a little. "The Fortress. That's twice you've mentioned it. What, does he have some castle up in the Himalayas or something?"

At least it made Lois chuckle. "No, nothing like that. Well... It's kind of... The Fortress of Solitude is where he keeps the remnants of his Kryptonian heritage. More a museum and library than a home. And no one - except me and that bastard Luthor - knows where it is."

"How'd Luthor find out?" Richard was trying to keep her talking, stop her from plunging back into despair.

That worked; Lois bristled, her hazel eyes brightening with spite. "Somehow Luthor tracked him. And he led those Kryptonians - General Zod and his little friends - right to the Fortress. With Non carrying *me* as bait."

Richard glanced at her. "But Luthor's trial..."

Lois cleared her throat angrily. "I had amnesia; I'd seen Superman very nearly killed, or so I thought, and I'd been held prisoner by *three* psychotic intergalactic criminals, each with *his* powers. It was post-traumatic stress or something that made me block it all out. By the time I got the memories back, Vanderworth's fancy lawyers had already gotten my testimony blocked, and Luthor was out of jail."

Richard's hands tensed on the wheel. "God, I hate how much money can do in the wrong hands."

"Tell me about it," Lois said softly, staring out the window as they threaded their way through traffic.

Perry's eyes weren't quite up to the microfiche, he grudgingly admitted, so he let Olsen search the archives while he handled the phones. Before he could even place the first call, however, his direct line rang. "*Daily Planet*, White," he said gruffly into the phone.

"Peregrine White, you tell my daughter to drag herself off of whatever story you've got her chasing and get home right this instant. She and the twins are missing Nora's birthday party!"

Perry winced. "Elinore..."

"Don't even start with me, Perry. Lois isn't answering her cell phone, and you'd think she would learn her lesson after what happened earlier this week. Don't make me drive up there to get her..."

Perry closed his eyes, remembering that the phone was now in his desk drawer, turned off. "Ella, listen," he said, his voice getting a little hoarse. God, he could hear the other kids in the background, and it just made the present situation all the worse.

"This had better be good," she replied sharply, as Lucy called her name admonishingly from somewhere near the phone.

"It's isn't," Perry told her, and something about his tone finally silenced her. "Ella, I think you should take the call somewhere away from the kids. I'll hold."

"Oh, God..."

"Ella, go pick up the other extension. Do it." None of his usual jocular flirtation now. Perry was all business.

Elinore Lane had been a general's wife, and she coped. The phone clacked against the table briskly, and he heard her say to Lucy, "Hang it up in a minute; I'll take this in your room."

"Mom?"

"Lucy, do as I say."

In a moment, Perry heard another receiver picked up, and after a pause, the first one was replaced in its cradle. "Well, Mr. White?" Ella said.

Perry took a deep breath and ground his knuckles against his eyes, hating what he would have to tell her.

"Your car or mine?" Lana said in the elevator, lifted an auburn brow at Clark.

"Well, you know, I only live a few blocks from work," he replied with only half his attention. The rest was listening to Lois, trying to decide if she was going to be all right. So far it sounded promising.

"Ah. My car by default." Lana nodded, reaching into her purse for the keys. "I warn you, it's a rental. One my assistant picked, no less. *I* don't normally drive a Cadillac."

"A what?" Clark said, turning to look at her with a slight frown.

"She says I'm supposed to travel in style. I vetoed the red convertible, so she had to get a high-end Cadillac DTS instead. I mean, really. How pretentious can you get?" Lana said.

"Couldn't you exchange it?" Clark was having trouble reconciling the Lana he knew, whose parents had been well-off by Smallville standards but were strictly Oldsmobile drivers, with the fashion designer who was presently walking up to a pale green Cadillac.

"All they had left were SUVs and a couple of sports cars. This was the most sensible option," Lana replied. In spite of her disparaging remarks, she smiled fondly at the car. "It looks good with my hair, too. The color's called Green Silk."

Clark just stared, and she chuckled at him as she unlocked the doors. As long as he'd been in Metropolis, he was still a bit overwhelmed by a car that was probably worth as much as his first year's salary with the *Planet*. "Sorry, having a designer moment. Where do you want to start?" Lana turned somber again as she thought about their mission, the twins' peril

suppressing her normally cheerful personality.

Looking at their list, Clark quickly figured out which ones were closest and which were more distant. "Let's start nearby and work our way out," he replied. "The first possibility is this office building just over on Stamp Avenue."

Lana nodded as they both buckled their seat belts. "I think I knew which one, too. The 'for lease' sign in the front window looks fairly old." As she steered the Cadillac out of the garage and onto the street, she glanced at Clark and asked, "How do you plan to get in, anyway?"

Clark hadn't thought about that one. He was pretty sure that Lois had sent Lana with him so he could keep her safe, knowing that his x-ray vision meant they didn't actually have to break in. "Oh, I wasn't planning on going inside," he replied diffidently. "We ought to be able to tell if there's been any, uh, recent activity without having to break and enter."

Lana nodded. "Sounds wise. Of course, Lois is probably planning to shoot locks off doors and God knows what else."

"Richard won't let her," Clark said quickly. "Not to mention, she wouldn't make all that noise when she could just pick the lock."

"Easy, boy, you don't have to get all defensive," Lana said, raising an auburn brow at him.

"Lana, I didn't mean..."

The redhead sighed. "Clark, I know ... you're in love with her." It was on the tip of her tongue to say *I know you're the father of her children*, but she paused and demurred instead. That wasn't her place to say, if he didn't know; and if he *did* know, she'd wait for him to tell her.

"Lana..."

"You made your feelings on this topic perfectly clear at the restaurant the other day," Lana said, forestalling his objection. "But even if you're uncomfortable admitting you love her, it's still true."

"And Richard's still her fiancé," he pointed out, rather abruptly.

"Clark ... he's not blind, either," she said, not noticing the alarmed look on Clark's face. "As a matter of fact ... Clark, he thinks..." Lana brought the car to a halt in front of a stop sign at the corner, and turned to look at him. "Just how involved *were* you with Lois Lane?"

Blue eyes opened wide, and for a moment no answer was forthcoming. "Lana ... I don't know what you're talking about..."

Oh, the heck with it. If he's searching for them, he ought to at least know. "Clark, please. You do know. Richard ... he thinks the twins are yours."

The glass floor was black as pitch now, and the twins stayed away from it. It just looked way too creepy, like anything that wanted to could just swim up from underneath and take a bite out of them. Of course, that forced them away from the skylight and into the deepening darkness.

After several minutes of tense silence, Kala whispered, "Jason?"

"Yeah?"

"You scared?"

"A little." His tone was so hushed that only she could've heard it.

Another pause as they watched the shadows grow, seeming to pulse with malevolent life. "Me too," Kala finally murmured, and leaned against his shoulder.

In the moment before absolute blackness descended on them, before hope of salvation vanished forever, the overhead lights suddenly came on. Instead of cheering, the twins

flinched, the bright lights stinging their eyes. "Ow," they complained in unison, trying to shade their faces with their hands.

The main door opened, and a friendly voice called, "Hey, it's getting kinda dark in here. Thought you guys could use the light."

Blinking rapidly, Jason recovered first. He recognized the man who entered the room and locked the door behind him as the same one who'd brought their meals. "Thanks," Jason said cautiously. "It was gettin' dark."

"Me, I don't like the dark," the man told them. "You never know what's in it, right? Better to have lights on at night. I even keep my lamp on in my bedroom - the guys tease me about it."

"That's mean," Kala opined. "How come they tease you?"

"Well, 'cause I'm a big guy," he replied as he moved toward the couches on the other end of the room. He was carrying several blankets and a couple of pillows, and he started to arrange these items into beds for the twins. "They think I'm a scaredy-cat because I'm a grownup and I don't like the dark."

"They're mean," Jason said sullenly. "They hurt me an' Kala when they brought us here."

The big man went still for an instant, then turned around. His eyes were suddenly scary, but his voice when he spoke was more outraged than angry. "They hurt you?"

"Squeezed my arms, threw us in here," Kala replied, intrigued now.

"I didn't sign up for no job that involves hurtin' kids," the man said. "And it ain't gonna happen where I can see it, lemme tell ya. I'll have a little talk with those other guys, and they'll leave you alone from now on."

"Mister, can you get us out of here?" Jason asked, trying not to let his voice tremble at the thought.

He came over toward them, not too close, and sat down at the piano bench. "Kids, there's nothing I'd like more than to jump this ship and take you both with me," he said sincerely. "But we're already out to sea, and I don't know how to steer this boat. The only other way out is the helicopter, and I can't fly that, either. We're stuck."

That news depressed the otherwise irrepressible twins. For a few minutes they sat in silence, absorbing the inevitable. But eventually the thought of their father - their real father - coming to their rescue cheered them again. *He* could fly, after all.

The man touched the keys of the piano lightly, playing a few notes. "You know, I never even got your names. I'm Brutus."

The twins hesitated a moment longer. He didn't seem mean, like the others. He was trapped in this situation, like the twins; he was afraid of the dark, just like them. Kala was the first to give her name, and Jason followed suit.

Brutus nodded. "Nice to meet you, kids. Well, do you need anything else?"

"You're leaving?" Jason asked.

"Well, Mr. Luthor has stuff he wants me to do," he replied. "That guy ... I wouldn't want to upset him, you know?"

They both nodded. "Are you coming back?" Kala said.

He grinned at them. "With breakfast in the morning. I'm gonna switch the side lights on and the overheads off, okay? Make it easier for you guys to sleep. It won't be too dark, though."

"You're sure?" Jason's voice trembled a little, though he tried to hide it. Kala scooted a little closer to him, looking up nervously.

"Nah, it'll be fine. See that bar along the wall? There's a light set under each one of them, every couple feet. You'll have plenty of light. They're dimmer than the ones overhead."

The twins nodded, both still a trifle wary. Brutus went out, giving them a brief wave, and they heard the door lock.

What they had both thought was a merely decorative strip of metal, running along both walls at about shoulder height to an adult, now proved to be a low-intensity light. A moment after those lights switched on, the brighter overheads went out.

It was dark ... but not *too* dark. With the reassurance provided by the lights, the grand ballroom became intriguing and mysterious instead of forbidding. The light also began to attract fish to the glass. Not giant, scary, child-eating fish, but pretty little darting fish. The twins dragged the sofa cushions, blankets, and pillows over the glass floor and stared into the magical underwater realm.

A casual observer might have thought the children were enjoying a holiday, but no one who knew them well could mistake the signs of strain. Jason wasn't taking the opportunity to show off his science knowledge by naming the various types of fish, and Kala wasn't claiming that he made some of them up. In fact, both of them were nearly silent, and not arguing with each other - a sure sign to those who loved them that things were far from normal.

Somewhere

Lana was being pushy, and that made Clark anxious. This wasn't the sweet, pretty girl he'd known years ago; Lana thought for herself now, and she didn't let go once she'd decided to pursue something. *A little bit like someone else I know*, he thought, chagrined. *I guess it's no wonder I fell in love with Lois at first sight, practically. I was looking for an echo of her in Lana before I ever came to Metropolis and met Lois...*

The redhead pulled the car to a stop at the corner and turned in her seat to look at Clark. "Just how involved *were* you with Lois Lane?"

He fumbled for an answer, trying to put her off that train of thought. She'd caught him unawares, however, and he could only pretend typical Clark cluelessness. "Lana ... I don't know what you're talking about..."

An auburn brow arched at him, and sea green eyes bored into his blue ones. Then she sighed, and shook her head slightly. Lana's expression was concerned and sympathetic when she said, "Clark, please. You do know. Richard ... he thinks the twins are yours."

Clark's jaw dropped. *Richard thinks... Oh my God.* And his brain vapor-locked on that thought for a long moment. Here was yet another indicator that he might actually be a father. Though Clark would never dare to treat the thought with any certainty until Lois herself confirmed it - he would be crushed if he convinced himself that Jason and Kala were his own children, and then found out otherwise - it was becoming a more and more likely possibility. *Me, a father. A father to those two, whom I already love so much...*

Meanwhile, Lana touched his shoulder, looking worried. "I'm sorry, Clark. I just ... I thought you should know, with them being missing. Richard and Lois are both going out of their minds, and it's only a matter of time before he blurts it out to you or to her. I wanted you to hear it from me first before one of them confronts you."

"Lana..." He couldn't get any further than that. *And Lana doesn't know who I am. So Richard thinks that **Clark** is the father of the twins? Holy... How the heck did he dream that one up? I never had a chance with Lois until she knew the whole of who I am.*

"I don't care whether it's true or not," Lana said, although Clark saw the curiosity she was trying to deny. "That's your business and hers - not mine. Not even Richard's. But the way you've thrown yourself into the search wholeheartedly, I thought you at least suspected they might be..."

"Even if I was absolutely certain they aren't mine, I'd be here," Clark said, unaware that he'd dropped the nervous vocal mannerisms that distinguished this persona. "Lois is, first and foremost, my closest friend. I'd help her when she needed me, no matter what."

Lana nodded slowly, temporarily satisfied with that noncommittal answer. After a moment, she replied slowly, "She's a lucky woman, to have friends like you and Superman to count on no matter what."

Clark nodded thoughtfully as she put the car back in gear and drove off. He had so much to think about... When Lana spoke again, the sound of her voice surprised him almost as much as her words.

"If they are yours ... I won't want to be anywhere around when Martha Kent finds out she has a pair of six-year-old grandkids she's never met."

"I don't understand why we had to be in pairs," Lois muttered as she picked the lock on the warehouse door. Richard stood by, keeping a nervous lookout and growing increasingly irritated at her constant grumbling. The lock's tumblers finally succumbed, and Lois swung the

door wide, still fuming. "We could've covered the lists in half the time and been working on the next set outside Metropolis by now."

They had been sniping at each other ever since they'd walked out of the *Planet* offices, both troubled by their own secrets and those they suspected each other of keeping. They also each blamed themselves for the twins' being missing, though they both tried to ignore that and concentrate on finding the children. But with Lois' constant grumbling, Richard finally lost his temper as he followed her inside. "Lois, the whole point of us going in pairs was so that we could watch out for each other. Personally, I think it was brilliant. And about the only way to stop *you* from doing something stupid."

Lois all but skidded to a halt, whirling to face Richard. Her flashlight beam seared his eyes, making him wince. "*What?*" she hissed.

Richard crossed his arms. He realized that he could've said that more diplomatically, but backing down wasn't in his nature. "Tell the truth - if you were alone, you'd still break in, wouldn't you? Knowing Luthor could be in any of these places, lurking around any corner, you'd still go in. Hell, if you knew for sure he was there, you'd run faster."

Her lip curled in a sneer. "Hmm, let's see. He has my kids - *of course I would!* You have no idea what this man is capable of, Richard! Not a frikkin' clue! They're *six* - and it's dark now!"

Chagrined, Richard remembered all the times he'd had to inspect the twins' closets for monsters. "Honey ... please. It's bad enough them being gone - I couldn't lose you, too. Luthor would snatch you up in a heartbeat..."

"Only if he can dodge bullets," Lois snarled. "Besides, even if he did manage to get me, it'd put me a little closer to where the twins are, wouldn't it?"

Richard stared at her. "Lois ... he'd kill you!"

"Not while he can use me for bait," she said coldly. "Alive I'm a hostage. Dead I'm nothing but trouble. Luthor won't harm one hair on my head unless he has a death wish."

Disbelievingly, Richard shook his head. "My God, Lois. You're talking about your own life like it's just a bargaining chip..." He hadn't known how utterly cold-blooded she could be. Once again it was all too clear that Lois had secrets Richard had never even imagined.

"I'd gladly risk mine to spare theirs," Lois replied hotly. "Richard, let's split up before we get into an argument."

"Lois..." he began, but she was already moving off, and he had little choice but to let her.

The black-haired reporter stalked away, practically steaming, swinging her flashlight in wide arcs through each room before she entered it. All the while, though she was irritated with Richard, her mind swung back to Luthor and the twins.

Luthor held a grudge against Superman, and he spared no mercy for Lois. She also had an awful feeling that he knew or guessed whom the twins' real father was. What he might do to them was beyond her capacity to imagine. *Please, let Kala keep her mouth shut. If she smarts off to Luthor, God only knows what he'll do. In a way, it's a good thing that Jason's with her. Maybe he'll keep her calm. Keep them calm.*

Oh, if he hurts my babies, that son of a bitch won't have to worry about prison. I'll kill him myself. And God help Kal-El if he stands in my way.

There was another sore spot eating away at her. As distant as she had been in these last months, how vocally dismissive she had been to him, from the moment she had received the phone call, he had been right there. Stopping her from running headlong into Luthor's clutches, soothing her tears, telling her that they would find the twins no matter what. And he meant it,

she knew, better than anyone else. The guilt over her past actions stung now, in spite of the reconciliation they were gradually coming to. No matter how angry she had been, how true her accusations had felt, Kal-El had yet to even do more than even slightly raise his voice to her.

Her emotions overwhelmed her, so strong that she could no longer hold back her tears. Biting her lip to keep from sobbing aloud, she berated herself for all of the wrong choices she had made and the ones that she stubbornly refused to make. If she had given more thought to her car suddenly breaking down ... if she'd been there to pick the kids up herself... Something. Anything. Why did life have to be so unfair, so intent on taking everything she had been so slow to realize that she wanted? When she already knew that only things she wanted now were impossible? Was this punishment for her traitor's thoughts about the man she had loved, to have an exchange? Him for her twins? Is this what it was?

...And gnashing your teeth like a repentant idiot is doing nothing for anyone, especially you, most especially not for those kids. You're human is all, impossibly capable of mistakes in some cases. Stop behaving like a fifth-grade drama queen. Snap out of it, Lane, and act like a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, commented a sarcastic, somewhat disgusted voice. Seemed that the General's Daughter had had enough.

And Lois knew the voice was right. This wasn't the time or place to fall apart. Brusquely, she rubbed away her tears as she forced herself to breathe more slowly. Shaking her head to clear it, she focused on the narrow, dark hallway ahead of her. Right now the twins were counting on her, more than ever in their young lives. Any personal issues she had could wait until they found Kala and Jason.

Being as cautious as she knew how, despite the urge to just go barreling onward, Lois made her way through several of the huge abandoned building's storage rooms. With the exception of river rats, of which Luthor was one only in Lois' system of classification, the area was deserted.

Her growing desperation showed in the way Lois startled at every sound and, instead of playing it safe and moving away, she headed directly to it. According to her watch, it had now been four hours since Barbara had called her after finding Mrs. Mosley unconscious on the entrance walkway, two hours since Lex's message arrived on her cell phone. It had been more than twelve hours since she had last seen their faces, barely awake as they bounded into the bedroom for a kiss goodbye before leaving for school. And the dark had closed in fast.

They had only recently been allowed to play in the yard until just after dusk, something that seemed to have a forbidden thrill to it. Yet they always seemed to come in before the allotted time. Her twins had never been alone in the dark, not even in their bedrooms. They had nightlights, both of them, still being at that age that they were afraid of the Boogie-Man...

Well, Lex certainly fits that description, her mind commented disloyally and that was enough to turn her back in the direction of Richard's car. She had to get more batteries for the weakening flashlight, had to keep looking, no matter how hopeless the area looked. Even if Kala and Jason weren't here, maybe there was a clue. One of Kala's hair-ties, maybe one of those goofy-looking Godzilla pens from Jason's bag. Maybe one of the backpacks themselves. She had to keep looking...

Lois froze. There, in the hallway leading to this area, a shadow that hadn't been there before. An elongated shadow, like a man's. Lois' hand crept into her purse, seeking the familiar rosewood grip of her Ladysmith.

Brutus finished his meal in the galley and set his plates in the sink. Stanford, Riley, and

Grant were playing cards, cheating each other as usual. "Hey, Brutus, I'll deal ya in," Grant said with that funny sideways grin.

The bigger man glanced at him and shook his head slightly. "Nah. Not tonight. 'M gonna check on the kids. Luthor says they gotta be watched."

Riley chuckled. "Watch the girl, man. She's a fighter. Like to see her again in about ten years."

Brutus didn't have to move fast or be overtly violent to make a point. He simply sauntered over to Riley, caught the front of his shirt in one fist, and lifted the man gently out of his chair. "Don't touch them kids," he said quietly. "I see a kid in one of your home movies, Riley, we're not gonna be friends no more."

"Yo, chill, man," Riley said with a nervous laugh, as Brutus slowly lowered him to his seat. "I didn't mean nothing by it, it's just talk, ya know? I'm not like a child molester or nothin'."

"I don't like people who hurt kids," Brutus said slowly, for emphasis. Riley laughed again, but he wouldn't meet Brutus' gaze. Grant was trying to watch him without seeming to, eyes skittering up to his face and away like a cornered rat trying not to see the cat approach.

And Stanford, who probably had the least to hide of any of them, looked up once and then back at his cards. Well, he might've been in stir with them, but Stanford wasn't like them. The mineralogist didn't get involved in stuff like this.

Brutus just looked at Riley for another long minute, and walked away. He took his time heading for the grand ballroom, shaking his head in contempt of Riley and Grant as he went. They had fought with the kids, opting to use force to get them on board. That was dumb. Kids were pretty easy to win over, if you were nice to them. Even smart, wary kids like these. There just wasn't any such thing as a six-year-old cynic - although that Kala got pretty close.

Brutus paused at the door. Gertrude's conceit had been to make every single door on the ship have a porthole in it. Not too great for privacy, and after a while all those little circular windows got on your nerves. But times like this they were pretty handy.

He cupped his hands around the window, peering into the darker room. The lights were still on, and in the dimness he could see them lying on the glass floor. Kinda cute - kids watching the fish. Brutus stepped back to unlock the door, and felt something brush his ankle.

It was only Tala, that powder puff of a dog. Brutus grinned at her. "Hey, fluffy-butt. Did she leave you out again?"

Tala stared up at him with dark, unreadable eyes. The tip of her tail wagged slowly.

"Wanna go keep the kids company?"

Tala knew the word 'kids', and her tail wagged faster. As soon as Brutus unlocked the door and opened it for her, she darted inside.

He followed more quietly. The kids were actually asleep - not even Tala's cold nose expertly applied to Jason's forehead woke him. The Pomeranian ran around the twins, her claws clicking on the glass, before leaping over Kala's back and settling down in between them.

"Good girl," Brutus whispered. Kala and Jason had made themselves a pretty comfy nest there, and they'd probably sleep all night. Good enough. Brutus put a couple of mints - the sugar-free kind - on the edge of the piano bench for them.

As he walked past, Jason moved restlessly in his sleep and murmured, "Mommy, I don't wanna go t' school t'morrow..." Kala's hand came out of the pile of blankets she'd burrowed under, and clasped his shoulder.

Brutus couldn't help smiling at them. "Wish granted, kiddo," he said softly. "Tomorrow's Saturday anyway, but there's no school on this ship any day of the week." Kneeling, he lightly ruffled Kala's tousled ebony curls, all that was visible of her other than her hand on Jason's shoulder.

"Lois?" the shadow's owner said, and the voice was so very familiar ... and so very not Lex Luthor's.

Lois had already slipped her index finger along the guard, preparing to pull the weapon from her purse, when the realization of her stalker hit her. Dammit! Why couldn't he ever be bothered to warn her when he did that? Stiffening at the embarrassment of his having startled her, the dark-haired woman clenched her jaw as she snatched the first thing that came to hand out of her purse, and hurled it at his broad chest. Her lighter only made a weak thump as it hit him, but that was quickly drowned out by her frustrated snapping. "Would it kill you to even let me know you're here? Instead of popping out of the shadows like some kind of psycho killer?" she hollered, holding her flashlight up at him like a nightstick. There was a moment of sadistic joy as she shined the light up into his face. She really did feel as though she had nearly had a heart attack. "For God's sake, Kal-El, I could have shot you ... how would you explain THAT?! What are you doing skulking around here in the dark instead of looking for the twins? Other than scaring the hell out of me?"

He didn't respond to her anger or her accusations. Superman, for he was in uniform now, simply walked up to Lois and enfolded her in his arms. The strength that could crush coal into diamonds drew her gently close to him as he murmured, "Lois, we're going to find them, I promise."

"How do you know that?" Her voice broke even as she struggled to pull away, hating herself for behaving this weakly. They didn't have time for this. Not with Richard somewhere in this building. Not with the stakes so high. *God, please ... let them be alright. I'll slit Luthor's throat where he stands once I find him, but please protect my babies. Let them be right. I beg you.*

Giving in, leaning against him, she sobbed, "You can't be sure of that! He wants revenge and from that note, he plans to take it from both of us. He knows about the Fortress, he knows what we were to each other. And he used it. He has my kids, Kal-El." *Our kids.* Her face came up then, the pain in her eyes sharp enough to cut. "They're so little. Still afraid of the dark, even. Especially Kala. And they've never been alone overnight before. They're scared, I know it. And it's all my damned fault."

"It's not your fault," he told her, a note of sternness in his voice. "It's *Luthor's* doing, Lois. If anyone should take the blame for Luthor's work, it's me. He's my nemesis; he wouldn't have done this if he didn't know what you mean to me." Superman sighed, his breath ruffling her hair. "As for the twins, they'll be strong. They might be scared, but they'll stay strong. Look at who their mother is - the woman who cold-cocked a Kryptonian criminal. Not even the entire Council of Elders made that much of an impression on Ursa."

That seemed to calm the hysteria somewhat. Unable to help herself, she reacted to his cautious teasing with a soft laugh between snuffles. It would have been easier to think on it if she didn't have to remember what had led to that battle, but her memory of that moment was clear as day. She had owed that monster Ursa a shot after nearly breaking her arm defending Perry hours before. Nothing had felt more satisfying than that haymaker. Well, short of the look of unfathomable shock on the other woman's face as she fell into the holding cells below

the Fortress itself. And the expression on Kal-El's face, his amazed laughter, when she turned to him afterwards. *At that moment, I hadn't the slightest doubt in the world that he loved me.*

Head leaning slightly against his chest now, she tried to absorb a bit of his calm, his power. The urge to tell him was strong enough to weigh her down, his compliment arguing that she return it. But she couldn't, not now. Not like this. "Yes, well. The difference is that Kala has a hard time with authority that isn't me or Richard, as well as the fact that she will tell you exactly what she thinks of a situation. You've heard her. Jason will behave, for himself and Kala, but ... with my daughter... I shudder to think of what her smart mouth might provoke him to do." Closing her eyes to push back the fear starting to swell again, she allowed herself only these few moments with him.

"We're going to find them, Lois, we'll get there in time," he told her again, stroking her hair lightly. How could he explain to her what he had done once before to save her life, what he would do again to save her children if he had to? *Once upon a time, Lois, I wasn't in time for you. You died in that desert, and I sent myself back in time to save you.*

The touch of his fingertips was light over the strands, but she felt it as if he had run that warm hand down her cheek. Her eyes closed at that delicate touch. Unable to help herself, Lois felt herself snuggle into his comfort. It still seemed the most natural thing in the world, the way she seemed to gravitate to him as much as he did to her. After all, wasn't he the father of her children? It was clear to her that she still loved him, painfully clear. Couldn't he see that? He had to, in spite of all she had tried to deny it. How could she keep lying to him, to herself? To Richard?

That simple thought threw her eyes open, a flush rising to her cheeks as she pulled out of his embrace to step away. Almost immediately, everything in her protested. Even the General's Daughter gave one of her rare silences. It was dark enough in the building to assure that he couldn't see her torn expression. Neither could anyone else, for that matter, she thought with a mix of relief and knowingness. Already feeling guilty, she said firmly in a quiet voice, avoiding his gaze, "This ... this isn't getting the twins found. Richard and I made it through our list - this is the last stop. What about you and Lana?" Thinking for a moment, she added, "Where *is* Lana, anyway?"

"We finished our list - I didn't have to actually break in - and I sent her home," he replied, watching her with a faintly puzzled expression. One moment she was in his arms, the next, distant. His father had always said that no man would ever understand women - Pa Kent, that was, not Jor-El. Funny how the most useful advice came from the farmer and not the scientist renowned for his wisdom. "She was getting exhausted, and she needed to get some rest. So do you, Lois."

Those eyes, which he could see much better than she thought he could, narrowed then. Her reply came quietly, firm as he had ever heard it, despite the many hours she had been awake and running. "I'll sleep once Jason and Kala are safe and sound, asleep in their beds."

"Lois, you can't run on nerves forever."

"I can do anything I damn well want to, Kal-El," Lois snapped, all the more vehement. "Are you trying to tell me I'm too *old* for this? Because I used to do it all the time. And *long* before *you* showed up."

Before Kal-El could try to reply, a beam of light entered the room. "Lois? Who are you ... talking..." Richard stopped, staring, as his flashlight found Superman.

Kal-El turned to look at him, reminding himself that he'd supposedly never met this man before. "Mr. White, I presume," he said, emphasizing the richer timbre of this person's voice.

"It's good to meet you at last, although I wish it were under other circumstances."

Lois' flashlight beam swung back and forth between the two men as she bit her lip. Richard was staring ... hopefully he was just surprised by the sudden appearance of the hero, hopefully he didn't have a clue that he'd been working with Superman for several months. When he finally spoke, Richard allayed those fears. "Yeah ... always wanted to meet you, but not like this." He seemed to shake himself slightly, adjusting to the presence of this superhuman being, and continued, "No luck?"

"I haven't found them yet, no," Kal-El replied, and genuine sorrow colored his words. "I scanned this building, too - the twins aren't here."

Lois' shoulders slumped in defeat. "Dammit. Well, come on, there's still upper 86th street."

"I've already been there," Superman told her gently. "I got a complete copy of the list from Mr. Kent and Ms. Lang, and I've checked all the addresses within the greater Metropolis area. There's nothing more you can do tonight."

"No, we can head back to the office," Lois said, shaking her head. "Perry and Jimmy will have stayed late digging up more leads."

"Ms. Lane, you need to get some rest," Superman said, glancing at Richard as if seeking his support. "Go home - I'll look into the out-of-state and foreign properties you found."

"I told you I'm not going to bed until they're found," she replied, glaring. *Get off the 'Ms. Lane' nonsense, Kal-El.*

"Lois, he's got a point," Richard said. "I don't like leaving the search tonight, either, but we can start again early."

"It's safer for you both in daylight," Superman added. "Searching these warehouses at night is very dangerous, Ms. Lane, as you know."

"When has that ever stopped me?" Lois challenged. She would never let either of them see the exhaustion that dogged her, a weariness born as much of constant anxiety as of physical and mental exertion.

"Lois, go home," Kal-El said to her, and completely missed Richard's sharp gaze flickering to him. "You don't want to pass out halfway through tomorrow. Go home and try to get some sleep. I'll keep on trying."

She began to argue it, but the fatigue weighing on her prevented it. Brow furrowed, Lois demanded, "Promise me."

He had always understood her so well. "Lois, I promise you I won't stop searching. Whatever it takes ... we'll find them. Somewhere."

Finally she nodded, and Richard took her arm. "We'll see you in the morning?" he asked the hero.

Kal-El's deep blue eyes met his, and he nodded. "Until then."

As Richard and Lois left, she turned one last time, and the fear that shone in her eyes was no longer under her control. It broke Kal-El's heart to see it ... and strengthened his resolve to find the twins.

Brutus left without waking the kids, looking back into the room as he opened the door. Only Tala's eyes glowed red in the faint light, and he smiled for a minute. Kids and a dog - it was a nice picture.

What waited for him outside the door was not. As he closed it, hand on the lock, he revealed Kitty standing behind it. Brutus' pulse raced, but he didn't let it show. Instead he simply locked the door casually, sparing the dark-haired woman no more than a glance. Her

full lower lip was even more swollen than usual; would she ever learn not to defy Lex? You just didn't cross a man like that.

"How come you were in there, Brutus?" she asked, trying to sound demanding, but her voice came out skittish. Weak. Brutus could break her neck one-handed, and they both knew it.

"Checkin' on the kids," he replied. "They're sleeping."

"Why?"

"Luthor said to." She didn't need a lengthy explanation; the shorter and more matter-of-fact his responses were, the less likely she was to guess his fondness for them.

Kitty seemed to accept that. She almost walked away, but halted, glancing up at him nervously. *I'm not Riley*, the big man thought of saying to her. As he looked back silently, Kitty added, "Have you seen Tala? My dog?"

Brutus jerked his head at the door. "In there. I guess she likes the kids, and they're good with her. You put her in the last time, right?"

"Yeah ... yeah, she likes them." Kitty looked at the door again, and Brutus saw some unnamable emotion flicker across her face. Just another thing about women he'd never understand, apparently. "She's better with them ... Lex doesn't like her much."

Brutus just nodded, filing that fact away for future reference. "G'night, Miss Kowalski," he said, and turned away.

Kitty remained, looking through the portal at the sleeping children, for a moment longer.

Richard's mind was spinning throughout the drive home, barely conscious of Lois beside him with her forehead pressed against the window, staring out into the tumultuous night.

He'd been a Superman fan pretty much ever since the hero had made his famous debut. The mere thought that a man could fly, without needing a plane or a jet or a glider, was intoxicating. To soar as the hawk soars, to scythe through the air like a falcon - no, even more free and powerful than the raptors, able to hover motionless or accelerate past the speed of sound in a moment, laughing at gravity and glorying in never-ending strength ... that was the stuff of Richard's boyhood dreams. How could the man that boy had become *not* idolize this living symbol of everything heroic, when Superman could *fly*?

Meeting the superhero today had been ... weird. He hadn't been this in awe since he met Lois - which, if he was brutally honest, had been partly due to her connection to Superman. *Good one, Richard*, he thought to himself with an ironic internal chuckle. *You got the ultimate Superman fan's collectible: his girlfriend.*

That had been the next thing to cross Richard's mind, after the head trip that was meeting his idol. Suspicion. Lois had been speaking very familiarly to Superman; she'd actually been quarreling with him, from the sound. As he'd looked from one to the other, a tiny jealous part of his brain had whispered, *He's awfully friendly with your fiancée.*

Immediately on the heels of that thought had come chagrin. *She was his girlfriend before I ever came back to the states. If anyone's the interloper here, it's me.*

More than enough to leave any man confused and melancholy. If that wasn't enough, the loss of the twins gnawed at him. Even more so when they arrived at the house and saw everything as it had been that morning, before their world had fallen apart. Both twins' drawings on the refrigerator door, Kala's hair tie on the table, Jason's other sneakers by the coat rack - those things seemed fraught with meaning, haunting Richard. It hadn't quite been real to him until that moment, a part of him still believing that this couldn't possibly happen to

people he loved.

Lois froze in the hallway, shivering, her eyes lingering on each of the twins' belongings as if concentrating could bring them home. Richard slipped his arm around her shoulders wordlessly; nothing he could say would comfort her.

For a moment she accepted the touch, but then Lois moved away slightly. He let her; both of them had too much to feel, too much to think about. She went into the kitchen and got something out of the fridge. Food didn't sound very appealing at the moment, but Richard supposed he'd have to eat something too.

He paced through the darkened house, his mind full of the twins - Kala's laugh, Jason's smile, their silly arguments, and the absolute seriousness with which they would suddenly unite in defense of each other. God, the house felt empty. Everywhere he looked was heartbreak - the couch that was often bereft of its cushions when the kids played at building forts, the piano Jason practiced on, the stereo system Kala sang along with.

And as awful as this was for him, it had to be infinitely worse for Lois. The twins were the most important part of her life, and her love for them was greater than any other emotion she'd ever known. She'd raised them basically alone through their infancy and toddler years, and only trusted a few people to look after them even now. Richard's throat closed in sympathetic pain.

Enough of this. We need to get some rest and get back to the search tomorrow morning. Richard headed upstairs to look for Lois.

His heart broke again when he found her in the twins' room, sitting on Jason's bed. She hadn't gone into the fridge for herself, Richard now saw. She had gotten out the mix of raw vegetables that Jason gave Gazeera every evening, and was hand-feeding the iguana. Wonder of wonders, the lizard was accepting the greens from her without trying his usual tricks; it seemed the pets knew something was wrong, too. Captain Jack's food bowl had been freshly filled, but he was ignoring it, standing in the corner of his cage closest to Lois and pressing his nose against the wire.

Richard started to come in; she didn't need to be in here, where the reminders of the twins' absence were a thousand times stronger. But when Lois offered Gazeera a piece of zucchini, he saw her reflection in Jason's mirror, saw the tears streaming down her cheeks silently.

Lois wouldn't rest that night. Richard knew it to look at her; she'd stay up, pacing and worrying, until she collapsed from exhaustion. That would do them no good tomorrow. Something had to be done, and Richard went downstairs silently to do it.

Her sleeping pills were in the downstairs medicine cabinet, well out of the twins' reach. Richard took down the bottle and shook one pill into his hand. He paused, thinking carefully, and added another. He'd seen her take two at once before, but not the way he planned to give them to her.

Richard replaced the medicine bottle and dropped the pills into a glass. He added a generous splash of Scotch and swirled until the pills dissolved. Then he topped up the glass with milk and carried it upstairs to her.

Lois had finished feeding the lizard, and accepted the drink gratefully. If she noticed anything funny about the taste, she probably attributed it to an extra dose of alcohol. Still without speaking, Richard sat beside her and rubbed her shoulders as she watched the animals move around their cages, probably wondering where their true owners were.

Within fifteen minutes, Lois's eyelids were flickering. She had already been tired, and

Richard caught the empty glass just as it tumbled from her hand. He was just fast enough to support her as she slumped against him.

She'd gone under awfully quick, and Richard felt her pulse as he held her close, worrying. The beat seemed steady, and her breathing was deep and even, so he must've dosed it just right. Gathering her into his arms and marveling at her lightness, Richard carried Lois down the hall to their bedroom.

Now all he had to do was figure out a way to make *himself* fall asleep.

Tipping the Scales

Lost in the darkness, hoping for a sign
Instead there is only silence,
Can't you hear my screams...?
Never stop hoping,
Until I know where you are
But one thing's for sure,
You're always in my heart...

~*Within Temptation, "Somewhere"*

Lois clawed her way up from sleep stubbornly, ignoring the heaviness in her limbs and the gentle insistence in the back of her mind that it would be so much easier just to lie here... The reporter forced her eyes open and tried to sit up, but her head felt fuzzy. She yawned, and immediately shuddered; her mouth was dry and tasted awful. *What the hell was I doing last night?* Lois wondered, but her mind was blank. Thinking felt weird ... furry somehow. Like her tongue.

Gagging at the thought, she quickly climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom. Lois splashed her face with cold water, rinsed her mouth, even drank straight from the tap. She took twice as long to brush her teeth, even scrubbing her tongue to get rid of the last foul taste of whatever she'd been drinking. Now she felt somewhat refreshed, and took a shower, letting the hot water pound on her skin and restore her a little more. It had been years since she had been able to imbibe the way she had in the old days, but those were instincts you never forgot, especially for a military brat.

Her mind was still rather hazy, but at least she felt better. *As soon as I find out what I was drinking last night, I'm swearing it off forever.* That would have to wait for her thought processes to start functioning a little better, though. As it was, Lois couldn't seem to remember much of anything.

Force of habit took her downstairs and past the study to the kitchen. She could hear Richard talking on the phone, his voice muffled by the closed door. Odd, for him to be up and on the phone this early on a Saturday ... was it Saturday? Usually the kids were up by now, concocting some culinary horror for breakfast. Maybe they were already watching cartoons. Lois went into the living room, but they weren't there, either. Strange.

Slowly, she turned around. The house was awfully quiet. A deep sense of unease was working its way past her hangover. Lois methodically went through each room downstairs, excepting only Richard's study. He was still on the phone, and they couldn't be in there with him - Jason and Kala just couldn't keep quiet while a phone call was in progress.

Upstairs, the eerie silence continued. She stopped outside the twins' bedroom, locked in place by a disquieting feeling of loss. It was as if, by opening the door, she would cause something irrevocable to happen. Lois felt certain the kids were just sleeping in, but the gooseflesh prickling along her arms seemed to tell her that if she opened the door to check, they would somehow vanish.

That was absurd. Lois shook herself and turned the doorknob stepping in. Her gaze landed on Jason's empty bed.

The memory of sitting there last night, tears running down her cheeks as she fed the godforsaken lizard, returned with all the force of a hurricane. Lois staggered, her hand flailing to catch the edge of the bed, and she fell against it instead of to the floor.

Sudden remembrance blew apart the haze in her mind, letting in all the terrible details of

yesterday. The Vanderworth estate, her car, Luthor, the twins ... *the twins*. *He* had them. Realization dawned horribly bright on her.

In the conference room at the *Daily Planet*, the rest of the team listened carefully as Richard murmured into the phone, "No, she's still out, I think I'll let her sleep as long as she can."

"Sound decision," Perry replied. Lana, Clark, and Jimmy all nodded; Lois had been running on nerves and rage. Best to let her get what rest she could. "You sure she's okay, though?"

Richard laughed ironically. "Oh, yeah. Our friend in the cape dropped by last night. Apparently he can hear her heartbeat from anywhere and wondered why it was so slow. He said she was all right, I didn't... Oh, shit."

They were left listening to the phone thump against the desk, and in the background, a rising howl of anguish, terror, and rage. Clark closed his eyes, grief burning in him. The very sound hurt his ears to hear it, hurt his heart to know the pain that caused Lois to scream.

Lana's hand covered her mouth, and tears glistened in her eyes. That didn't sound like a woman, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist. It sounded like a wounded bear, like a wolf whose pups were taken from her... *My God. Oh, my God, how can such a thing happen?*

Jimmy looked away while the scream rose, wavered, and broke off. Presumably Richard had gone to her, but there would be no comforting Lois, not until they had the twins safely back. The best he could hope for was her fighting spirit to rise, the anger to overcome the despair. In the meantime, his chest felt tight with sympathetic pain.

Even Perry had to blink rapidly, forcing back tears. He more than anyone else knew how strong Lois was, how terrible this must be to make her cry out like that. A sound like that shouldn't come from any living creature - it seemed a portent of death. Only a handful of times in all the years he'd known her had Lois even wept - to hear that long, agonized wail rising from her throat made him wish he could bear this and not her. Even if it killed him.

Brutus brought the twins' breakfast and let Tala out. Jason and Kala looked up at him blearily, their necks still stiff from sleeping on the floor. "Hi, kids," he said warmly, setting down the tray. "Did you see any big fish last night?"

Kala met his eyes, her hazel gaze sharp. "You came in while we were sleeping," she said.

"Yup," Brutus replied affably. On the inside, he applauded her. This one had rare maturity and insight. "I let Tala in for ya. She needed the company."

"How come she doesn't sleep in Miss Katherine's room?" Jason said with a frown. "Tala's her dog, right?"

"I wouldn't want Captain Jack to sleep anywhere but in my room," Kala added.

"Yeah, Tala belongs to Katherine," Brutus told them. Then he let his mouth droop into a slight frown. "She can't stay with her at nights, though."

"Why not?" both twins asked in unison.

Brutus sighed, looking down as if embarrassed. "Well ... Luthor doesn't like her much. He's mean to the little dog - it's best if Tala sleeps somewhere else."

Both twins were scowling now. "Why'd Mr. Luthor be goin' in Miss Katherine's room, anyway?" Jason asked.

"She didn't say?" Brutus asked. When they shook their heads, he pursed his mouth, pausing for a long moment. The kids waited for him to decide to tell them whatever it was,

both of them antsy at the thought of a secret. Finally, the big man gave another heavy sigh. "Well, I don't know if you guys will really understand, but Katherine is Mr. Luthor's girlfriend."

Cocking her head to the side, Kala figured it out first. Her face showed shock and disgust as she said, "You mean ... Miss Katherine is Mr. Luthor's *girlfriend*? Like grown-up girlfriend?"

"Like Mommy and Daddy?" Jason's nose wrinkled in horror, his expression mimicking Kala's.

"That's *gross*," Kala added. "Ewww!"

"But he's the bad guy!" Jason complained. "Nobody ever wants t' be the bad guy's girlfriend!"

"Miss Katherine *can't* be his girlfriend," Kala added. "She's *nice*, and he's mean."

Brutus merely shrugged. "I don't understand it either. But that's the way it is."

The twins just shook their heads, still in denial. Jason voiced both of their opinions when he said, "But we *like* Miss Katherine."

"Kinda." Kala's sharp eyes were on Brutus again, and he forced himself to look merely puzzled.

Lois hated being merely a passenger. Especially now. With her breakdown firmly behind her - never mind the tremor in her hands or the shiver in her soul - she wanted to be *doing* something. Sitting here while Richard drove them both to the office, where the others were already assembled and gathering more information, was nearly unbearable.

She darted a look at him, caught by conflicting emotions. On the one hand, Lois wanted to knock him senseless for daring to drug her - that was the only explanation for how quickly she fell asleep last night, and how groggy she'd been this morning. On the other hand, she would never have gotten any rest if he hadn't done it, and Lois knew that Richard had her best interests at heart. *What a Hallmark moment. 'A man who cares enough to slip you a Mickey.'* *My God.*

Richard sensed the look, and glanced at her. "You okay, Lois?"

"Fine," she replied, deciding not to call him on the doctored drink. However, that didn't prevent her from poking at him about it. Yawning theatrically, she added, "Still a little hazy. You must've put the good Scotch in my drink last night."

He avoided her eyes then. "You needed the sleep. I didn't want you up all night, pacing and worrying. We've got a lot to do today."

"Mm-hmm," Lois replied, stifling another yawn, this one genuine. "Did you get any sleep?"

Just an instant's hesitation, then Richard said, "Only after I borrowed one of your sleeping pills. You're almost out of them, just so you know."

Lois made a noncommittal noise, staring out the window, and thought, *They aren't as good or as fast, but I can always use Tylenol PM. Those usually help me fall asleep.*

By then they were approaching the office, and Lois steeled herself. She couldn't let her demeanor show the others how close she'd come to utterly breaking down this morning. She had no idea that they had heard that awful cry, and no one would let her find out, either.

Although the way they all looked up concernedly when she stepped into the conference room was a little suspicious. It might've just been the fact that she was dressed casually - jeans and a blouse instead of her usual suits. Perry was the first to speak, and his gruff tone sounded

like everything was normal. "Well, now that you've had your beauty rest, Lane, we can get to work."

Lois just rolled her eyes as she dropped into a chair, stifling a yawn along with the urge to flip him off. "So bring me up to date, old man."

Perry glared, but she saw a hint of a relieved smile on his face. "All right, this is what's happened so far. First of all, your mother called yesterday, and I told her what's going on. She and Ron are keeping it a secret from Lucy - she's too far along to upset with news like this. But your sister's pretty pissed at you for missing Nora's birthday party."

"Let her be mad," Lois said. "It's better than telling her what happened. Okay, what else?"

"Well, it turns out we've got two things for you to check out. First, that Karla Smith-Bennett is in private practice, but she does a helluva lot of work pro-bono. Usually on behalf of kids." Perry raised a grizzled brow.

"Sounds like someone's got a guilty conscience," Lois said, her hazel eyes glittering. "One of us should drop by her office in person and see what she knows."

Perry nodded agreement. "Next up is the phone company. That one has to be in person, too. Lois, I think you ought to go with Kent and talk to the same woman he spoke with yesterday. You're the kids' mother, and the call went in to your phone. You can probably convince her to bend the rules."

Lois agreed. "So that leaves Richard and Lana to talk to Ms. Bennett. What about you, Perry? Find anything else in the archives?"

Now the editor-in-chief looked disgruntled. "Olsen's run up a couple possibilities, but nothing concrete. I got a call from that girl at the *Daily Star*, Raines. Apparently Sawyer tipped off the competition, and Raines is going over their background information to see if they have anything we don't. It's gonna take longer because she has to do it herself - obviously we don't trust just anyone over there. Not even sure if I trust Raines, but the lieutenant does, so I have to bow to her judgment."

"All right," Lois said. "Let's get going."

"Be careful," Lex said unnecessarily, and Stanford bit his lip yet again. *As if I didn't know that one drop of seawater on this thing will start it growing.* He carefully fitted the kryptonite cylinder, with one of the large crystals from the Fortress inside, into a steel sleeve. Trying to ignore Riley filming and Lex looming, the mineralogist screwed the sleeve together tightly. It was almost watertight - simulations showed that it would take about half an hour for enough seawater to reach the main crystal to make it expand and burst the sleeve. That gave them time to get away.

Not enough time, in Lex's opinion. The resulting EMP would knock out every electrical system on the yacht, and Lex would take no chances of their computer simulations being wrong about the speed of crystal growth. He insisted on being well out of range, so Stanford had chosen the simplest delay method possible.

A life raft, spray-painted dark blue just in case someone happened to see it, was lying on the deck nearby. At first Lex wanted to fire the crystal with a missile launcher, but the stress of hitting the water at such speeds might have caused the seams to widen, letting in water faster and causing the crystal to expand prematurely. Stanford punched a few tiny holes in the life raft, enough to let the air out very slowly, and placed the canister inside. Grant and Brutus lowered it - "Gently!" Lex cautioned - and they watched the unassuming device bob away on the waves.

"Not exactly the historic moment I envisioned," Luthor muttered. "It lacks the panache of a missile launch."

Only Stanford dared contradict him. "Safety or panache, Mr. Luthor? I'll admit, the missile launch might've gone fine. But if one seam of that sleeve cracked early, we might've foundered this ship."

Lex's dark eyes cut to him, and the boss gave one of his rare smiles. "True. Not that I don't intend to spend a lot of time on my island, but I'd prefer to keep this mobile base as long as I can. Gentlemen, you're dismissed. Grant, bring us around south by southwest."

The others looked bored as they headed downstairs. Only Kitty, clutching her dog, remained on deck with Lex and Stanford. She looked troubled, and Stanford spared her a pitying look as he passed her. *Poor girl had no idea what she was getting into on this ride*, he thought. But considering the fates of others was counterproductive on this trip. All Stanford wanted to do was get back to the desert lab and his experiments there.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I really can't..." The customer service representative trailed off as Lois pulled out her wallet and held it open so the photos were right in her face.

Clark squeezed her elbow gently, and Lois modified her tone. "You see these kids, Ms. MacKenzie? Look very closely."

"Yes, well..."

"Now look at this picture." Lois held up the cell phone with that damned text message on the screen, and saw the woman's eyes widen. The wallet photo was recent, and the grainy phone picture was obviously of the same two kids. "Pay particular attention to the end of the message," Lois added dryly, controlling her temper.

Ms. MacKenzie's mouth slowly opened in dawning horror. "But ... no one would..."

"Ma'am, we're reporters," Clark said gently. "We see all the statistics. Unfortunately, people do that and worse to children every single day. I'm afraid the threat is genuine."

Lois swallowed hard. That wasn't a reminder she needed at the moment. All she said was, "You can see why I won't involve the police or the military in this, then."

Ms. MacKenzie nodded. "I'll run that trace for you now, Ms. Lane. It may take a few minutes."

"Thank you," Lois said with sincere relief. "We'll wait."

Clark seemed about to add his thanks as well, but something in his pocket chirped. Lois arched an eyebrow at him as he excused himself and walked out into the lobby. "Hello?"

"Son? I haven't heard from you in a few days, other than the news. Is everything okay?"

Clark gave a shaky laugh. "No, Ma, far from it." He lowered his voice and turned away from Lois to continue, "Luthor kidnapped the twins."

"*What?*" Martha exclaimed. "That lowdown, no-good cowardly son of a... Oh, Clark. My poor boy! When - how? My God, what about Lois?"

"He nabbed them after school. Lois and I - and Richard and Perry and Jimmy and Lana, of all people - are trying to track him down. We can't let the police or the military in on it." He didn't have to tell her why, and lowered his voice even further to add, "Lois isn't taking it very well. I really hope I find him before she does - Ma, she'd shoot him. In a heartbeat."

Martha huffed. "That's normal, Clark. Any mother would protect her children. Heck, I'd be tempted to take a shot at him myself. Speaking of which... Is Lois there with you?"

"Yes," Clark murmured, noticing Lois watching him keenly.

"Has she said anything about what we talked about last time?"

"No," he replied. "But, well, I'm starting to think it's a strong possibility."

"Hmm," Martha mused. "And you said you're all working on it? Even Lana?"

"Even Lana," Clark said. "She's really thrown herself into this."

"Because of you?"

Now that was a question he *really* couldn't answer with Lois anywhere nearby. "No ... it's complicated. But it's not about me."

Martha heard the hesitation, and sighed. "Son, I know you have to be busy. And she must be listening to you, too. Call me when you can, please. I'll be praying for you."

"Thanks, Ma," Clark told her. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Please take care of yourself, Clark. I know you'll find them."

He had no reply to that, and hung up with a soft "Goodbye."

Lois was still waiting for Ms. MacKenzie, and she pounced on Clark as soon as he walked back to her. "Well?"

"My mother's praying for us," he replied.

Lois started to say something sarcastic, then halted. "Tell her I said thank you next time you talk to her. We need all the help we can get, including divine."

Brutus set down the tray, saying, "It's not much, but it's breakfast."

"Oatmeal?" Jason said. "But there's no jicama..." Kala wrinkled up her nose; she wasn't particularly fond of oatmeal.

"Sorry, kids," Brutus said. "We don't have a lot of choices around here." He looked so dejected on their behalf that the twins hushed and ate their breakfast anyway.

For once, Brutus didn't leave immediately. He sat down at the piano, idly plinking a few notes. Jason watched him thoughtfully as he finished his oatmeal. Swallowing the last bite, he asked, "You okay?"

Brutus seemed startled by the question. "Huh? Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

But he didn't act fine. He acted sad. And Jason had always known at least one sure way to cheer up any adult in his vicinity. Putting his spoon and bowl back on the tray, Jason went over to Brutus and hopped up on the bench beside him.

Kala, eating more slowly because she really didn't like oatmeal all that much, paused to grin at the sight of them. Jason picked out a now-familiar tune, and Brutus grinned at him, playing the accompaniment. The big man caught Kala watching them, and gave her a cheerful wink.

Heart and soul, I begged to be adored. Lost control, and tumbled overboard...

"Mommy likes this song," Jason said.

"It's a neat one," Brutus agreed. "You play it really good."

"Thank you for seeing us without an appointment," Lana said, giving Karla Smith-Bennett her warmest smile.

"This is about Luthor, isn't it?" the attorney asked. She looked weary and sounded disgusted. "I'm sure you're aware of attorney-client privilege."

"We are," Richard answered, his voice a trifle sharp. "However, I don't think that *you* are aware your former client kidnapped my fiancée's twins yesterday."

"Allegations like that..."

Richard flipped open his own phone and showed her the forwarded text message.

"Admittedly, he wasn't kind enough to send his thumb print or signature, but we know it's

Luthor. He's the only person with enough of a grudge to take it out on children. *Children*, Ms. Smith-Bennett. They just turned six this month. And their favorite presents - an iguana and a ferret, God help my uncle - are pining for them."

The woman bit her lip, and for some reason glanced at Lana. "I'm sorry ... this must be very stressful for you."

Lana caught on before Richard did. Rather than deny the attorney's assumption, she leaned forward and caught the blonde woman's gaze demandingly. "Unless you have children, you have *no* idea. If you know anything that might help us find them ... please."

Her gaze, trapped between professionalism and ethics, shifted between the two of them. Richard held his phone out. "Read the message. He's not kidding - my fiancée has dealt with him in the past, and she'll tell you he's perfectly capable of such a thing."

"I don't need to tell you, do I?" Lana said shrewdly, watching Ms. Smith-Bennett's face go pale as she read the part about returning the twins in pieces. "You already know. That's why you quit the firm. That's why you do so much pro-bono work now, isn't it? Trying to atone?"

"You know as well as we do that Luthor's guilty of murder, at the very least," Richard chimed in. "Prison didn't rehabilitate him; if anything it made him *worse*. You couldn't go on aiding a psychopath, and now you're trying to expiate your guilt for your part in setting him free, aren't you?"

Karla Smith-Bennett suddenly rose from her chair, turning her back on them both and pacing to the window. Her voice was taut when she replied, "If I help you, I could be disbarred."

Lana touched Richard's wrist lightly; this line belonged to her. "If you don't help us, you could be a party to the murder of two young children. Jason and Kala need you."

The blonde gave a short, bitter laugh. "All those damn lawyer jokes ... sometimes I wish I was as self-interested as they portray us. You're right - I'd rather lose my license and wash dishes for a living than have this on my conscience. Fine." She came back to her desk and sat down, defeated. "I'll tell you everything I know."

Lois was pacing, twiddling a pen instead of raking her fingers through her hair. Nothing Clark said could calm her at this point. Truth be told, he was anxious, too. This was their best chance at a lead...

Ms. MacKenzie came back out with an apologetic air. "I'm so sorry. My manager says I can't track that down for you. It's against the law..."

"**What?!**" Lois began, but Clark saw the look on the woman's face and caught Lois' wrist tightly. Her dark head whipped around, and she glared at him in outrage.

"Is there any way you can help us, Ms. MacKenzie?" he asked softly ... very softly.

She gave a slight nod, nearly imperceptible. "I'm afraid not. But I have your mobile number, Ms. Lane, and if I can get an authorization from the police department I'll be glad to call you with that information."

Still hanging on to Lois, and ignoring the look she was giving him, Clark replied, "Thank you very much for your help, Ms. MacKenzie. We'll have our contact in the police department call your manager directly. When would be a good time?"

"He's on-duty until eight o'clock," the representative told him, a glimmer of relief in her eyes. "However, he takes lunch around five-thirty, so I wouldn't call between then and six-thirty."

"Thanks again, ma'am," Clark told her, and hustled Lois outside.

She was still blinded by fury. "Dammit, Clark, I do *not* want Maggie calling here..."

"She won't have to," Clark murmured, practically pulling Lois to the curb where she had left Richard's car. "She'll call us when her boss goes to lunch."

Lois blinked at him, and felt extremely sheepish. "Clark..."

"You're wound tight," he said, giving her a small smile. "C'mon, let's see what Perry and Jimmy have found for us."

Before going around to the driver's side, Lois stood on tiptoe and kissed Clark's cheek briefly. "Thanks. You've always kept a cooler head than me."

Clark actually blushed. A compliment, a kiss on the cheek, and the sight of her in jeans - to which he *still* had not adjusted - were enough to render him speechless as Lois fished the spare key to the Saab out of her purse.

Just as she was putting it into the lock, her cell phone rang. Lois tried to grab it, nearly dropped the keys, got the phone out and nearly dropped the purse, started to fumble in her haste - and Clark was suddenly by her side, catching the purse in one hand and the phone in the other. Since it was on the third ring, he flipped it open and said brusquely, "Kent."

"Hey, Clark," Toby Raines said, her normal cheerful sarcasm subdued by the circumstances. "I see you've signed up as Lane's secretary?"

Lois could hear her voice, and snorted derisively as she unlocked the car. Toby continued without waiting for an answer, "I've got a live one for you, I hope."

"Go on," Clark said. He didn't need a note pad - his memory was keen enough.

"Way back when Gertrude Vanderworth's husband was alive, they owned a vacation house in Nantucket."

"We found that in the tax rolls; it was sold last year," Clark told her.

"Aha, the house was, but what about the *land*?" Toby said. The phone started to beep as she continued, and Clark ignored it. "We've got a notation in our files about a sizeable acreage somewhere in the Cape Cod area. In fact, the reporter who worked this story thought the Vanderworths might own a whole island. One of the smaller ones, sure, but still..."

"Toby, you're a lifesaver," Clark said. "Any idea *where* exactly the island is?"

His tone and his words made Lois snap to attention, holding the door partly open and staring hard at him. Toby sighed in aggravation. "Unfortunately, no. My guess would be somewhere in Buzzard's Bay. The Elizabeth Islands are mostly privately owned, so it wouldn't surprise me if some of the others are too."

"It's good enough for me," Clark said. "We may have a little, um, help on this one, so we can search a wide area."

"Caped help? Good deal," Toby said. "I'll keep looking, but that sounds like your best bet."

"Thanks, Toby," Clark said. "We'll be in touch." She hung up, and he turned to Lois. "The Vanderworths may own an island north of the Vineyard, somewhere in Buzzard's Bay."

"Let's go," Lois said. "That's about six hours by car, so we'd better fly."

As Clark got in the passenger side, he said, "I'll get us there, but you'd better leave the car at the airport to prevent questions. It's only a forty-five minute ride..."

"Fifteen," Lois said dryly as she revved the engine and looked at the traffic. "Twenty, tops. Buckle up, Kal-El."

"Oh, dear," Clark muttered, as she made the 'born from jets' brand motto live up to its name.

"Dammit," Richard growled, flipping the phone closed. "She never answers the bloody phone."

Lana, in the co-pilot's seat beside him, eyed the instrument panel warily. "Richard, are you sure it's a good idea for us to just fly out?"

"She's with Clark," he replied, flipping a sequence of switches and knobs with familiar swiftness. "They're probably chasing after their own lead by now. I left her a voicemail and I called Perry to update him; that's the best we can do. Here, put on a headset."

Lana settled the large earphones delicately, and her voice came over the mic as Richard started the seaplane's twin engines. "I just hope they're not after the same lead as us."

His reply crackled with static as he taxied out onto Hobb's Bay. "Probably not. The land north of Mackinac Island was never officially owned by the Vanderworths, but Luthor definitely knows it's there."

Lana had been half listening to him and half bracing herself against the bumpy acceleration the waves caused. When Richard pulled back on the yoke and the nose of the seaplane began to rise, however, she was silenced by the immediacy of this flight. Nothing like a big jet, where everything was smooth and gentle... The designer's nails clenched in the leather-covered seat, and her eyes widened.

Breakfast was long over, lunch too, but Brutus came back with the twins' dinner. He'd somehow managed to make burritos for them, and Kala and Jason were overjoyed. The last of their reserve seemed to have dissolved, and Jason was more than happy to sit beside the big man and go through his repertoire of songs. Brutus even managed to teach him a new tune, *Chopsticks*.

Kala was getting a little bit bored, though, and she wandered over to the couches across the room to draw. Brutus had also managed to sneak some copier paper and colored pens in for them - not the best artistic materials, but they'd made do with all kinds of office supplies at the *Planet* before.

Jason had nearly gotten the new song perfect, and Brutus patted his shoulder. "Good work, Jason. You're a natural; you pick this stuff up way faster than me."

"Thanks," he replied, beaming. Of course, the distraction made him miss a note, and Jason scowled as he started over.

Brutus just chuckled. "You work on that for a minute, okay? Let me see how your sister's doing."

At first Jason watched him sitting beside Kala, the pair of them leaning over her drawing. But then the little boy got caught up in the music, trying to make the notes perfect. He was getting really good at it; pretty soon he'd be almost as good as he was with *Heart and Soul*.

The first hint Jason had of trouble was Kala's voice rising shrilly. "*No!*" she shouted, leaping off the couch, but Brutus had hold of her wrist and she couldn't leap far. "*Lemme go!*"

Jason stopped playing, standing up to see what was happening. His eyes felt like they were bulging out of his head, and his breath started to whistle in his throat. Why was Brutus, who had been so nice, suddenly holding Kala's arm so tightly? He was telling her, "Shh, shh, it's okay, it's just a game, don't yell..." Jason didn't like it; didn't like the way Brutus was bending over his sister, didn't like to see Kala throwing her whole weight against his grip on her wrist.

"Hey, it's all right, hush now," Brutus said, and Kala kicked him in the shin, hard.

At nearly the same moment she brought her little fist down on the hand that held her

opposite wrist and Brutus's grip loosened enough for her to eel away and run, still yelling.
"Don' touch me! Don't you ever touch me!"

Brutus followed, and now he was scary-quick, Jason's chest tight, seeing the large man's powerful hand clamp down over Kala's face. Her eyes wild, fighting for air, Brutus holding her arm and shushing her, but his hand covering her mouth so she couldn't breathe, and Jason's heart thumping loudly, his little hands squeezing down on the piano, squeezing...

Over the roar of his own pulse, Jason heard a few faint pops, the source of which he couldn't trace. His vision was growing dark from lack of oxygen, his throat closed in terror. Kala tried to scream, but her voice was muffled, her eyes so full of fear...

Echoes from the recent past. Kala's voice: *I won't let anybody take my brother away. Even if you are a boogerhead.* And Jason's own: *I love you, too, Kala. I'll never let anyone take you away from me either.*

Nobody hurts my sister! With that thought renewing his determination, Jason managed to take a noisy, rasping breath.

Brutus turned at the sound, just in time to see the piano, airborne...

Come Undone

Who do you need...?

Who do you love...?

When you come undone?

~Duran Duran, 'Come Undone'

"You almost hit me!" Kala wailed, her eyes huge and accusing as she looked from the piano to Jason and back again.

Jason couldn't reply, fumbling his inhaler out of his pocket. But when he held it up to his mouth, he realized his breath was coming freely now. *Weird*. "I didn't hit you!" His voice was wounded.

"But you almost!" Kala replied, still anxious. She ran to her brother's side, and then he could see she was shivering. Jason just hugged her, and they clung together for a long moment.

At last Kala got herself under some kind of control and stepped back. "You saved me," she said quietly.

Jason just nodded. "Did he hurt you?"

Kala looked at her wrist, where the faint red marks of Brutus' hands were fading. "No ... he was scary. Creepy-scary."

"Yeah," Jason replied, looking nervously at the wreck of the piano. At any moment he expected the big man to push it off him and come toward them again.

Just then, the door opened, and the twins leaped back, Jason putting a protective arm around Kala. Kitty stepped in, and gave them her usual too-bright smile...

... which quickly faded. "What happened to the ... piano ... oh." The dark-haired woman saw it now, on the other side of the room, and her eyes grew very wide when she saw Brutus' feet sticking out from underneath it. "How ... what happened?"

"He tried to hurt my sister," Jason said, and his tone carried a hint of belligerence. "I knocked him down."

"Yeah, you certainly did," Kitty muttered. She finally tore her eyes away from the piano, and returning her full attention to the twins, she asked, "Do you two know who your daddy is?" It was a dangerous question to ask, perhaps, but with that display of superhuman strength...

Jason and Kala both looked shocked by it, and they glanced at each other for an instant before answering nervously, "Richard."

Kitty nodded slowly. Any normal kid would've looked puzzled and replied *Daddy*. But these were clearly not normal kids. Just as clearly, they were hiding whatever they knew about their true parentage.

The kids were still eyeing her warily, and she seemed to come to some kind of decision. "You know, you guys were never supposed to be in here. They had a nice room all set up for you, but Grant and Riley were such chickens they dumped you here. How about we go to your room so we can get the piano fixed?"

"Nuh-uh," Jason said sternly. "We're not going anywhere with you."

Kitty looked at their accusatory glares, and asked, "Why not? I'm not like Brutus."

"No, but you're the bad guy's girlfriend," Jason shot back. For once Kala was being quiet, just giving Kitty a withering stare of disappointment and betrayal.

"Wha..." Kitty shut her mouth before she said something foolish. Obviously Brutus had been trying to alienate them from her - why, she could guess, and the thought sickened her. She came toward them, but the kids backed up, and Jason tried to look as menacing as

possible.

Kitty stopped, sighing. "Listen... I didn't know how bad Lex was when we started going out."

"So break up," Kala retorted. "Suzie broke up with two boyfriends in one day, and she's only in second grade."

"Things are complicated for grownups," Kitty told them, unaware that she was echoing Lois' own words to them. "It's kinda like ... why doesn't your Mommy break up with Richard to be with your father?"

Kala bit her lip in sudden realization, and Jason started to nod before catching himself. "Richard *is* our daddy," he said, a little too loudly.

"I mean your father," Kitty said gently. "Superman."

The looks of panic that crossed their faces wounded her, but Kitty just kept her questioning gaze on them. There was no other way a little boy could throw a grand piano, after all. Especially not one as frail as Jason seemed to be.

The strain of the secret was too much for Kala on top of everything else that had happened in the last few minutes. Not only had Brutus scared her, but then Kitty made her realize for the first time that she couldn't have her real father *and* the daddy she loved at the same time. Leaning against Jason's shoulder, she started to snuffle.

He hugged her protectively and cut Kitty a look that could've been Lois in miniature, full of anger and frustration. "Leave us alone - you're *mean*."

"No, no," Kitty tried to soothe. "Listen. I didn't mean to upset you guys. It's just - I can't break up with Lex. He wouldn't let me. Plus we're on a boat and I can't get away. I'd never hurt you."

"Don't believe you." Kala's voice was muffled against Jason's shirt.

"Your mommy knows who has you," Kitty whispered, glancing over her shoulder. If Lex walked in and heard her telling them something like that, she wouldn't have to worry about breaking up with him. "Your mommy's going to come get you. And then Superman will come too and rescue you. Lex thinks he's a lot smarter than he is ... the bad guy doesn't ever get to win, does he?"

Jason looked over at the piano. Brutus hadn't moved, but he really didn't want to be in this room when the big man finally woke up. "Fine. But if you try anything funny..."

"I'd never hurt you," Kitty repeated, shivering a little at the thought of being threatened by a six-year-old with superpowers. She held out her hands, and after a minute, the twins came toward her cautiously.

Kitty took a deep breath of relief. Now all she had to do was get them to the stateroom without anyone seeing them, and *then* tell Lex about the piano.

"Dammit," Richard muttered, glaring at the airport clock. "What are we gonna do now?"

"Richard," Lana said, with a little force in her words. "You can't fly anymore today - you're over the amount of time you can legally - *safely* - pilot the plane. *Furthermore*, you're exhausted. We have to stop for the night."

"I know, but Perry says Lois is running a lead out toward Buzzard's Bay in Massachusetts. If she called to check in with him, then she reserved us rooms out there, and I've got no way to get there without leaving the seaplane here." His voice was full of frustration, and he paced the lobby of the private airport incessantly.

"I can cancel my room," Lana said. "Or heck, I'll pay for it. Whatever. This was a bust,

but it needed to be checked out. We'll meet Lois and Clark there tomorrow, and we can survey from the air while they cover surface streets."

Richard smacked his palm down on the table. "Dammit! Lana, I didn't want the kids to spend another night away from us!"

Lana caught his wrist, held it until he turned to face her. "Richard, we're going to get them back. There's just nothing else we can do tonight, okay? C'mon, let's get a cab. Gotham's only a half-hour away."

"Gotham?" His blue eyes were faintly puzzled, still troubled by his worries over the kids.

"Gotham City," Lana explained patiently. "Where I have an apartment and a sleeper sofa. I don't trust you to stay in some hotel and actually *sleep*."

Richard's eyebrows lifted in surprise. He'd never expected Lana to invite him home ... even if she *was* prominently mentioning the sofa. "Lana..."

"Oh, knock it off, Richard," she said. "The way you are now, *someone* has to be around to slip *you* a Mickey."

A little chagrined, Richard finally allowed himself a chuckle. What was he worrying about, anyway? Lana probably wasn't interested in him as anything more than a friend, no matter what he tried to read into her intentions. "All right. Just let me try Lois' cell phone one more time, so she at least knows where we are." Not that he would mention just where they would stay tonight...

Lois flipped her phone shut and sighed heavily. "Isn't that fantastic," she muttered.

"What?" Clark was watching the weather; a cold front was moving through the area, hampering their search with high winds and icy rain.

"Richard can't fly out to meet us tonight. After we choreographed everything through Perry, he's stuck out somewhere near Gotham City and can't fly until morning. Worse, they didn't find anything in the lake islands."

"Another red herring," Clark said glumly. "Luthor's got more layers than an onion. And every one smells as pungent."

Lois couldn't help chuckling tiredly. "Well, I guess we can go look at another of the islands before we turn in. There's still time..." Her voice trailed off into a forcibly stifled yawn, and Clark touched her shoulder.

"Lois, you need some rest. C'mon, let's go to the hotel."

"This will be their second night in *his* clutches," she whispered in wounded frustration. This was tearing her apart, the not knowing, the instinctive fear for them. "I can't. I have to keep looking. There might be something we missed..."

So very gently, Clark caught her chin and made her look at him. "Lois, I'll keep looking. I don't need sleep, really, as long as I can get sunlight. You have to get some rest."

"I slept last night," Lois began, and her voice trailed off into another yawn that she couldn't hide. Clark just looked at her steadily, and in the face of her body's betrayal, she had to relent and drive to the hotel. But when she parked the rented car, she turned to Clark and said with guilty misery, "I want them home. I *need* them home. God, Kal-El..."

Clark squeezed her shoulder, his blue eyes as melancholy as hers. "We'll get them home, Lois. I swear it." Nodding, she got out of the rented car and grabbed the overnight bag she had hastily packed that morning, then headed for the hotel they'd reserved earlier in the day.

Lois walked into the lobby of the Hilton Garden Inn with none of her usual sense of purpose, exhaustion weighing heavily on her even as she fought to keep her eyes open. The

dreary overcast day had been as dark and threatening as her emotions, as her outlook. Clark followed her, with more energy but the same weary look. Frustration had gnawed at both of them all day, and the news about Richard being stuck in the lakes region did nothing for their morale. The thought tolled through both their minds: *Another night away from home. Another day trapped somewhere with Luthor.*

Silence reigned as they checked in and then took the elevator up to their floor. Lois trudged to her door and flicked the key card through the little scanner, but there was no welcoming click of the door unlocking, just a flashing red light. "Damn," she muttered, and tried it again a little slower. Still nothing. Maybe it was too slow ... nope. "Goddamn piece of..."

Clark reached around her, took the card, reversed it, and scanned it. The green light blinked and the lock clicked open. "Dammit," Lois groaned, leaning back slightly against his chest to look up at him. "I hate you."

"No, you don't," he said gently, opening the door for her. "You sure you're going to be okay by yourself?"

"As long as I can remember not to stick quarters in the electrical outlets, Kal-El, I'll be fine," Lois answered in a quiet but cranky tone not too unlike Kala's after a long day. "And I swear I won't play with the plastic garment bag in the closet that has 'DANGER OF SUFFOCATION - NOT A TOY' printed on it."

"Okay, okay. I just worry about you. This is ... it's hard on all of us, but you most of all."

"I'll be fine; I'm a big girl," Lois told him, trying to keep her mind straight enough to not start bawling yet again. The twins needed her to be strong, not ringing her hands like a hysterical mother. The only thing that was keeping her from continuing the search even now was the fact that the man beside her was clucking at her like a mother hen - and would be going out again to look for them. Moving forward to hold the door for herself, she arched an eyebrow as she glanced up at him again. The exhaustion she had denied was starting to take its toll, and his concerned look was starting to get on her nerves. She'd gotten along without him for more than six years; she could survive one night alone. "You're not going to have stay in here to keep guard, or keep me distracted, so don't get any ideas."

He looked down at her, dark eyebrows raised. "That was the furthest thing from my mind. Who do you not trust, Lois? Me or you?"

In spite of her fear for her children, the deep-down truth of his statement hit a little too close to home. There had not been a moment the entire day that she hadn't felt their attraction stronger than ever and knew that the steel walls she had built were in ruins. That she hadn't just wanted to break down and just confess all...

Calling herself a fool, her hazel eyes narrowed. "Doesn't matter. I'm going to take a bath." She seemed to think on that for a moment before almost teasingly adding, with a tiny smile, "And no x-ray vision or I'll kick your butt."

"Lois!" Clark realized how tired she was with that remark; her smart-aleck attitude had been wired directly to her mouth, without passing through the brain first. "Anyway, I'm not going to my room yet. One more flyover, remember."

"Yeah, you promised, despite the rain. Maybe there will be something else, anything else. When you get back, come in and tell me what you find." Lois held the door open and handed him her key card.

"I think you'd better just go to sleep," Clark said, trying to refuse the key, but Lois caught him with that steely glare.

"If you find anything - *anything* - or nothing at all, I want to know," she said, rallying her strength. Her will had always been indomitable, and determined as she was now, the fatigue barely showed. "And when I hear you come in without coming over here, which I *will*, I'll find a way to get over to your room. *I mean it*. I want to know the minute you find something out. Understood?"

"All right, Lois, I'll let you know," he said gently. "Try to get some rest, okay?" Impulsively, he hugged her tight to his chest and rested his cheek on her hair.

For an instant, she stiffened in surprise, and then her resistance melted. Lois all but slumped against him, all of the snappishness drained from her, only fatigue in its wake. This had been something she had needed for hours now, something no one else had seemed to think mattered. She sighed heavily, gratefully, luxuriating in the relief of finally letting down her façade. Unable to help it after all this time, Lois simply let herself surrender to the one she had always been safest with and snuggled closer with the relief of simply being able to finally do so. "I'm starting to worry..." she whispered with a tone of bitter amusement.

"Lois, we'll find them," he murmured, trying to envelop her in his warmth and strength. She was so small, so fragile, and it was only when she was in his arms that he remembered it. *She's practically a force of nature when she's angry, but like this... I'd give anything to protect her. Anything.* "I promise we'll rescue them."

"Good," she said softly against the fabric of his shirt, "because you can't lie to me... If you say we'll get them back ... has to be true..." For the second time in as many days, she was struck with how absolutely right it felt to be so close to him. *Home. It feels like home.*

There was no reply, no words for how much he treasured her renewed faith in him. All he could do was hold her, letting his arms around her waist and his heart beating beneath her ear speak for him.

After a long moment, Lois forced herself to pull away and headed into her hotel room reluctantly. Just before she stepped over the threshold, their eyes met long enough for her to say softly, "Thank you. For being here ... for me..." Her gaze, so full of mixed emotions, held his for a heartbeat longer before she slipped through the doorway, closing it behind her.

Clark watched her go, and then went into his own room to change. As he flew off the balcony, he prayed as he had been praying for the last two days: *Please, let me find them. Let me find the twins safe and sound. Let them still be okay.*

Kitty rarely came into the galley when the men were playing cards, so her appearance today drew notice. She didn't look at them, however; her eyes were only for Lex, in the formal dining room just off the kitchen. "We had a problem," Kitty told him, "but I handled it."

Grant snorted, and Riley guffawed, but Lex just turned to look up at her, his eyes somehow flat and reptilian. "What kind of problem?" His voice was silky and dangerous.

"Brutus," she replied succinctly. "I don't know what he was doing around the kids all the time, but it wasn't good. He pushed them too far, and one of them threw the piano at him."

"Threw the piano?" Lex repeated, his eyebrows rising. Kitty could almost see the gears in his mind suddenly whirring to new speed as he came to the galley door.

"Told him they were vicious," Riley said under his breath. Louder, he continued, "Boss, what do you wanna do?"

Kitty was faster. "*You* don't have to do anything," she said with mock sweetness. "I already moved the incredibly dangerous *six-year-olds* into the room they were *supposed* to be in all along. They're fine, so you brutes don't have to go dragging them around and scaring

them all over again, and getting someone else killed."

"Thank you, Katherine," Lex said. "That was very neatly done. Stanford, the surveillance equipment is in place?"

"Yes, sir," he replied.

"Excellent," Lex said. "Grant, Riley, I want Brutus' body removed. Just put him overboard. The piano too - I doubt it's repairable."

The two men were a bit nonplussed, and glanced at each other. At last Grant said cautiously, "That's it? Just chuck Brutus over the side?"

"You can have a funeral service if you want," Lex said sarcastically. His dark eyes bored into the men's before he added, "Of course, you do realize *why* they killed him, don't you? He never told anyone why he was sentenced, never complained about the lack of women in Nevada. I suppose we know why, now. Throw him to the sharks, gentlemen. They're not so choosy."

Richard was supremely uncomfortable in Lana's house. The sofa he was lying on wasn't the problem, nor were the cozy furnishings in the room. No, the two things that kept him staring at the ceiling long past the hour when he should've been asleep were both troublesome thoughts.

First, the twins. For the past three years, he had been there for them most nights, tucking them in, talking to them, and reading them stories. True, he'd shared that time with Lois, but now the twins didn't have either of them. The thought of Jason and Kala, alone somewhere with only each other for comfort, gnawed at the back of Richard's brain.

The other thought that simply would not go away, no matter how hard he tried to banish it, was a comparison of Lois and Lana. As often as Richard told himself it wasn't fair to either woman, his mind kept returning to the contrast between them. Under pressure, Lois became tense and tended to lash out. Anytime she felt herself to be under attack, she fought back - and she generally won out of sheer stubborn refusal to accept defeat. Lana, on the other, would ignore anything short of a physical attack. She seemed to personify the playground advice so many parents gave their children: Don't stoop to their level.

Lana was gracious where Lois was abrasive, and yet both of them always seemed to emerge the victor of any situation. Contemplating the vast differences that led to such similar superiority, Richard still couldn't fall asleep.

And now it seemed he wasn't the only one. A moving shadow caught his eye, and Richard sat up to see Lana standing in the hallway in a long bathrobe, as if his guilty thoughts had somehow conjured her. She was completely covered from neck to ankles, but the tightly-belted robe still followed her curves, and Richard's traitorous mind seized on the image. He blushed in spite of himself, thinking, *Idiot, it's not like she can read your mind. Quit acting like teenage boy caught peering into his neighbor's windows with binoculars!*

Lana looked at him silently for a moment, her auburn hair merely dark in the dimness. "Having trouble sleeping?" she quietly asked at last.

"Yeah," Richard replied, his voice as hushed as hers. *Stop being a fool. You're just trying to distract yourself from the real problem. She's not at all interested in you...*

"Me too," Lana said, and chuckled softly. "Let me see if I can do something about that, hmm?"

Richard's eyes widened as she walked toward him and past the couch, leaving a trail of some light, floral scent in her wake. Half unable to believe what she'd just said, he watched her

disappear through the door.

After a moment he tossed the covers aside, his expression dazed, and stood up. In only an undershirt and boxers Richard padded after Lana, wondering if this were some kind of dream.

Lois moved with a deliberate slowness born of despair and the knowledge that, in her exhausted state, she could easily do something forgetful. Like climb into the bath with her blouse on - she'd done that once, after staying up for sixty hours chasing a story. But she soon sank into the comforting embrace of the hot water, immersing herself up to her chin and letting her hands fall to her sides.

Something went *clink* faintly. After thinking about it for a moment, Lois realized the sound was her engagement ring hitting the porcelain. Hot water with lavender bath oil in it would soon make the ring slide off her finger, so she took it off and set it beside the tub. Then she slid back into the water until only her eyes and nose were above it, and tried to clear her mind of everything.

It wasn't working. As tired as she was, her mind was still spinning crazily, running on fumes and fear. Where were the twins right now? Who was giving them their nightly bath, or were they being forced to endure grime along with captivity? Had they had dinner tonight? Had anyone spoken kindly to them since they'd been taken? Were they scared, right now, had that bastard left them in the dark?

The water gradually became saltier as Lois' silent tears slipped from her eyes. *I can't do this. I need to sleep; I have to be rested tomorrow.* In the makeup bag beside the bathtub were several essentials of Lois' life, and she reached for the Tylenol PM. Swallowing two pills dry, Lois set about getting herself cleaned up. No sense in soaking now that she had taken the drugs. She knew from experience that in about half an hour, she'd be totally unconscious and stay that way until dawn. Or until something woke her, preferably Clark telling her that he'd found the twins and accidentally dropped Luthor onto a sidewalk from two thousand feet.

When Lois finally slid between the sheets, her mind had gone pleasantly foggy. All the things she worried about seemed to be at a distance, and she closed her eyes gratefully, ready to sink into slumber. She was falling into a deep black well, letting sleep rise up and close over her, sweet respite...

Normally, she remained in that state until morning. But this time her nerves were still wired, and she began to rise toward awareness. For a long time she hovered in blessed darkness, and then after several hours she started to dream...

...the silver material was cool and smooth against her skin, like the finest silk and yet not like it. He was beside her, so warm, and she curled closer to him, the circular design of the bed making it easier for them to cuddle in the center of it. Kal-El, she was finally lying beside Kal-El with no more secrets between them, no more hesitation. Lois sighed softly and burrowed closer. In some way, she knew this for a dream, a memory more than six years old, but she let it comfort her anyway. Drifting as she'd drifted that morning, she felt peaceful and content and loved as she never had before. Her sleep deepened...

...he moved beside her, tucking the sheets around her. It was cool in the Fortress, not cold but cool, and even with his warm body beside her she would've been uncomfortable in just the thin nightgown. How sweet of him to do that...

...his lips brushed her forehead once. So brief a touch, and yet her desire woke purring like a sleepy cat. Lois turned her face up to his, caught his lips with her own, and kissed him with all of her adoration and satisfaction. Kal-El kissed her back softly...

...Lois ran her fingers into his thick dark hair, pulling him down closer to her. His very mouth tasted faintly sweet - was there nothing about him that wasn't perfect? She smiled against his lips, thinking, *No, of course not, he's always been breathtaking*, and kissed him again. And pulled his glasses off, tossed them aside, and kissed him again. And again...

...Kal-El drew back from her slightly, and Lois rose up with him, letting the sheets slide down around her. Her arms around his neck, his hands on her shoulders, even that simple touch making her skin tingle. Now he was sitting up on the edge of the bed, running a hand down her back, and she could feel his fingertips trace each vertebra...

...Murmuring wordlessly, Lois slipped free of the sheets and into his lap. He gasped, and she took advantage of it to deepen their kiss. Wonderful, it was as amazing as kisses in dreams should be, and a deep part of her grieved that this was only a dream, that she would wake alone. The rest of her concentrated on melting into him, her skin finally as hot as his, knowing that her nightgown was riding up her thighs and not caring. Only thin satin panties under it, but no matter. Let him see, let him touch, let him lift her up as he'd done six years ago and kiss the hollow of her hip...

...Lois drew back from the kiss to catch her breath, and started to unbutton his shirt, purring as his bare skin came into view. He caught her hands, his blue eyes serious, and murmured, "Lois, no." She silenced him with another kiss and took his hand and placed it on her breast, letting him feel her heart beating so fast and her nipple rising for him...

...Moaning into his mouth because oh, God, she missed that so much, arching her body against him, so what if this's a dream it's a good one so let it be. He tried to whisper, "We can't," and she ground her hips against him and his hand caressed her breast and she moaned again, feeling her pulse beat between her thighs that were wrapped around his waist now...

...His voice so husky, "Lois, wait... Don't, Lois, we shouldn't..." and no matter what he said, she knew he wanted her, no way not to know given where she was sitting. Ignoring her waking life, she wanted this moment for her own, if she could have him only in dreams then by God she would have him here...

...Moving her body against him seductively, the gown almost up to her hips. Holding his hand against her breast, she whispered back, "This is *my* dream, Kal-El, things have to happen the way I want in my dreams, it's only fair... Nothing else matters now but the dream, and in my dreams you don't ever say stop..."

"You're not dreaming," his voice so low, the need in it. "Lois, please... We shouldn't... Please, Lois, wake up, this isn't a dream."

Everything stopped as Lois woke up fully.

No silky silver sheets, only white cotton ones. No magnificent Fortress of Solitude, just the Hilton Garden Inn's generic décor. But the man whose lap she was straddling was real, as real as the ache in the pit of her stomach. It was all real, from the kiss, to his hand on her breast, to the feeling of him pressed against her just there. Clark's eyes were wide and his breath was fast, but he hadn't simply picked her up and moved her off of him.

Lois realized then that the damn drugs had made her think she was dreaming; Clark had come in as requested to tell her about his search, and had gotten a whole hell of a lot more than he expected.

She also realized that he was still disconcerted, so much so that he hadn't taken his hand off her breast. For a long instant, she stared at him, full of the knowledge that five little words would bring him to her with no more hesitation, words she'd breathed into his ear six years ago. *Just say it... You can have this, it worked then to conquer his fears and it will work now. Just*

look him in the eyes and whisper "I want you inside me," and you can have him...

No. No matter what the possibility felt like, the reality was that it wasn't worth making Superman an adulterer. He'd tear himself to pieces over the guilt. It wasn't worth betraying Richard like this, either. Even if she knew that things were nearly over between them. But oh dear God how she wanted it ... she was literally trembling with desire...

Lois slithered off his lap, curling herself into a ball with her back at the headboard. Her hazel eyes, so wide she looked almost frightened, never left his, never looked away from the terrible yearning in those blue depths. After a long, breathless moment spent staring at each other, Lois whispered shakily, "I guess it's *still* too late to play hard to get."

That broke the spell slightly, the memories of six years ago close to the surface of both their minds. He laughed a little, running his fingers through his hair nervously. "Yes, well, it's not like you didn't always know how I felt about you," he replied, voice just as unsteady. "Even in that first interview I was grinning like a fool every time I so much as looked at you. And you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

That felt like a knife twisted in her heart. *How can I say no to this? Why am I even trying to deny it to either of us?* Again she cursed herself mentally for having anything resembling a conscience. "I had no idea back then. And... I... I'm sorry, I got a little ... carried away... I was dreaming ... about..."

"I know," he whispered. "I dreamed about it for three years in that damned ship, heading to Krypton. I should've realized then that, even if I had a home waiting for me there, it would never *really* be home without you. Even though I was sick from kryptonite radiation on the trip home, I still dreamed of you. And I never said stop in *my* dreams, either."

Lois had to close her eyes. One more second, looking at him, and she'd lose control of herself entirely. *No more bullshit, Lane. Not when you've come this far.* "Kal-El ... I'm still in love with you. I've always loved you. Angry or not, I've never stopped."

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "Oh, Lois... I love you, too. I had guessed ... hoped ... but you don't know what it means to hear you say that face to face."

"Oh, I know what it means. I remember the first time you said it to me." Their eyes met again for a painfully intense moment that made her again regret her restraint. With a shuddery sigh, Lois pulled herself together, and finally began to say what she'd gradually realized she *had* to tell him. But it was so hard. "Kal-El, the twins..."

"I know. We shouldn't even be thinking like this while they're missing," he said, rerouting his train of thought with visible effort. "No sign yet, Lois. I looked everywhere within a hundred miles of our last lead."

It was on the tip of her tongue to correct him, but she bit it back. *He's got a point. Not now, not here, not like this. Not when we're both still shivering with need for each other. But I have to tell him they're his. He deserves to know now; I was wrong to keep it from him for so long. It doesn't leave me any less frightened of what he'll think or what he'll say, or what his bastard father will do ... but it's time to give up the last of my little secrets.*

"Kal-El," she murmured, biting her lip briefly before finally looking up at him. Her mind was made up. He had to know now. "There's something I have to tell you in the morning."

"Is it something important?" he asked nervously.

"Yes," Lois replied seriously, the look in her still-dark eyes still worried. "Something I probably should've told you a long time ago. But it just...it's been difficult to make the decision. Now's not the best time for either of us, but tomorrow..."

"I'd probably better go," he said huskily. "Before... We both need some rest."

Not like I'm going back to sleep anytime soon, she thought. "Even if it makes me sound even more like a scarlet woman ... does it make you feel any better to know I don't want you to leave?"

Her sad little chuckle was echoed by his own. "Yes and no. We both care about Richard, though. I guess this is the price of being the good guys, huh?"

"I can never claim to be one of those, especially these days," Lois told him with a pained look he completely misunderstood. "And yes, I do ... *care* ... about Richard...but..."

"I know. You're a better person than you think, Lois."

She gave a soft snort of bitter amusement at that. *Would I be an entirely awful person if I said I don't care at all at this moment? That all I want is you? All I ever wanted was you?* The yearning in her eyes was clear when she whispered back, "Actually, to be honest, I feel like I'm being more selfish than ever. And I wish I cared."

He had no reply for that, just a longing look. "Goodnight, Lois," he said as he rose awkwardly to leave.

It seemed like Lois would say something more, but she tore her gaze from him as he left.

After the hotel door closed, Lois sighed. Unable to help herself, she said it again, just to hear the words out loud. "I love you, Kal-El."

Heart and Soul

Be my friend...

Hold me

Wrap me up,

Unfold me...

I am small

And needy,

Warm me up

And breathe me...

~Sia, 'Breathe Me'

Clark leaned against the door of his own hotel room, breathing raggedly. Inwardly, he cursed his eidetic memory for filling his mind with images of Lois, both the long-cherished ones of that night in the Fortress six years ago and the more recent ones of six minutes ago.

My God, all I did was go in to give her an update, he thought, but that wasn't totally accurate. When he'd seen her lying so still, breathing so deeply, he had known almost immediately that she had taken something to help her sleep. There were times when she had come to the office still groggy after taking a dose the previous night, so waking her up should've been impossible.

He shouldn't have counted on it. She looked so beautiful and vulnerable that he couldn't help coming closer, letting his eyes feast on her. Lois, always so fragile in sleep, like a porcelain doll, an exquisite mask of perfection liable to shatter if touched too roughly. But the opposite was really true, and he knew it, but he couldn't help feel protective of her while she slept. So he had tucked the covers more closely around her, and bent to softly kiss her forehead.

And that was when the trouble started.

He could've stopped it then. He knew he was more than strong enough to hold Lois away from him. But it wasn't the strength of his arms in question, rather the strength of his heart. And he was simply too weak not to kiss her, not to respond to her desire.

It would've been both better and worse if he could've let himself think she was expecting Richard. But no, she'd said his name even while she slept. So now it was undeniable, Lois still wanted him, still loved him - for no mere physical lust would make her voice shake like that, make her eyes go so wide with longing and a little fear of her own emotions.

The memories came back, haunting him, rising from every corner of his mind. One night and one morning they'd had, and within that short time an intimacy so total it was almost frightening. He remembered it perfectly, remembered telling her how often he'd wanted to simply reveal everything, especially when he had to sit next to her at work every day and listen to her talk about Superman. Listen to how much she loved him...

Kal-El had trailed off then, realizing just how much he had been eavesdropping on her while he was Clark. Lois had merely smiled at him over the champagne and said, only half-teasing, "I guess it's a little late in the game for me to play hard to get."

That had led to them talking about Clark, and about secrets, and finally she had said, "It's kind of confusing," and he had taken her hand and looked into those amazing eyes and replied, "Not for me it isn't. For the first time in my life, everything's clear."

To see her understanding dawn, to see Lois Lane actually surprised, was priceless. She who had made a hobby of startling people with her boldness was now almost shy of him. And then the hesitancy from both of them, that initial nervousness when he blushed all the way to

the roots of his hair and whispered, "Lois, I've never..."

Thank God, she'd understood. She'd silenced him with a kiss, a gentle one. "It's okay," she'd told him. "Let me."

And he had, letting her set the pace, letting her lead the dance. No other moment in his life was as sharply etched in his memory as watching her unzip the back of the dress and let it slide down off her shoulders, revealing the delicate silk slip underneath, seeing her look at him so very seriously as he drew in his breath with wonder. At a loss for words, he'd slid one arm around her, pulled her close, and she had deftly guided his other hand to cup the swell of her breast...

Lois' mind had drifted to the same place as his, lying in bed staring at the ceiling, listening to the patter of the storm that had finally begun. It had been threatening all day, but only now had decided to make good on its promise. Every nerve twanged, her body still alive with need, as if with lightning running through her veins. And it didn't help that this tonight - which she refused to think clearly about - was bringing back her once-lost memories in even clearer detail.

Like the way his eyes had widened, the first time he'd touched her, his hands so warm, Lois herself so very conscious of the dress lying puddled on the floor beneath her. Even now, she wondered what she had been thinking, wearing blue chiffon when she could have worn anything else for him. She had been worried, wondering if she looked good enough, but the hungry rapture on his face convinced her. Lois had tried to ignore the way her hand shook as she had taken the clip out of her hair, letting the dark length of it fall past her shoulders. And all the while a little voice in the back of her mind whispered, *The first, you're the first, he will remember this forever so stop mooning like a silly teenage girl! For one time in your life you can be a goddess, so get a hold of yourself. Forget about being in awe of him for once and let him just be a man. Show him what love is ... show him how much you love him.*

He'd been so gentle, so scared of hurting her, his kisses were like whispers on her skin. She had been more bold to reassure him, running her nails over the perfect muscles of his back, letting him feel the hint of her teeth when she kissed his neck. Just getting the clothes off had been an excruciating torment, her pulse beating so hard it made her ears ring when all that was left to remove were her thin slip and his pants.

Both of us were as scared and awkward as a couple of schoolkids in the back seat of Dad's car, she thought. Me, with my sophisticated views of love and sex, reduced to wishing I could turn off the lights before he saw me - gasp! - naked. Like he didn't have x-ray vision, like he hadn't taken a peek inside my lungs before. He could have seen me naked any time he wanted.

But Lois had to admit the results were a lot better than the teenage fumbblings she'd experienced and he had completely missed. He had been a quick learner, oh yes indeed...

At the first, every time Lois had breathed in sharply he had thought he'd hurt her. His powers were supposed to be gone, but what if they weren't *entirely* gone? Besides, she was so much smaller than him, so much more delicate. He had shivered in fear of hurting her with each sudden sound, in spite of her reassurance, until she had spoken huskily into his ear and pleaded that he never stop. *Pleaded.*

Until that moment he had never dreamed of Lois sounding so needy, had never imagined she could plead for anything... Of course, since then the image of her face haunted by desire,

the sound of her voice gone molten with it, were branded into his memory.

I want you inside me...

The surprise he'd felt when she slipped onto his lap, the shock of actually... For a moment sensation had overridden all else, he even forgot to be afraid when she cried out sharply and clenched her nails in his skin. And then, holding her while she trembled, that mysterious fey look in her darkened eyes, and Lois had whispered so huskily, "Trust me, that didn't hurt me." He'd had no words then, just kissed her, let his mouth and his hands speak of his desire for her. It had been the most overwhelming pleasure of his life for a minute or two, quickly surpassed when she started to move against him...

He shuddered, pressing his palms against the wall, and willed the memory away. *I can't think about this, if I do I'll wind up walking right back into her room, and God only knows what will happen. I have to get my mind off this...*

Richard stopped in the kitchen doorway, perplexed. Reality and his half-hopeful expectation simply didn't jibe. He'd followed the lovely redhead assuming ... what, really? Now he felt like a fool.

Lana looked up at him with a knowing smirk, stirring a saucepan of milk on the stovetop. "Richard, I'm not Lois," she said quietly. No hint of rancor in her tone, but her point was made.

Richard winced. No, she wasn't Lois. If Lois had tossed off a line about helping him sleep, she surely wouldn't mean a cup of warm milk. And furthermore, Lana *also* wasn't Lois in that she was not his fiancée, and he had no right to make such presumptions. "Lana..."

"Hush. It's late, you're exhausted, I'm not exactly bright-eyed myself," she told him. "I just wanted to let you know ... things aren't any different just because I invited you into my apartment. To *sleep*. On the *couch*."

"Okay, point made," Richard muttered. "I'm sorry, all right? I just... You're right, it's late. I'm sorry I assumed ... you've got no reason to be interested in me..."

"It *must* be late," Lana said casually, tipping a few drops of vanilla extract into the milk. "Because I know you're not normally this ... this *unobservant*."

He looked blankly at her, wondering what the hell was going through her mind.

Sea-green eyes met his, the frank honesty in them incredibly attractive - and just a little frightening. "Richard, I *am* interested in you. *But* you're engaged to Lois. The fact that she's possessive and licensed to carry a gun means *nothing* next to the simple *wrongness* of trying to steal someone else's man! Furthermore, even if you were single, we barely *know* each other. I don't even kiss on the first date, Richard - and we aren't even *close* to dating."

"I know that," he replied earnestly. "Lana, I don't want you to think I'm just some kind of unfaithful, lecherous..."

"Oh, faithful and pure-minded, parading around my house in your underwear?" Lana had to bite her lip to keep from smiling.

Richard looked down. "Boxers and a t-shirt!" he protested.

"Underwear, Richard. If a woman walked around the house that way, it'd be considered obscene."

Unfortunately, Richard had a very visual imagination. "That's not obscene, that's sexy."

"On you it's obscene," Lana replied sweetly, and now the smile couldn't be hidden any longer.

"That was cold," Richard complained, trying to suck in an already flat and toned stomach.

"This is warm," Lana shot back, pouring a mug of milk and handing it to him. "Now drink

up and go to bed. To the *couch*. We have to get up early."

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered, sipping the hot, sweetened drink as Lana poured one for herself.

For a moment silence reigned between them, each alone with their own thoughts and fears. Richard wondered about the twins, about Lois - alone somewhere with Clark, who was probably the father of her children - and about the woman beside him. Lana worried that she had protested too much - did Richard guess how much she already cared for him, how his dark blue eyes sent chills down her spine?

With both of them so preoccupied, it was no surprise what happened next. Richard finished the cup of milk first and reached around Lana to set it in the sink. She drained the last sip only a second later than he had, and the way he leaned into her personal space unnerved her by how much she welcomed it. So she stole a glance at his face as she started to put her own mug in the sink, and knocked it against the counter by accident, jarring it from her grasp.

Lana gasped, already imagining the ceramic in shards on the floor. But even this late, Richard had a pilot's sharp reflexes. He caught the falling cup before it could shatter, but then he was face to face with Lana from only inches away.

One solemn moment looking into each other's eyes, one chance to back down. Neither did. Before she was even totally aware of what she was doing, Lana kissed him. Richard slipped one arm around her waist and kissed her back.

It was not the simple little brush of lips they'd both imagined. This was passion, sudden and enveloping and utterly in disregard of propriety. Lana ran her fingers into his hair and delighting in the sweetest kiss she'd had in a long, long time. Richard reveled in the tenderness of it, the slowness. It had been some time since he'd had a kiss that wasn't just a brief brush of lips or a fiercely-burning expression of momentary lust.

All good things must come to an end, and it was Lana who pulled away, breathless. "Richard..."

"I know," he breathed, and kissed her forehead once. "But later ... after all this is settled..."

"Maybe," she replied, firmly closing the door on that topic. "Right now we have more to worry about."

"Yeah, we do," Richard sighed, and then with the ghost of grin added, "So much for not kissing on the first date, Ms. Lang."

The slap surprised him, though she didn't hit him hard, just enough force to show him his error. "*Good night*, Richard," Lana said with a hint of frost. "I'm going to my room - and locking the door. I'll see you at 5 AM." With that, she turned on her heel and left.

Looking - and feeling - like an errant schoolboy, Richard slunk back to the couch, thinking, *What the hell am I doing?*

And some deep, uncensored part of his brain caught a glimpse of Lana in the hallway, and replied, *Not what you **want** to be doing...*

"I'm going to sleep," Richard muttered, dropping onto the couch and pulling the pillow over his head.

Lois was still not in control of her own mind, her defenses swamped by Tylenol PM and aching need. She'd curled herself into a ball with her face buried in the pillow, trying to muffle her pleading whimpers. *Why the **hell** did I send him away? He's all I want right now, all I ever wanted, all those sensible reasons we can't be together look so flimsy measured against this.*

And if was only that, the way we fit together perfectly, maybe I could forget all of this again somehow. Could shrug it off. But looking into his eyes that night, seeing the way he watched me with nothing but stark emotions. It felt like a dream to me then, too, from the moment I pushed things farther. From the moment I felt him move.

There were no words for the firestorm that rained down on her then, the feeling of reality and fantasy blurring as they moved so closely together, the intimate dance between them reaching its zenith as she had quickened her pace, her cheek rested against his hair. He was here, he was with her. He had chosen *her*. Had given up all just for the sake of being *hers*.

Her breath was coming in throaty whimpers now, his just as harsh, the sensations almost painful in their intensity. She just couldn't stop touching him, reassuring herself that he wouldn't disappear abruptly to leave her alone in her lonely bed with yet another dream to torment her. Until that moment her mind was still somewhat rational. Then he was caressing her breasts more boldly, the sensitive skin of her belly, and she was lost with a husky wordless murmur of need. The pleasure was almost painful, nerve endings afire.

Starting to gain surety that he wouldn't hurt her, she felt him catch her hips, responding to her arches with tentative thrusts of his own, a slow and irresistible rhythm that he even now tempered. Lois bit back a moan as she felt him deep inside, his movements rocking her within her, his hands on her hips so careful but with a degree of possessiveness she had only hoped for.

Her arms slipping around his neck in a gesture all too familiar to their flights, her cheeks and chest flushing as the intensity between them rose, Lois did something she had never done with a lover before in her life. As the tension built higher, the fire stronger every second they moved together, the urge was too strong, and as the first shivers ran through her, Lois raised her head. Wide eyes caught his and stayed riveted to their stormy cerulean depths as he moved inside her, their connection even more immediate and intimate. And in a more profound way than ever before between them, Lois fell. Plummeting in free-fall. Only this time it was with vulnerable and desperate cries of pleasure, although his arms were there to catch her as they had always been.

And in the present, she was alone in her room, with her face turned into the pillow to muffle her sounds while the storm outside her window raged. As the world exploded around her, Lois ignored the tears slipping down her cheeks. In her memories, she lay against his chest as his arms came up around her, holding her tightly. Nuzzling closer, she had felt her heart seize when he whispered *I love you* against her ear. Dear God, she loved him, too, she thought as her memories began to blur, raising the fire lit within her even higher.

He could hear her breathing rapidly in the next room, despite the thunder that had begun to rumble, and to be so close to Lois tormented him worse than the memories of the past. Memories ... if only they weren't so achingly clear...

Kal-El fled the room, seeking the sky, putting distance between himself and the swift beat of Lois' heart. The temptation was far too strong...

Temptation. Waking that next morning to find she'd rolled slightly away from him, seeing her body bared to him while she slept, he had been unable to resist the temptation of her perfect form. At first he had simply admired her, his eyes lovingly tracing her curves, but soon his hands moved to follow the path of his gaze.

He stroked the plane of her cheek, her long dark lashes lying over her porcelain skin, concealing those jeweled eyes he loved so well. And then he caressed the hollow of her throat,

where her pulse beat slow and steady, satisfied and sleepy. With each breath, her chest rose, inviting him to run his fingertips along the curve of each breast, tracing a leisurely spiral path around to the peak, which stiffened to his touch.

That had brought a smile to his lips, and smiling he had kissed her there, brushed his lips against the silken skin. Lois had sighed softly in her sleep, turning her head, arching her shoulders up toward his mouth. Slowly, gently, he had begun to suckle, his tongue touching her nipple softly, evoking a soft moan from somewhere deep in her throat. Still mostly asleep, she ran one hand into his hair, cradling his head closer.

Lois slept very soundly, as Kal-El was learning. He was free to explore her body, sometimes with feather-soft kisses, sometimes with a bolder caress. She made an inarticulate murmur of pleasure as he kissed the back of her neck, but wasn't fully awake yet. Gradually he moved from the sweet fullness of her breasts down to her softly curved belly, nuzzling his face into the curve of her flank. Such bliss, to lie there with her, Lois asleep still and in total surrender to him. He could lick a wet line of warmth from the top of her hip up to the tip of her nipple; he could stroke his fingertips across her sides until she whimpered in protest at the tickling sensation.

Her legs, so impossibly long on someone built so delicately, were utterly fascinating. The strong muscles in her thighs and calves contrasted with her dainty ankles and feet, the sleek curves suggesting power as well as grace. Kal-El adored her, kissed the top of her thigh... and then a wicked thought came to him.

Last night, the first time had gone swiftly, his fear of hurting her mixed with his overwhelming desire. Neither of them had been exhausted by it, and Lois had roused him to passion again with something he'd never expected. Her raven-black hair lying against his thigh, her mouth... He shuddered to remember. The sensations had been so incredible, so far beyond anything he ever imagined he could feel. Now his blue eyes darkened at thought of bringing her such pleasure. Surely she couldn't sleep through *that*...

Lifting her had been so easy, even without his powers, Lois was so light. Her legs curling naturally around his shoulders, he'd kissed the thin, soft skin of her inner thighs first. Anxiety gave way to desire; could there be anything more erotic than this, his breath on the most sensitive part of her body? And then to taste deeply, feel her shudder, see those eyes fly open wide with shock even as she cried out huskily...

In the present, high above the earth, Kal-El tossed his head back and pressed his hands to his eyes, trying in vain to block out a vision that was branded in his mind. *Please, no more*, he begged of his faultless memory. Oh, his recall was perfect in all five senses: her breathy cries, her hips arching helplessly in his hands, the faint trace of desire perfuming her skin, her hazel eyes stained with need, and the taste of her... *No more specters of the past, no more reminders of what I gave up. I can't bear this, not now.* The rain beat against him, but could not cool his skin or his desire.

The past overwhelmed him again, the memory he'd been trying hardest to avoid. His tongue had teased Lois until she cried out in desperation, her nails clawing his shoulders to pull him up to her. "Please," her voice rough and needy, "please, Kal-El ... please, I need you..."

He had never heard her beg for anything before that night, never imagined the pleading note in her husky voice or the craving it woke in him. Kal-El had slipped one arm under her shoulders to support his weight and caught her hip to steady her. Looking into Lois' eyes, those eyes he thought he knew so well, seeing the wanton hunger there, hearing her whisper, "Yes, please, oh yes, *please*," he had taken her then, gasping at the molten heat of her desire.

Lois' eyes had slipped closed, a long low moan breaking from her throat, as she shivered and wrapped her legs around his waist. "My God, Kal-El," she'd murmured against his ear when she could speak, lifting her hips to his next thrust. His hesitancy forgotten, he had done as he had dreamed of doing, spurred on by Lois' breathy cries of rapture. Even then he had held back a little of his strength, though with every move Lois sought to draw him closer, pull him deeper.

The first two times the previous night, Lois had mostly been in control of their lovemaking, and that experience had been beyond Kal-El's most explicit dreams. Still, though, he had expected her to take the lead - had expected to offer her his tenderness and inexperience. Now, though... Lois was helpless, utterly surrendered to his will, and he found that more erotic than he could ever have imagined. This woman, whom he loved for so many reasons but chiefly for her fiery independence, now writhed under his touch and begged wantonly for more. Kal-El would never have guessed how Lois' craving and capitulation affected him; inflaming his desire for her as well as his need to protect her and care for her. Love and lust had twined together in his heart as Kal-El watched her stormy eyes, his own growing hazy with passion.

Her breathing was all the swifter now, almost shuddering painfully in the present as her mind swept back over that moment. Eyes closed tight as her brow furrowed deeply, the teeming images of the last time they made love tearing at her exquisitely. She was biting her lip so hard, her dark hair tossed and rumped again the white sheets, soft sounds escaping her nonetheless...

The searing look in his eyes that once again trapped and held her as thoroughly as his body held her own. That night on her balcony, all of the almost childish fantasies she'd had of this man, from the first time her gaze had locked with his own, were nothing compared to the reality that they now arrived at. Never had she thought this possible, that he could ever want her with the same unbearable intensity that she had always known for him. But just one gaze in those cerulean depths ... oh God, the expression on his face... To see the same need in those eyes, to feel him closer and closer, deeper and deeper, enveloping her, driving her utterly mad in sensation...

Even now she could hear her own voice, so breathy and broken and desperate as she urged him on, "Please, oh dear God, *please*... Kal-El... *Fill me up* ... I need more..."

No denying the end of it, the force of emotion and sensation that threatened to drown him in shattering intensity. Kal-El had gone so far beyond anything he could ever have imagined or dreamed that words would have failed if he'd ever tried to describe that morning. The only light in the Arctic pre-dawn hours was the faint illumination of the crystals themselves, their glow limning Lois' face and gleaming on the tears that began to slip from her eyes.

Tears? Oh yes, this was a moment so sublime he could weep for the perfection of it, lost in a sea of passion, so close now... The only experience that came anywhere close to this was flying, the moment of intense pressure and striving urgency just before he broke the sound barrier and soared. Lois threw her head back, her body arching completely up off the bed to meet him, her nails raking his back as she tried to pull him even closer.

And then, the finale, at last Kal-El had found a force stronger than himself, more powerful than the sun's hot rays - and found it in the arms of Lois Lane. He drove into her one more time, shuddering with the strength of sensation. Lois caught the back of his neck, pulling

his face down to hers, and he felt the dampness of her tears when she pressed her cheek against his and cried out softly, lost in a fog of passion...

Memory. All a memory, more than six years old, and the reality was this: a man not from this earth, shivering at the mercy of his perfect recall as he hovered far above his adopted planet's surface. Even the thin, cold air at this height didn't chill his ardor or slow his racing heart.

I can never forget, he thought, feeling tears on his own face, freezing in the upper atmosphere. No matter what I do or where I go, she'll always be in my heart. Even if she never comes back to me - just because she loves me doesn't mean she will - Lois will always be mine...

Revelations and Famous Last Word

The new room was smaller than the grand ballroom, but much cozier. Kala and Jason cuddled together in the bed, arms protectively around each other, the comforter pulled up to their ears. It had taken them awhile to fall asleep last night, and Kala in particular had woken up several times for no reason apparent to the two men watching the closed-circuit television.

"I'm not sure," Stanford said, wishing Lex would leave so he could take another gulp of Mylanta. Just knowing about the kryptonite hidden in the vent above the bed made him queasy; this was no way to treat children, half-alien or otherwise. "They were complaining about headaches and blurry vision last night. And they seem not to be sleeping well."

"Inconclusive," Lex murmured, watching the pair with a keen aquiline gaze. "It might be affecting them, it might not. The sample's too small."

"We didn't want to risk more," Stanford replied, thinking, *I didn't want to use more. I really don't want them hurt - but what can I do?* "Prolonged exposure could have unforeseen effects."

"Hmm." Lex's mind was now obviously occupied elsewhere, and Stanford returned to nervously watching the two children and counting the minutes until his boss left the control room.

When Lois thought back on that morning later, she wasn't even sure what made her wake in the half-instant before it happened. As her eyes opened slowly, still dozy from the fog of the Tylenol PM, Lois heard the keycard in the lock, and then the door opened. She blinked hazily as she slightly tossed her loose locks out of her face, still more than half asleep, and saw the broad-shouldered shadow filling the doorway. He had come back after all, several hours having passed. Unable to help herself, she lay there on her stomach and watched him move forward, heat flaring within her even as she felt a chill of nervousness. *Dammit, Kal-El, I hope you know what you're doing coming back in here... I only have so much self-control.*

Last night's storm of memories and emotions circled back to haunt her, and she couldn't control the sultry smile that rose to her lips even as she shaded her eyes from the light spilling into the room. Anxious as she was, fully aware of how wrong it would be, a part of her had hoped desperately that he would return to finish what they'd started.

"Lois?" His low, concerned voice sent a spike of shock down her spine as Lois snapped fully awake. *Oh my God, you stupid woman. It's Richard, not Kal-El. Oh, shit. Thank God I didn't open my big mouth and say...* Her mind raced to the previous night, hoping nothing in the room seemed amiss, even as she reflexively clutched the sheets to her chest.

The room was black when Richard stepped inside, having used the keycard the desk clerk had given him. Thankfully the room had been reserved in his name as well, or he would've had to wait while the clerk rang Lois. The way *she* slept, he'd be here 'til noon waiting for her to answer.

He'd seen Clark in the lobby, nodding off in front of a newspaper and looking as though he hadn't slept a wink. Richard's hand on his shoulder started the poor man so badly he almost leaped out of his chair, and hurried to get his own room packed up so they could all leave. *Poor devil. He looks as tired and achy as I feel - the Lang couch was not designed for comfort.*

And his awakening this morning had been far less than pleasant. Perry had called, seeking Lois, and the editor was less than pleased to learn that Richard had spent the night at Lana's

apartment.

Once in the room he should've shared with Lois last night, though, Richard had to pause. Something just seemed ... off. She was sitting up hastily, drawing the blankets up around herself and wincing in the bright light coming from the hall. "Richard?"

He didn't answer right away. Richard's journalist instincts were on high alert. The covers were tangled, as if Lois had spent a restless night thrashing in her sleep, and her hair was similarly ruffled. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first glance, though... "Hey, honey. It's almost seven. If you want to start getting dressed, I'll pack up for you."

Lois' voice was still a little rusty with sleep, her eyes still closed against the sunlight. "Yeah ... thanks, Richard." He had reached the bedside by then, and bent to kiss her forehead, noticing the way she stiffened slightly at his touch. Something was *definitely* up. "I hadn't realized what time it was. I need a shower before we go," Lois muttered.

"Give me a minute," Richard said. "I need to shave - my razor's in your bag."

Lois blinked at him and started ask a question, realizing only then that they'd never quite gotten around to packing separately. She wouldn't have thought yesterday that she would be spending the night with *Clark*, not *Richard*...

The thought made her blush, which Richard fortunately didn't see. He had already gone into the bathroom, annoying stubble making his face itch - this was the last time he went *anywhere* without a razor. The absolute *last*.

As he stretched his neck, running the Norelco over his chin, Richard caught a glimpse of gold in the mirror. He turned, frowning, to see the ring he'd given Lois sitting on the edge of the tub. *She always does that*, he told himself firmly, ignoring the chill of apprehension at the nape of his neck. *She's lost some weight the last couple months; it'll slip off in the shower, or when she washes her hands. You always find it lying by the sink, so don't let your guilty conscience read anything into it this time.*

Richard tucked the ring into his pocket, intending to give it back to Lois later, and finished shaving. If only the nagging feeling of wrongness could be as quickly disposed of as stubble...

Lois was waiting outside the door when he opened it, leaning against the wall and seeming lost in thought - and wasn't *that* odd, her reluctance to come into the room while he shaved? She even startled slightly when he came out and said her name, her thoughts obviously a million miles away. And she looked ... in the nightgown that fell only to mid-thigh, with her wavy hair lying in ruffled waves over her shoulder, Lois looked utterly seductive. Why then was she so distant, so suddenly shy of his touch? Hadn't they maneuvered around each other's morning routines in smaller spaces than this, with the twins underfoot as well? Richard chose not to reflect on that as he watched her go to take her turn, either, telling himself they had more important things to worry about than Lois acting a little odd.

While Lois hurried into a quick shower, Richard started picking things up around the room. From the looks of things, she hadn't bothered to completely unpack last night. Getting ready to leave was fairly simple - all Richard had to do was put away her clothes from yesterday; gather up her hairbrush, keys, Tylenol PM, and put them next to her purse; and then find her boots. That was Lois' one annoying traveling habit; she tended to kick her shoes off and let them lie wherever they fell, which had been the cause of several near-falls and much cursing on Richard's part.

Richard knelt beside the bed, fishing one black boot out from underneath, and looking around for its mate. Glancing under the bedside table, he froze...

What the hell are Clark's glasses doing on the floor? At first the thought was just absurd, but then a suspicion began to form in Richard's mind, one that explained the strange feeling he'd had since he walked into the room. Rumpled sheets, tousled hair, engagement ring hidden ... and the twins' father's glasses on the floor beside Lois' bed.

Picking up the glasses slowly and slipping them into his pocket, Richard muttered aloud, "I'll give her one chance to explain this. One."

Downstairs, Clark was giving Lana a slightly confused look. Packing up his own room had only taken a few minutes, and he was on his way to check out when he met Lana in the lobby. She'd been oddly hesitant, distracted and uncomfortable talking to him. *What on earth happened to make Lana act this way?* Clark wondered.

The elevator dinged behind them, and Lana looked past him, wincing slightly. "Hmm. I think I'll meet you outside, okay?"

"Sure," Clark replied bemusedly, heading for the counter to check out. Now he could hear Lois' heartbeat behind him, and further speculation on the cause of Lana's distress was cut off by his own discomfort in Richard's presence.

He couldn't help seeing Richard walk up to the counter next to him, nor keep from noticing the way Lois avoided his gaze. The air around her seemed entirely too warm, and Clark tugged at his collar as he handed one clerk his credit card and room key.

Richard placed his MasterCard on the counter in front of the other clerk, giving the young woman a brief distracted smile as he asked Lois for the room key. His mind, like Clark's, was elsewhere until Lois caught both their attention by muttering a curse. "Dammit. I don't have it - did you see it in the room, Richard?"

"No," he replied, giving her a look. "Good Lord, Lois, did you lose *another* one?"

"I've only had to pay for about ten of those stupid things," Lois muttered under her breath, then directed a bright and slightly frazzled smile at the clerk. "I'm sorry, I guess you'll have to replace the key for room 306."

"306?" the other clerk said, puzzled. She held up the keycard Clark had handed to her, and continued, "But it's right ... here... Oh."

Lois glared at her; Richard stared at Clark; the two clerks looked at all three of them with raised eyebrows, and Clark slowly took his own keycard out of his *other* pocket. "Um..."

"That is the last goddamn straw," Richard growled. He hadn't confronted Lois in their room, wanting to wait until they were alone, but this was too much. "Somehow I'm not surprised by *her*, but I thought better of *you*, Kent."

"Shut your mouth, *White*," Lois spat. "You don't know the first thing about..."

Richard whirled back on her, his patience evaporated. "No, this is about the *fifth* thing. One, the bed was wrecked. Two, you're wearing the sexy nightgown, and you looked rumpled. Three, the ring I gave you was hidden in the bathroom. Four, *his* glasses on the floor! C'mon, Lois - entertain me. How're you gonna defend *that*? Try a new excuse - I'm tired of the ones you've been using for months now."

His vehemence had shocked everyone into silence; even Lois was open-mouthed at the conclusions he'd drawn. Only now did she remember pulling Clark's glasses off last night in the depths of her 'dream'. And in spite of how bad this all looked, in spite of how difficult explaining herself was going to be, she couldn't stop a traitorous thought from running through her mind. *If I'm going to be damned for it, I really wish I'd actually **done** it.*

"You stop entertaining the staff and *pay for the goddamn room*," Lois growled back

finally, her fury barely checked, and continued only in her mind, *You wanna paint me as a Scarlet Woman, we can do it **outside**.*

As if Clark had heard her thought, he finally shook himself free of his horrified surprise and spoke. "Lois, go wait in the car. Richard, we'll discuss this outside."

Richard turned back to him, ready with a scathing retort, and the words died on his lips. Clark had unconsciously drawn himself up to his full height, and some deep instinct spoke in Richard's mind. *He's bigger than you ... dunno why you never noticed that before, but he's taller, broader through the shoulders, and that's muscle under the secondhand suit. He could pound you like a tent stake, so maybe you ought to shut up and **think** for a second here...*

"No," Lois replied sharply. "I'm not gonna let him stand there and talk about me like that. Or *you*, for that matter."

Another uncomfortable realization for Richard. This wasn't the woman he'd known and loved, lain down beside and worked with, for the past several years. Sleeping Beauty was wide awake - and furious.

"Lois, wait for us in the car," Clark restated gently. For the first time that morning, his eyes met Lois', and in spite of the circumstances, a spark leapt between them. "I'll handle this - we don't need to waste time bickering. Just go wait in the car, honey."

Defiance in her eyes and the set of her jaw, but against his calm insistence she finally let out a sighing breath and rolled her eyes in defeat. Still growling under her breath, Lois turned and left, sending one more venomous glance Richard's way as she did so.

Outside the hotel, Lana had realized that she didn't know what type of car Lois and Clark had rented. So she waited just outside the doors, hoping to just sort of fall in with the trio when they walked out and follow them to the car, not meeting anyone's gaze. Even Clark suspected something now...

The automatic doors slid open, and Lois stormed out of them, radiating frustrated fury. *She knows* was the first thought on Lana's mind, but the reporter didn't even glance her way, heading out into the parking lot.

If it's not that, then what has her so angry? Lana followed, having to hurry to keep up. "Um, Lois?" she began tentatively.

Lois' head whipped around so fast her dark hair flew out as if it were in some kind of shampoo commercial. A faintly puzzled look crossed her face, and she said distractedly, "Oh. Lana. Hi." She slowed down a little as she spoke, but kept heading out toward the far end of the parking lot.

So she doesn't know, Lana thought, biting her lip. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

A blunt "No" was her only answer, and she was forced to quicken her stride again. Guilt gnawed at Lana; she hated to think about kissing Richard, hated to be jealous of his ring that Lois wore - though not at the moment - and before her conscience could tear her heart in half, she *had* to say something.

Lana reached for Lois' wrist and thought better of it at the last second. "Lois..." she began, and her courage faltered.

The reporter cocked her head, staring curiously at the redhead. "Yes?" Her voice was clipped and impatient, her mind clearly elsewhere.

"Listen, I don't feel right about this..." Lana trailed off again before taking a deep breath and forcing herself to meet Lois' sharp hazel stare. "I wanted to apologize to you... I didn't mean to, it was sort of an accident, but ... IkissedRichardlastnight. And I'm really sorry about

it." The actual words came out in a rush, and Lana winced, waiting for Lois' reaction.

Silence. Lois stared. After a moment she blinked. "You kissed Richard."

"Yes." Lana closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable explosion. Lois would probably slap her... No, this was Lois. She'd probably punch her.

"That's all? You just kissed him?"

"Of course that's all," Lana replied, affronted. "I'm not... Look, I didn't intend to do *that* when I brought him to my apartment, Lois - I just didn't trust him by himself. I didn't think... I didn't mean to, I just ... kissed him."

Fleeting emotions crossed Lois' face: disbelief, irritation, possessiveness, and then a cynical kind of acceptance. "Fine. Good for you." With that, the shorter woman turned on her heel and stalked over to a burgundy PT Cruiser.

Lana's green eyes widened. That was all? She'd expected a much more violent outburst, based on Lois' reaction to seeing her talking to Richard that day in the *Planet* offices. "Something else is going on," Lana muttered, and wondering what it was, she followed the other woman to the car.

After paying for the rooms in stony silence, Richard and Clark went outside. Richard, actually, would've continued their confrontation in the lobby, but Clark caught his elbow and gently but irresistibly propelled him out the door. Yet more confirmation of the fact that Clark was far stronger than he looked. That kept Richard silent in spite of his seething resentment and suspicion. *She let him call her honey? And she actually obeyed him?!*

Once outside - and neither of them saw Lois and Lana sitting in the car at the far side of the parking lot - Clark turned to face Richard and spoke in a low, serious tone. "Look, I know you and I have some ... issues to work out, but the priority now is the twins. Luthor would want us to be divided; we're less effective that way. Once Jason and Kala are safe, you and I can ... arm-wrestle in a bar or something, but 'til then we have to be on the same team."

No one else could've pulled that off, but Richard did sincerely like and respect Clark. It also helped to know that the man was honest as the day was long. And utterly incapable of lying... "Fine," Richard replied, banking the simmering fires of jealousy and guilt for now. "For me to be a team player, though, you have to answer one question."

Clark sighed. "Okay, go ahead."

"Have you been sleeping with Lois?"

Though he had been expecting something of the sort from the moment he realized he'd handed the clerk the wrong keycard, Clark was still shocked by the bluntness of Richard's tone. And by the implication that this was some sort of *affair*, not the accidental collision of dream and reality that last night had been. "What? *No!* Richard, I can't believe you'd think that of me *or* Lois!" His denial was made even more fervent by his longing for Lois, by the desire both physical and emotional that he had denied since his return.

The sincerity of Clark's reply, the vehemence of his moral outrage, made Richard feel even guiltier for having kissed Lana last night. And stung by that awareness of his own duplicity, he added vindictively, "Have you ever slept with her?"

Clark's eyes widened, and before he could consider his response he blurted out, "You said *one* question." *Oh, no. That was almost as good as saying yes ... sometimes I really wish I could lie...* "Um, Richard, I didn't mean... I mean, I wasn't trying to say..."

Richard held up one hand to block any further explanation. "I get it, Kent. Enough. That's all I needed to hear. Just ... enough. You're right, we can deal with all of this later. Let's just get

to the car."

"But I..."

"The car, Kent. I don't want to talk about this anymore. Let's just get on with it, okay? The kids need us. All of us."

Reluctantly, feeling the weight of everything left unsaid, Clark led him to the PT Cruiser.

Lana sat down gingerly behind Lois in the driver's seat, and the dark-haired woman could see her concerned gaze in the rearview mirror. "So, what did you guys find?" she asked, effectively forestalling any more discussion of Lana's transgressions. Lois found it hard to believe anyone could be so upset over a simple kiss.

Pausing to organize her thoughts, Lana delivered the bad news. "We didn't find a thing. There's some evidence Luthor has used one of the islands up there at some point, but not recently. Only a few buildings big enough to hide a person, and we checked those - the locks are rusted shut."

"What about underground?" Lois asked.

"Richard thought of that," Lana replied. "But the water table is so high, and the area so marshy, that it would be very hard to build anything below ground. Still, there are no signs of recent human activity on any of the islands we searched."

Lois swore under her breath. "He misled us *again*, the conniving bastard," she growled. "When I get my hands on Luthor, he's a dead man."

Lana opened her mouth to say something comforting, and then saw Lois' hazel eyes in the mirror. She was absolutely serious - this woman was utterly frank about her intention to commit cold-blooded murder. No one could say she wasn't provoked, but Lana still felt a chill down her back.

Just then, the two women noticed the men leaving the hotel. They stopped, and not for a friendly chat. Lana's brow furrowed, and she asked aloud, "What's that all about?"

Lois' eyes narrowed. "Richard's damn guilty conscience." She started rolling her window down, prepared to lean out and yell something to get their attention, but just then Richard held up his hand in a gesture that was undeniably *stop*. Clark seemed unsure of himself as he walked toward the car, glancing at Richard worriedly. Lois sighed then, shaking her head. "Oh, for the love of God. What have you gone and done now, Mr. Morality?" Lana heard her murmur to herself.

No answers were forthcoming as the two men got into the car, their silence awkward. Clark met Lana's surprised look with a guilty expression quite foreign to his features, and Richard didn't even look Lois in the eyes as he sat down in the passenger seat beside her. "All right, everyone," he said, his voice tightly controlled. "Priorities. Let's go get some breakfast, trade information, and figure out where to go from there. Sound good?"

"Um, sure," Clark replied.

"Fine by me," Lana added.

That left Lois. She didn't look at Richard, either. "There's an IHOP up the road. Let's go."

The drive, though short, was nearly unbearable. The front seat seethed with tension; the back was rife with guilt and questions. Once they actually arrived at the restaurant, a smiling waitress told the sullen group, "My name is April, and you all need to cheer up." She actually managed to startle a chuckle out of them before seating them in a booth.

Lois felt a little nauseous and excused herself before April could take their drink order. Clark spoke first. "Let's have an endless pot of coffee, and to balance that out, a glass of

orange juice apiece - sound good?"

Richard shook his head sharply, mouth twisting up in a wry grin. "No way. Lois *hates* orange juice. She can't even look at the stuff."

Perplexed, Clark said, "But she used to drink it freshly squeezed - even bought a juicer for her office."

"Not anymore," and now the smugness in Richard's tone was undeniable. "She drank so much orange juice when she was pregnant, she *loathes* it now."

Lana shot him a dirty look and kicked his ankle under the table. They chose the coffee instead and started browsing the menu. When Lois didn't show up to order, Richard sighed heavily. "I'm gonna go find her," he muttered. "Send the search dogs if I'm not back by the time the food gets here."

"Ah, Richard, don't you think *I'd* better go after her?" Lana asked too politely. "She *is* in the ladies' room."

He met her sea-green gaze for a moment, seeing the accusation there, and replied, "I'm just going to knock on the door, not invade the sanctity of the women's restroom. I got over wondering if you had fountains and carpet in there back in sixth grade." With that he left the table.

"Interesting," Lana said aloud, turning to look at Clark. "Well?"

"Well, what?" He tried to look innocent, suddenly nervous, staring intently at his coffee.

"Well, what happened last night?"

At that question, coming unexpectedly from Lana, Clark dropped the whole packet of sugar into the mug unopened. "Darn!"

"Clark..."

"What are you talking about, Lana?"

"*Something* happened," she replied. Lana couldn't keep the guilty, pained look off her face, but she also couldn't stop herself from inquiring further. "Something happened to all of us last night - we weren't this edgy yesterday. Lois is acting ... absolutely bizarre, and..."

"That's normal for Lois," Clark assured her. Then he realized what he'd said, and added, "Well, not bizarre, but you know she doesn't conform to expectations."

"You've got that right," Lana sighed, stirring cream into her coffee. "I'd expected her to sock me one when I told her I kissed her fiancé."

Clark turned to gape at her as Lana calmly sipped from the mug. "You *what*?"

"Kissed Richard. By accident."

"How do you *accidentally* kiss someone?" Clark was so caught up in indignation that he wasn't even aware of the double standard until Lana turned her sharp gaze on him.

"Why don't you tell me, Clark? And while you're at it, you can explain why she calls you Mr. Morality - and why you're more upset over me kissing Richard than she was. All she said was, 'Good for you'. *That's* why I'm asking you what happened last night."

Lois was not in the ladies' room. Richard had knocked, but gotten no answer, and started to panic. This couldn't have been Luthor's plan, could it? To kidnap Lois right out from under their noses? Had his goons been stalking them ever since they'd arrived, just waiting for a chance to catch Lois alone?

He'd opened the door long enough to look for her boots, seeing the room empty. And then, his heart beating painfully fast, he headed back to the table to alert the others. That was when he glimpsed Lois' dark hair and her long black coat through the window. But what was

she doing ... outside...?

A plume of smoke answered his question. The first threads of panic turned instead to anger, and the mystery of last night roared back into the forefront of his mind. Richard stormed out the front door and up to Lois just as she took the cigarette from her lips again and exhaled.

Richard snatched the cigarette out of Lois' hand and threw it as hard as he could. "What the hell are you doing?" he snapped, grabbing for Lois' elbow.

She yanked her arm out of his hand, snarling back as she glared holes in him, "Get your hands *off* me! Who the *hell* do you think you are?! Did it occur to you I might *need* a smoke with everything that's going on?"

"Your fiancé, last I checked," Richard replied hotly. "And you might very well *need* one after last night, for all I know. No one ever explained to me how his glasses wound up on the floor of your room!"

Her jaw dropped, hazel eyes suddenly bright with immediate wrath. "How *dare* you!" she snapped. "You're jumping at shadows because *you* feel guilty!"

"What the hell..."

"I know you kissed Lana!" Lois spat, leaning up to fire the words directly into his face. "You *always* do this when you screw up! You can't just admit to what you did, you have to make *me* seem just as fallen from grace!"

"This has *nothing* to do with that," Richard argued back. "Yeah, I kissed Lana - she must've told you. Damn Midwestern morals... But it sure looks like you did a whole helluva lot more than just *kiss* Clark, and not by accident, either! How *did* he get your room key, Lois?"

"I *gave* it to him, you moron!" Lois was now walking a fine line between the truth and a lie, and though she wasn't entirely innocent, she did have the fact of the Tylenol PM and thinking last night was a dream on her side. "If you really *must* know, he was checking out a couple more places. He insisted that I get some rest, and I agreed *only* if he came in and made a report!"

"And how does that explain his glasses on the floor?" This time Richard managed to grab her arm, and drag her bodily away from the window, out of line of sight of the restaurant patrons.

Richard, just drop this, damn you! I don't want to be having this fight with you! Not now. Why can't you see that? "He carries a spare pair - they probably fell out of his jacket pocket," Lois said stubbornly. She'd resisted him pulling her until she realized why, then took a few steps on her own and shook her arm free of his hand again.

"Why do I suddenly smell a lie?" Richard asked rhetorically. "There's no way his glasses could've gotten up underneath the table if they just fell out of his pocket, Lois."

"Fine," she blazed, angry enough to give him the truth - or most of it. "If you really *must* know, I took some Tylenol PM to help me sleep. When he came in, I wasn't even awake - I thought I was dreaming. I didn't even know who he *was*. So I kissed him. There you go." Lois had raised her hands to shoulder height in explaining last night, and now she let them fall to her sides abruptly in defeat. It was only after looking away briefly that she continued. "Happy now? You were right, I'm no better than you. You 'accidentally' smooched the cheerleader; I gave Kent the shock of his life. We're even."

"Nothing like the shock he's gonna get when he finally finds out those kids are *his*," Richard retorted.

"**What?!**" Lois' head whipped back toward him as she stared with absolute horror. How in

the *hell* had he figured that out, unless he knew that Clark and Superman were...

"Oh, come off it, Lois! That *wasn't* the first time you ever kissed him!" Richard couldn't seem to figure out what to do with his hands; afraid to touch her, and not wanting to ball them into fists, either. Either sign of aggression would likely be met by the infamous Lane elbow being introduced to his chin at speed. "Paris, six years and nine months ago. About a month after Niagara, just a few weeks after Superman disappeared without a word. You were in Paris searching for the hero; Clark was there starting his trip around the world."

"Wha... what? *Clark* was in Paris?" She didn't add *When?* Lois blinked as her mind momentarily switched gears; this was news to her until this moment. *No. Oh God, no... Tell me that I didn't miss him back then by just a day, a few hours...*

And she was unaware of how damning her suddenly stunned expression seemed as she came to this realization.

"Stop playing games," Richard demanded. "When the hero broke your heart, your best friend was there to help you mend it. It all makes sense - no one saw you with him in the city, so you couldn't have been together long. Just long enough for the twins. And then he was gone, too, and he'd left you worse off than Superman did. No wonder you were so furious at him when he showed back up here - no wonder he's so scared of you, when he could probably pick you up one-handed."

Lois couldn't decide whether to be relieved or horrified. *It just keeps spiraling out like a nightmare. He's so close to the truth, and so very far away. This is 98%fiction he's spinning, but the answer he got from it...*

"They have to be his - you're not the kind to get yourself knocked up by some one-weekend stand and then have the kids. You'd only go through with the pregnancy and raising the children if their father meant more to you than that. I *know* the story's a lie. There's never been a Garen at the *Quotidienne*, Lois. And as for the four guys who do work there who *say* they slept with you, they're all lying. I figured *that* out the year I met you."

Fear for Kal-El's secret and shock at Richard's conclusion had Lois reeling, the world seeming to spin crazily around her. She couldn't bear that nauseous, unbalanced feeling, and so locked on to the one thing that steadied her, the one emotion she could always cope with: anger and outrage at Richard's prying, the implications of his investigation. It didn't help that his remark reminded her of all the whispers at the *Quotidienne* when her pregnancy began to show, all the cold looks and snide comments about Superman's girlfriend getting pregnant the day he disappeared... It was little wonder she'd eventually gone back to the *Daily Planet*, unable in the end to escape the rumors.

Richard's face went numb, and his ears rang from the force of the slap. "How *dare* you meddle in my past, you sonofabitch! I've told you more than once it was *none of your business!*" Lois yelled, arm cocked back to strike him again, eyes wild. "I've heard enough whispers about being a whore enough in the last six years, I don't need to hear it aloud from you, Richard White! And I sure as hell don't need to be reminded of all that bullshit *now*, with the twins missing! You *bastard!*"

In spite of the hectic rage in her voice, in spite of the furious speed with which she'd lashed out, Richard didn't miss seeing the tears welling up in her eyes. There was no saving what he'd said so far, no way to take it back and apologize, try to state it in a way that didn't wound Lois to depth of her soul. Too late for that now, and Richard pushed on instead of backing down. "Lois, he *needs* to know," he insisted, as if she'd merely confirmed his suspicions by trying so vehemently to deny them. "He *deserves* to know they're his, especially

since he's helping us find them."

Lois was still too hurt, too scared, and too furious to hear reason, however. "They're *my* kids, it's *my* life, and *my* decision! Why can't you *ever* just stay the hell *out* of it?! Why can't *any* of you just stay out!"

"You're right!" Richard shot back. "You're absolutely right! There's never been a single goddamn thing between us that's *ours* - you never ever *pretended* to make it *our* family! It was *you* and *your kids* - and me, the stand-in for *both* men who left you! Hell, the worst part is, you probably never even realized you were doing it." His voice lost some steam, realizing dawning cold and bitter. "You were never gonna marry me - those kids were never gonna be Whites. I was never more than a walk-on in your life. I don't even *know* you, do I?"

"Richard, at some point I would've..." Lois faltered. She couldn't reply to his question, either; the answer was self-evident.

"You would've done it because it was comfortable," he said quietly. "You would've done it if your mother and Perry hinted at it long enough. You would've done it when the twins started asking why Mommy and Daddy weren't married. If it was just up to you, we would've gone on the way we were forever." Richard sighed. "Or until the man you really love walked back into your life. I've just been a placeholder..."

"Richard, you don't understand," Lois pleaded, her eyes full of agony. "I didn't want it to be like this..."

"Neither did I," he replied sadly. "I just ... maybe we shouldn't be together."

"Maybe we shouldn't," and Lois' voice was even softer than his.

For a long moment they merely looked at each other, a man and a woman who had shared life's trials and joys for three years; who had raised two children from toddlers to kindergarten; who had worked, loved, laughed, and argued their way along the journey together for so long that they were both, in spite of making their living with words, mute at this parting of ways.

Then Richard sighed and said, "Let's go find the twins." He lowered his gaze and turned to walk inside.

As he stepped into the doorway, Lois hung back for a moment and watched him thoughtfully. *And there's something different about **him** now, too. Something beyond me and the twins and this mess we've found ourselves in. But has he even acknowledged it?* Softly, she mused aloud seven words, making Richard spin around so fast that he never felt the door swing back and smack his shoulder.

"You're in love with Lana, aren't you?"

How Do You Love

*And the truth that you'll find
Will always be
The truth you hide.
So how do you love,
How do you love?
When your angels can't sing,
And your world is still
Lacking of me?*

~Collective Soul, *How Do You Love?*

Lois' hands clenched on the wheel as she drove back to the airport. She and Richard had wisely decided to part ways after their fantastic argument - he and Lana were taking a cab to the airport and would fly the seaplane back to Metropolis.

Clark and Lois were planning to drop the rented car off, then fly back to Metropolis themselves. During breakfast - *most uncomfortable meal ever*, Lois thought, remembering the pained silence that had made her stuffed French toast taste like ash - her phone had rung. Ms. Mackenzie had come through for them, in spite of having to dodge her boss repeatedly. And as it turned out, Luthor's threat had been sent from Metropolis. The docks, to be specific.

That bastard lead us all on a wild goose chase, Lois had snarled after thanking Ms. Mackenzie and hanging up. *The island was a false lead.*

Either that or he's talking about the yacht, Lana had replied. *It's big enough to be an island.* With that thought, the four had finished up the meal quickly and left the restaurant. Lois smiled a bit at the recollection of Richard's guilty glance at Lana; her question had rocked him, and though he couldn't reply coherently, she didn't need him to. The answer was obvious.

The four of them in a car together was a very bad idea at that point, so Lois had left first and let them wait for a cab. Now Richard and Lana were somewhere behind them, and Lois and Clark would soon be in the air - or more correctly, Lois and Superman. And the silence in the car was almost as tense as the silence at the table had been.

Lois felt her stomach churning, breakfast unsettled by her nerves. Seeking for something, anything, to say to the man beside her, the raven-haired reporter muttered, "Right about now I really wish you could home in on their heartbeats like you can mine."

Kal-El smiled sadly. "I wish I could, too. But Lois... I worked with you every day for a couple of years. I got to know the rhythm of your heart very well. The twins... I've only known them a few months. And I don't see them as often. I tried, that first day, but I just can't. I haven't even managed to lock on to their voices."

"Luthor probably has them in a sound-proofed room somewhere," Lois growled, adding a few choice phrases about Lex's ancestry.

"We'll find them," he replied, touching her wrist lightly. Lois glanced at him, and for a moment both of them remembered that he'd accidentally called her honey, remembered why she had allowed it and why she had done as he asked her. Then Lois resolutely turned her eyes back to the road.

Clark sighed. He still couldn't believe he'd slipped into pet names; it had been his delight, those few hours in the Fortress, to lavish all the endearments he could imagine upon this woman who was his darling, his beloved, his dearest heart. She tended to draw the line at anything resembling *sugar* or *sweetheart* - *honey* was as close as he could get, and he cherished that forbearance.

Jason and Kala weren't feeling too well. They both had headaches; in fact, *everything* ached, like that time they had the flu. Kala's ears were ringing, and Jason was seeing spots in front of his eyes. They both felt simply miserable, and had stayed in bed, not even wanting breakfast.

The door to their stateroom opened stealthily. In the control room, Stanford bit his already ragged cuticles as he watched Lex ease into the room. The bald man moved with exaggerated caution, one hand never leaving his right coat pocket.

Kala lifted her head to look toward the door, and then her bleary eyes suddenly cleared. "*Jason*," she hissed urgently, shaking her brother's shoulder. "Jason, wake up! It's *him*."

Jason's head felt like it weighed more than the piano - more than *ten* pianos. He blinked and raised his hand slowly to block out the brighter light from the hall, a low grinding pain suffusing every muscle and joint of his small body. "Go 'way," he muttered, but his voice was fretful, not defiant.

Kala's breath started to whistle in her throat as she realized that whatever illness was overtaking them had affected Jason worse than herself. As terrified as she was - as scared as she had been ever since Brutus covered her mouth with his big hand - she knew that it was her turn to protect her brother now. She wasn't as strong, but maybe the creepy bald bad guy didn't know that...

"Leave us alone!" the girl cried out defiantly, but Lex just smiled, trying to be as charming as possible as he sauntered closer.

"Hey, relax," he said quietly. "I'm not going to hurt you - what would be the point of that, hmm?"

Both twins sat up, watching him warily. "What d'you want?" Kala demanded, her gaze flickering around the room, seeking something to throw.

"I just want to ask you some questions," Lex replied. His unblinking stare was nearly mesmerizing, his low voice hypnotic. Oh, the little girl looked so much like Lois, that distrustful sullen look he knew so well... "Do you know who I am?"

"You're a *bad* man," Kala replied spitefully. Those hazel eyes watched him with an almost hawk-like intensity unusual for one so young. "And my Mommy doesn't like you at *all*."

Lex chuckled. "Oh, it's not like that at all. True, she wrote a lot of very mean things about me, back in the day. She made up for that by writing my favorite article ever, 'Why the World *Doesn't* Need Superman'. I really need to thank her for it - that editorial brightened many a dark day."

The twins looked at him skeptically. They both felt miserable, and this scary man was only making it worse. Even when he tried to be charming, he seemed dangerous. "Liar," Jason rasped.

"Oh, no," Lex replied. "Your Mom and I have more in common than she thinks. We just need to talk about some things, like your father. She's going to be here today, I hope. And then we can all set sail together, like good friends."

His cheerful tone was utterly wasted on the twins. Kala gave him her best Lane frosty glare, and said threateningly, "If you hurt us or Mommy, my daddy will kick your butt."

Lex came closer to the bed, and in spite of her bravado, Kala shrunk back as he leaned toward her. Now he chose to drop the act, and his eyes were cold and merciless on those hazel ones so like her mother's. "He'll try ... I'm counting on it. But I have a surprise for him if he does, little girl. Want to see the present I'm going to give Superman?"

She would've said *No*, if she could've spoken, but Kala's voice had dried up in horror. She shook her head sharply instead, curls flying.

Lex took his hand out of his pocket anyway. The kryptonite shiv glittered prettily as he reached toward Kala with it...

If the drive to the airport had been uncomfortable, the flight from there, his arm around her waist as they skimmed above the waves, was intolerable. They had never been so quiet for so long, at least not this tense and prickly silence. On other flights long ago their stillness had been filled with echoes of warm words of love and adoration. Unspoken for so long, but the weight of them filled those hours in the air nonetheless...

To be silent now seemed cold, especially since last night. The curve of her waist under his hand... Trying to draw her out again, and hoping to think of something other than what might have been, Kal-El said quietly, "I barely know Jason and Kala..."

"You know them well enough to order their dinner," Lois replied swiftly, eyes firmly on the skyline, knowing he could see her face clearly with her hair tied back.

"Well, Lois, that's the first thing anybody learns about the twins," he soothed. "The first thing anyone who meets them hears is what not to let them eat. Sure, I know that, and I know Kala likes to call that lizard Gazeera just to irritate Jason. I know a few things, but I don't know *them*." *And given the parts of your argument with Richard that I couldn't help overhearing, he thought painfully, I feel like I should know them better than I do.*

Lois sighed sharply, sliding back an errant curl that had slipped loose behind her ear. This was not easy... she'd meant last night to tell him the full truth today, but after that fight with Richard... God, he'd had to have heard that. She snuck a glance at him, wondering what he thought of everything they had said. Wondering and dreading.

But Kal-El was looking away, perhaps scanning the coast, perhaps too shy to catch her gaze, and Lois was left to wonder. Slowly, she began to speak, working her way backward through the twins' lives. "Jason loves science," Lois said softly, with more than a touch of motherly pride. "He's always asking 'Why?' Their teacher gives him extra projects sometimes... Kala could be doing better. They're only in kindergarten, and she gets bored easily. And when she's bored she acts up. Loves attention. They can both read already - not *War and Peace*, but you know, they read better than most kids their age."

Sighing, Lois closed her eyes. That made it easier to lose herself in memories. Kal-El kept quiet, his silence a well into which her recollections could pour. "When Jason's interested in something, he has to learn everything about it. He won't quit until he knows more than most adults. And you can't fob him off with 'because I said so' or 'that's the way it is'. He has to *know*. And with games - Jason won't stop until he figures out how to play them. Same thing with puzzles. Once he starts one, he'll finish it, even if it's one of Richard's thousand-piece brain-busters. One that was just a picture of a bunch of different beads, it took him three months to get that puzzle done. But he just doesn't know the meaning of 'quit'."

"He's your son," Kal-El whispered. His eyes meeting hers were as warm as his body beside her, and for a heartbeat she couldn't speak. What she wouldn't give to have had him beside her when these memories were made...

If she started thinking like that, she'd never get around to saying what she'd meant to tell him since last night. Lois bit her lip and glanced down, feeling the wind against her hair as much as she felt the long-harbored secret in her heart. "Yes, well, Kala's got a lot of me in her, too. Has to be the center of attention, has to stand out from the crowd. One time she climbed

an old oak tree behind the school during recess. The fire department had to get her down - she was fifty feet in the air. All because some dumb boy said girls weren't as good at climbing as boys." She couldn't help chuckling. "Scared the hell out of me. One of those 'Mommy moments' I never expected to have."

"You're an incredible mother," he told her. The sincerity in his voice made her look up again, and at her surprised expression, he tightened his arm around her slightly. "You *are*, Lois. Look at all the challenges you've had raising the twins. You've overcome every one. Not to mention you managed to keep up your career *and* raise two children."

"I never expected to be a mom, had never really even considered it at all," she replied, her voice growing softer as the past seemed to rise up around her. "I'd been in Paris for a while. I was having ... flashbacks, I don't know. Little bits of memories, of Non and Ursa trying to tear me in half. Luthor pointing me out to Zod. Seeing the Fortress collapse. That kind of stuff. I'd been treated in the 'states, diagnosed with amnesia due to posttraumatic stress disorder. I went to this specialist in France..."

Dr. Arnaud had seen her in his office, Lois sitting on an overstuffed chair while the doctor took her vital signs and asked about her symptoms. None of the sterile white treatment rooms she was used to in America, just shelves full of books and a discreet cabinet of medical instruments and supplies. This doctor - even in memory Lois loathed to call him a psychiatrist, thanks to Elliot - had wanted to start her on some medication, but first he wanted to do some bloodwork...

"I came back a week later, and the results were in. He told me he was putting me on a couple of things and some vitamin supplements, and I thought that was kind of odd, and then he says, 'But I cannot start with the major course of medication, Ms. Lane, until after your delivery.' And I was just nodding along, and then it hit me what he'd said, and like a moron I go, 'Delivery?' Of course he looks at me like he's thinking *Stupid American*, and he says, 'Yes, Ms. Lane, these drugs are not safe for the unborn child. We must wait until after you deliver.' So I stared at him like he'd grown another head."

In spite of the fear she'd felt then, she chuckled now, and got a smile from Kal-El as well. "So that's how I found out I was two months pregnant. I'd never guessed - I was always religious about the pill. And I was utterly shocked by the news. I think I used some creative language to express my feelings... Anyway, I figured out who the father was pretty quickly. Didn't help much, though. I was still alone, in what was pretty much a strange city, and though a part of me was terrified of having these kids - eventually I found out it was twins, which just made me all the more thrilled - anyway, I was scared of becoming a mom, but the biggest part of me wouldn't let me ... do anything ... about it. I had a strong feeling that the twins were precious, that I had to protect them and cherish them. It was really weird, because I also felt like I shouldn't talk about them to anyone..."

For a long moment she fell silent, and Kal-El picked up speed as they passed a busy port, wanting to remain unseen. He was still tuned to her, waiting patiently for her to resume the story, lightly squeezing her side again to let her know he was still listening intently. Lois' voice was too low for any ears but his when she continued, "I used to stand on the roof and wonder why all of this was happening to me, wonder what the fragments of memories I was getting back meant. Hate myself for ruining my career and my nicely-ordered life with this crazy decision to keep the twins, even though their father was out of my life. I lived across an alley from this club, and they'd play a lot of American music. 70's and 80's stuff, mostly, and one night when I was standing there staring up at the sky, they played this old Moody Blues song,

In Your Wildest Dreams. And it just seemed to sum up all the sentimental memories, and all the wild hopes I had, and the sadness too. Everything I felt about the whole situation, missing the twins' father, being alone in Paris, all of it."

"I started singing it, to myself, to the twins. They loved it; the fact of being pregnant just didn't feel real somehow, until I started singing it to them one night and they... I guess they were making an attempt at *dancing* in there, they kicked like I was going to have mules instead of a pair of babies. They still love it - it's their favorite lullaby. And every time I sing it to them I can't help remembering how I felt then, how badly I wished you were there, in spite of myself."

They slipped sideways in the air for a moment, then Kal-El corrected them back to level flight and turned to look at her, those amazing eyes so wide. "Lois?" he asked in a strengthless, pleading voice.

Oh, please, God, Lois thought, but she'd come too far to turn back. Hope flared brightly in her at the sound of his voice, almost as if he really... She'd been alternately hoping for and dreading this moment since he had torn the door off that 777 jet and looked right into her again. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes as she whispered with a small nod, "Yes, Kal-El. *You.* Jason and Kala are yours."

Lana wasn't even sure why they'd bothered putting headsets on if they weren't going to speak. All four of them had felt the strain of old ties breaking and new ones being made that morning, especially after the apocalyptic argument outside IHOP, which had fortunately broken up without her intervention. *And what would I have said, anyway? 'As the dubious occupant of the moral high ground, I demand that you two act your age!'*

The redhead shook her head slightly in bewilderment. How on earth had they gotten themselves mixed up like this? No matter what she did or said, it seemed wrong. If she tried to mediate between Lois and Richard, not only would she be highly unwelcome, but she'd also be prolonging what looked like an inevitable breakup and thus increasing their turmoil. On the other hand, it was never right to pursue someone else's fiancé. And it didn't help at all that she could still taste Richard's mouth on hers...

"Do you regret it?" Her own voice startled her; Lana hadn't meant to speak aloud.

Richard glanced at her thoughtfully. "No," his voice crackled in her earphones. "Do you?"

"No, I don't," Lana sighed. "I regret that I *don't* regret it, God help me."

He looked a little puzzled by that, or perhaps he was just focusing on flying the seaplane. After a few moments, though, Richard asked cautiously, "You wish you did regret it?"

"Yes," Lana replied. "Because then I could still tell myself I'm a good Midwestern girl, and not a potential home-wrecker."

His laugh was brief and mirthless. "Trust me, at this point our home couldn't be any more wrecked if a herd of wild horses stampeded through it. And *not* because of you - because of *us*. Lois and I were doomed from word one."

It had worked better than he'd dreamed, and Kal-El listened raptly as Lois' voice delved into the years he'd missed. He could almost see it: Jason methodically working the puzzle, Kala perched in the tree like a queen on her throne... The image that branded itself on his mind, however, was Lois turning her face to the sky and drowning in loneliness. How he wished he could have been there for her, in either guise ... or as his true self, if he had been a little wiser, a little less eager to spare her pain.

His heart aching from those thoughts, Kal-El wasn't prepared for Lois' next words. *And every time I sing it to them I can't help remembering how I felt then, how badly I wished you were there, in spite of myself.* The realization - she'd spoken of missing the twins' father only a moment before - struck sharply enough that he momentarily forgot to keep them aloft. Quickly correcting their flight, he turned to her, his voice choked. "Lois?" The sound of her name embodied everything he'd hoped and feared, prayed for and dreaded, since the moment he'd seen her again.

Lois smiled even though her eyes brimmed with tears, and nodded slightly as she whispered back, "Yes, Kal-El. *You.* Jason and Kala are *yours.*" And the look of absolute *relief* on her face surprised him as much as her words. As if she hadn't expected his reaction.

His heart seemed to swell in his chest. Suspicion, even being so nearly certain as he'd been for the past few days, was nothing compared to absolute confirmation. Kal-El found it hard to breathe, a shiver of finality running through him. *Mine. Lois' kids are mine ... ours. Our twins. My God. I'm not alone - and a part of her will always be mine.* Her words to him from so long ago, her voice full of wonder even as the gunshot echoed around the room - *I must have known that for the longest time.*

"Lois, I..." All of a sudden, Kal-El remembered the times he'd seen her before leaving this planet for good, or so he thought. *She was pregnant then. If I had just looked... The thought wouldn't have crossed my mind. But oh, if I had just glanced at her lungs and seen a bit more, I could've known then. I could've stopped all this...*

"Kal-El?" Lois' voice trembled, too, and he realized how distraught he must look, thinking on the past. It was clear that she was as shaken by the confession she had made as he was to hear it. *Please, please, God. Please let him say something, anything, good.*

Squeezing her hand gently, he sought for words that would explain. "I had hoped... Lois, I've wanted them to be mine so badly for so long. That was one of my first thoughts on seeing you with them. But I couldn't imagine, couldn't let myself hope... You don't ... well, I guess you do know how much this means to me."

Lois bit her lip, looking startled and unable to meet his eyes for a moment. For a moment, that beloved face worked with emotion before she stopped. Tentatively, she asked in a near-whisper, "Kal-El, you're not ... angry, are you? I ... I thought it was best ... if..."

She glanced back up in time to catch his puzzled look. "Angry? Because you kept them a secret? No - but I wish I knew why you did that."

"I was afraid," and her voice was tiny, those three words he'd never expected to her from the lips of Fearless Reporter Lois Lane. "I thought ... you'd see them as a mistake. The way you saw our time in the Fortress as a mistake."

"Lois, no," Kal-El said with quiet urgency. "Trying to give up my duty for my own desires: that was a mistake. I should've found a way to balance both ... a career and my life with you. But loving you never was anything but a blessing. And our children..." The simple little phrase stopped him in mid-sentence, and then Lois saw him grin broadly with delight. "**Our children.** It's not just that I'm a father, not just that I'm not the last son of Krypton any more. It's that I'm the father of *Lois Lane's* twins."

Thank God. The weight of the secret, the fear of his rejection, fell away, and Lois started to blush as she heard the reverent tone he gave her name. That and the slightly goofy smile echoed her own reactions to him so long ago; as silly and romantic as she had been over Superman, he felt the same about her.

The full realization of how very groundless her fears had been made her drop her head

against his shoulder, a sob caught in her throat. She'd been so frightened over this for so long, so alone with this knowledge. "I'm so sorry," Lois murmured brokenly. "I was scared ... I was scared you'd be so ashamed of them that ... after everything Jor-El said..."

"Lois ... as far as I'm concerned, it's a miracle," he told her gently. "I could never be ashamed of Jason and Kala. I'm too busy being amazed by them."

Lois had no immediate reply to that, other than to press her cheek against his shoulder. Now they were over Metropolis, Kal-El increasing his altitude slightly to avoid undue attention, and in a few moments he set her down gently a block from the Audi dealership. "I'll meet you in a minute," he said, letting the tenderness in his expression speak for all the things they'd left unsaid.

Nodding, still not trusting herself to speak, Lois headed for the dealership's service entrance. Clark arrived in time to open the door for her, and in a few moments Lois was back in the driver's seat of her beloved Audi. The mechanic had confirmed her suspicions: someone had deliberately tampered with the engine. But now the powerful little car ran smoothly again, and Lois rubbed her thumb over the leather-covered steering wheel with a smile. At last, she finally had control over *one* aspect of her life.

"So, we're headed to the docks?" Clark asked, buckling his seatbelt and casually bracing his arm on the windowsill.

"Precisely," Lois said, revving the engine slightly. Ah, she'd missed that purr. Being on her own turf again made her bold enough to look him in the eye and grin. "Let's go get our kids back."

The life raft was better designed than Stanford had ever dreamed. Even now, it still bobbed at the surface, though it was mostly deflated. The metal canister with the kryptonite inside rolled near the edge as a wave tossed the tiny craft around.

The outcome was inevitable. As more air leaked from the raft, water slipped in, splashing around the outside of the canister. Some of it gradually worked its way through the cracks in the metal.

At last, when Grant was docking the yacht just outside of Metropolis, the first drop of seawater touched the clear Kryptonian crystal within...

...and the silent pulse of electromagnetic energy swept outward in an invisible ring, growing ever larger. Heading toward Metropolis...

Richard banked the plane over Hob's Bay, most of his mind focused on the tasks ahead. When Lois got to the city, she would be picking up her Audi and heading for the docks on the eastern side of the river. He and Lana would be picking his Saab from the airport parking lot and checking in with Perry at the *Planet* first, then taking over the search of the western side. If they were very lucky, they'd find Luthor's yacht docked somewhere. Barring that, perhaps they'd find someone who'd seen it...

The cabin suddenly fell quiet, and Richard had a horrified moment of total recall. The jet's engines cutting out, coasting barely a hundred feet off the ground... But this was different. He hadn't just lost the engines, Richard realized with a cold cramp of fear. The instrument panel had gone haywire, too. Every light was off, and his compass currently claimed he was heading south by southeast, when he was actually flying northwest. "Oh, shit," he muttered, thankful

for one other difference: he had several thousand feet of altitude under him at the moment.

Lana took her headset off, able to hear better without them now. "Richard, what just happened?" she asked worriedly.

"Buckle up and pray," he replied shortly, working the ailerons gently to bring them back to level flight. Their altitude was dropping steadily, but for the moment they had more than enough forward thrust left.

The redhead had been buckled in the entire flight, but she checked anyway. Her voice took on a fretful sharpness as she asked, "What's going on?"

"Lost all the power," Richard retorted. "This is a glider, now." He looked out the window at the bay below; the water was choppy, but not too choppy. *I hope. God, I really hope it's just smooth enough. Not like I have much choice at the moment.*

Lana paused for a moment, just staring at him, and he honestly expected her to panic. But she said very levelly, "What are you going to do?"

"Land without power," Richard said, giving her a brief appreciative glance. Few people could be that calm in such unexpected circumstances. "I've done it before, and water landings in a seaplane are a little more forgiving, but it could get a bit bumpy."

She nodded, and touched the back of his hand briefly. "You handle the landing, I'll handle the praying."

It was enough to make Richard chuckle, when he desperately needed something positive.

Lois had nearly reached the docks, Clark flinching at the way she wove through traffic, when the engine suddenly sputtered and died. Fortunately they were the only ones on the road at the moment, so the car could coast to a stop. Lois slammed her palm against the steering wheel and swore comprehensively. "*Luthor!* I'll wring his goddamn neck when I get hold of him! Those bastards at the service center said she was frikkin' *fixed!* Sorry sons of..."

Clark caught her hand and squeezed gently until she stopped and looked at him. A chill swept through her at the expression on his face, and it was only intensified by his low voice. "It's not the car ... it's everything. The whole city... It's another blackout, Lois. Worse, this time."

"My God..." Thanks to Superman's miraculous reappearance, the aftereffects of the first blackout had not been too severe. But now... "Do you think it's Luthor?"

"Has to be," he replied grimly. "Lois, I have to go."

"Then go," she said, trying to keep the quaver out of her voice. With their current situation still unsettled, it was all she could do to say those words. To not plead, *Don't go*. Not being understanding of his mission was what doomed them the first time. "Be careful. And come back to me in one piece."

He smiled, stroking her cheek softly. "I will... Wait for me right here, Lois. And *you* be careful."

Lois put her hand atop his and leaned her cheek against his hand fondly. In spite of everything, a small mischievous smile started to curl her lips. "Aren't I always?"

Unbuckling his seatbelt, Kal-El laughed softly at her. "More like *never*. Don't do anything rash - I mean it. We have too much to talk about when I get back."

"Isn't talking what got us into trouble in the first place?"

That little self-deprecating chuckle she knew so well, that warm delighted smile she so loved to see... There was so much else to say, and no time in which to say it. Kal-El leaned in to kiss her once, gently, but a lovers' kiss nonetheless. Lois slipped her hand around the back

of his neck, holding him for one heartbeat longer. Then they both pulled back, the inside of the car thrumming with words unsaid. "Wait for me, Lois. Be safe," Kal-El murmured.

"I love you," Lois said simply, her voice low.

"I love you, too." And then he was gone, so fast that he was only a speck in the sky as Lois got out of the car and looked after him.

"You swoony romantic moron," Lois sighed, shaking her head at her own actions, but unable to stop smiling. Knowing that he still loved her, that he loved their children - *their children*, what a phrase - couldn't make everything better like the wave of a magic wand, but it came pretty damn close.

The car started beeping to let her know she'd opened the door with the keys in the ignition, and at the same moment her cell phone began to ring. Apparently the EMP had passed - Lois got back in the Audi and pulled her phone out of her purse. It was about time Richard or Perry called...

This electromagnetic pulse lasted longer than the previous one, but fortunately, most devices started working again as soon as the pulse passed. Superman flew around the city, rapidly taking care of those that didn't. A metro train's brakes failed, leaving it coasting toward the end of the track. He stopped it, and moved on to help another jumbo jet stay aloft until its engines powered back up. Faster than any human eye could follow, Superman found each problem, fixed it, and moved on to the next. The entire time, in the back of his mind lurked the thought of Lois.

*We really do have so much to talk about... First we have to get the twins back. **Our** twins. God, the mere thought is still too much to process.*

He rose above the city, taking a final glance around... Out on Hob's Bay, was that...? Superman felt his stomach lurch at the thought of Lana and Richard crashing, but he soon realized that the plane's engines had fired back up, and Richard was pulling it out of the glide even as he watched. *They're safe. I'd better get back to Lois.*

Lex hung up the phone, smiling lazily, and gazed with sleepy satisfaction at the sophisticated recording equipment in front of him. He didn't even notice Stanford taking another swig of warm Mylanta.

The bald man leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the desk. The monitors before him presently showed only stillness and silence in the stateroom where moments ago there had been screams.

"D'ya think she'll come?" Grant asked from the doorway.

Lex rolled his eyes toward the shorter man. "Of course she will. Lois Lane will come running - and so will *he*."

The warm, chalky liquid made Stanford cough, and he turned a tortured look on Lex. "Was that really necessary? We already knew it affected them. Did you have to expose them to the stuff until it knocked them out?"

Cold eyes narrowed, and Stanford knew he was treading awfully close to the fine line between useful and dead. At this point, he didn't care. Hearing Kala scream for her mother was like a knife between his ribs. Maybe Kitty was right, maybe all of this was just too wrong for words...

"Relax, Stanford," Lex said levelly. "Their powers of recuperation will astound you, I'm sure. Especially since we removed the sample from the air vent. But to answer your question,

yes, it was necessary. Every hunter knows the best lure is the distress call of the young."

Just when he thought the city was safe, for the time being, Superman heard a greedy roar. An abandoned warehouse - the very one that Lois had searched only two days ago - had gone up in sudden flames. He put it out with his freezing breath, using precious time, and discovering in the process the body of a man surrounded by ten remote ignition devices similar to those he'd found at other arson sites. So this was the arsonist, slain by his own works; evidently the timers had all reset unexpectedly when the electromagnetic pulse passed by. But his relief that there would be no more fires couldn't compete with his growing feeling of unease.

Hurrying, not sure why, Kal-El headed back toward the docks. His intuition proved correct. Lois wasn't where he'd left her, where she'd promised to stay. And he wasn't entirely surprised by that.

She also wasn't anywhere along the riverside where they were supposed to be checking the docks. *No. Oh, God, no. Lois, where the hell are you?* On the verge of panic, he forced himself to stop and listen for her heartbeat...

There. South of the city. He rocketed toward the sound, passing out of Metropolis proper and down the coast, along the waterfront industrial complexes... Lois' heartbeat cut off suddenly, but not as though something had happened to her. It sounded more like she'd been forced into a soundproof room... Kal-El's own heart raced in terror. *No. Lex can't have her, she wouldn't walk into a trap, it must be something else, it has to be...*

He checked his hasty flight. Her car was below, parked alongside an alley. This was barely a twenty-minute drive from where she'd been, though it hadn't been on their route. No one was nearby, and Kal-El landed beside it.

The driver's side door was unlocked. Looking within, frantic now, he saw her cell phone on the floorboards, her purse upended in the passenger's seat. Of its contents, only the gun was unaccounted for, so this was no mere robbery. The jacket she'd left in the back seat was also gone, and Kal-El had a sinking feeling he knew what had happened.

She took the gun and her shoulder holster, took the jacket to hide the gun, and she left. But where? Kal-El stood up, looking around, but this area was full of factories and shipyards, endless confusing tangles of metal and concrete to his x-ray vision. Perhaps he'd get a better idea from her cell phone...

He flipped it open, and after looking over the series of buttons, found the one marked Voicemail. Fortunately, Lois didn't keep a password on her voicemail, so playback started immediately.

A digitized voice said, "Good evening, Ms. Lane. Since you seem to be having some trouble, I'll tell you precisely how to locate me. But first, a little musical interlude..."

The voice faded, and Kal-El's keen hearing detected the faint crackle of static. He was playing something back on a hi-fi stereo system...

Kal-El's eyes went wide with horror, his facing paling. He heard Jason crying weakly, heard Kala whimpering, "Leave us alone!" A moment later, one of the kids retched, and then Kala's voice, breaking with terror, "No! No! Get away! **Mommmeeee!**"

Before he could stop himself, his hand on the phone clenched reflexively, and the sounds mercifully cut off as plastic and silicon chips ground to dust.

In the Belly of the Beast

Lois breathed shallowly, keeping her back pressed to the wall and the gun aimed at the ceiling as she sidled along the corridor. Getting onto the *Gertrude* had been easier than she'd expected, but the reporter knew that was only the beginning. Finding the twins would be far more difficult; escaping with them would be nearly impossible. But ever since she'd gotten that message from Luthor, ever since she'd heard Kala and Jason crying and calling for her, escaping wasn't Lois' goal. Getting to her children was. If she was with them, she could protect them - with her life, if necessary.

She had known, from the moment she set foot on the yacht's deck, that this particular adventure might kill her. It was a risk Lois was willing to take. At least she might be able to take Luthor with her...

Another damned corner. Lois stopped, slid silently down onto one knee and peered cautiously around the edge of the wall. This hallway was short, ending in the open door to a stateroom. They would have to keep the kids locked up, but there were two other doors to check out. Lois crept forward to peer into the portholes, finding nothing of interest. Machinery in one, cleaning supplies in the other. And the open room was truly empty when she checked it as well.

Onward, to the next door, the next corridor, relentless in her search. Lois knew that Lex's goons had to be looking for her. After that message, she was expected. But she had gotten past the nervous, ratty-looking guy outside this enclosed repair bay, so perhaps they were still waiting for her to arrive, not realizing she was already on board.

Lois didn't allow hope to make her reckless, however. She eased up to the next open doorway, beyond which she could hear running water. Nothing prepared her for the sight that met her eyes when she peered around the doorframe: Lex Luthor, standing with his back to her, apparently brushing his teeth.

A wave of chilly fear swept over Lois; here was the monster himself, and she was only a few feet away from discovery in his very lair. But wrathful heat bloomed in its wake - he had done something to her children to make them scream for rescue. Lois leveled the Ladysmith at him, lining the sights up with the back of Luthor's bald head. Her hands didn't tremble as she slipped one finger inside the trigger guard, and her lips thinned to a grim line. *This will blow my cover - but that won't matter once you're dead. Your hired muscle cares only about money, not your twisted schemes. And even if they do try to stop me, I've got more ammo.*

With such cold thoughts in mind, Lois held her aim steady and began squeezing the trigger slowly. *Goodbye, Luthor. May you rot in Hell.*

For a moment, Kal-El stared at the phone. His mind was awash in horror and guilt; horror at the thought of the twins, crying, calling for their mother, and guilt at the realization that he had inadvertently destroyed the phone before hearing the most important part of the message: how to find Luthor.

Frantically, he scanned the area, trying to make sense of the jumble of steel parts and lead ballast all around. He also strained his hearing for one whisper of Lois' voice, for the beat of her heart, but could hear neither. Panic began to gnaw at him; where *was* she? Did Luthor have her already? Surely that maniac couldn't have captured and subdued Lois this quickly...

With his hearing at its most sensitive, he became aware of the sounds he least wanted to hear: alarms and sirens. Many of them. But what could be causing them, almost an hour after the EMP swept past? Kal-El hated to tear his attention away from Lois.

A low, greedy roar, one he'd thought he would never hear again after finding body of the arsonist. *Another fire? But how... delayed timers gone haywire after the EMP?* And then he realized he wasn't hearing *one* fire, but several. One of them was dangerously near the main propane lines serving the city...

Giving one last, tortured look around the shipyards, Kal-El whispered, "Hold on, Lois. Keep the kids safe for me, just for a little while longer." He took to the air swiftly, trying to discharge duty in time to return and save his beloved.

The Ladysmith's trigger had been lightened to require a mere two and a half pounds of pressure, and it glided back smoothly. Lois never slackened the pressure; she knew better than to pull the trigger sharply, as that might spoil her aim. Instead she squeezed it, and the front sight of the gun never wavered from the center of Luthor's head.

When the gun fired, the noise was nearly deafening in that small space, and it was quickly followed by a loud tinkling crash as Luthor vanished. Lois had an instant of bewilderment before she realized what happened and threw herself across the hall, cursing her luck. It wasn't Luthor she'd shot at, but his reflection in a mirror that took up most of the wall. And now, not only was the bastard still alive, but he knew she was here...

No time to waste. Abandoning stealth, Lois ran to put distance between herself and Luthor, whom she could hear yelling into a cell phone or a walkie-talkie behind her. She turned at random, bolting down a corridor and into a gym room. Lois rushed through a final door and came to a sudden halt by the pool. *Shit. I don't need to be outside.*

Behind her, the gym door slammed open. No time to turn back, now. Lois darted around the low wall, hoping it lead to a staircase, but found herself trapped. *Well, maybe I can lower myself off this edge - the engine room is probably down there on that lowest deck somewhere. It's a bit of a drop, but...*

"Ms. Lane?" Luthor's cultured voice held a hint of predatory mockery. "Ms. Lane, I think it would be to your advantage to put the gun down."

"And come out with my hands up?" she shot back nastily. "What is this, a low-budget Western?"

Lex chuckled cruelly. "No, Ms. Lane. This is more of a suspense. Namely, which of your bastard children am I holding hostage right this moment?"

Her spine turned to ice, and her stomach plummeted. He'd gone for them so damn fast... Or he was bluffing. "How the hell do I even know you *have* one of them with you? If I stick my head out, you could shoot me right here."

"Oh, no, Ms. Lane," Luthor replied. "I wouldn't shoot you. Not only am I not carrying a gun, but live bait is *far* more effective at luring the big ones." Giving that only a second to register in her mind, he continued, "The boys are waiting inside - I wouldn't want them to get overexcited, and do something regrettable. No, this is between you and me, Ms. Lane. You and me, and one other..."

His voice trailed off, and a moment later Lois heard what she'd been dreading most: Jason's shaky voice. "M-Mommy?"

Lois swore under her breath, helplessly. *How could I have done this? I **knew** it was a trap. I was just vain enough to think I could trade my life for theirs...* "Jason, honey?" she called softly, wanting him to know she was really there.

"Don' come out, Mommy," Jason said, in a stronger voice. "He's a bad man."

"Good and evil are merely different perspectives," Lex said absently. "Now, Ms. Lane,

put the gun down and push it around the corner. Don't even think about shooting me - I've got your boy in front of me. And twins are like salt-and-pepper shakers, aren't they? It's not quite the same if you only have one of the set."

"Lex, you don't need them," Lois reasoned, forcing herself to sound merely exasperated. The terror and rage she kept locked down very tightly. "You have *me*. We've done this before, and he came right along to rescue me. Let the twins go - they're just kids. You don't need them."

"They're just *his* kids," Lex replied silkily. "And I believe I'll keep them, all the same."

Lois swallowed the lump in her throat. She had to make this believable. "Where did you get an asinine idea like that? Can't you *count*?"

That cruel, mocking laugh again. "He's an *alien*, a fact you seemed to forget once upon a time. Who knows what their gestation is? As for where I got the idea, well, from *you*. Specifically, from the blank space you left on their birth certificates. Come now, Ms. Lane - your boy is getting a little nervous. Slide the gun out and come here."

"Oh, please," Lois said. *If you're gonna bluff, go for it all.* "You're assuming aliens can even breed with earthlings. Which is fairly absurd - been watching too many B-movies, have you?"

"So, you're saying you really *can't* remember who you slept with?" Lex asked lightly. Lois didn't need to see him to know he was grinning like a rabid fox. He continued, "Let me narrow the field for you, Ms. Lane. At least one of these kids has superpowers."

Shit. I really wish I could make myself believe he's dumb enough to let me have another shot at him... And I wish he didn't know how to wind me up so well. Sonofabitch. "So typical, Lex. Tell me, do you ever get tired of hiding behind someone else? Although you've reached a new low, using a six-year-old for a human shield."

Jason gasped and whimpered. "Well, his mother *is* a dangerous trigger-happy reporter who was willing to shoot me in the back - I think I'm perfectly justified to hold this kryptonite shard to his throat until you put the gun down."

Lana and Richard arrived at the *Planet* only to find Ella Lane in Perry's office. She raised a silver brow at them questioningly, and Lana felt very uneasy with those familiar hazel eyes trained on her.

Richard was taken aback, but covered it. "Ella! This is a surprise. Let me introduce you to Lana Lang, the designer - she's an old friend of Clark's, and she's graciously volunteered her time to help us search for the twins. Lana, this is Ella Lane, Lois' mother."

"Pleased to meet you," Ella said coolly, but her focus was on more important matters. "Richard, Peregrine's told me everything he knows, but it seems you've been too busy to update him this morning. What's the progress on finding my grandchildren, and where is my daughter?"

"Both the leads we had turned out to be false," Richard replied quickly. "But we got a call this morning that said the message Luthor sent Lois was placed from the docks here. She and Clark are on their way up now, and the three of us are going to search the docks for Luthor's yacht or any sign of him."

Ella nodded, casting another speculative glance at Lana. "Hmm. Well, then, let's get to work dividing the dock area up into a search grid."

"Richard, you get started," Lana said, sounding casual, but the look she gave him was full of purpose. "I'll get us some coffee. Mrs. Lane, how do you take yours?"

"Black, with sugar," Ella replied.

"Ella, Uncle Perry brews that coffee," Richard warned. "Newsroom coffee is ... an experience."

"It can't be any worse than barracks coffee," Ella replied. "Sam brewed it so strong you couldn't pour it in a metal thermos."

When Lana left, the other three adjourned to the conference room, which suddenly seemed a great deal cooler than the rest of the office. Ella sat down while Perry dragged out the maps of Metropolis they'd used the other day, and Richard found her sharp eyes on him. He sat across from her and returned the look exasperatedly. After everything he'd been through that morning, he wasn't in the mood to deal with Lois' mother being nosy.

To her credit, though, Ella came directly to the point, and spoke without rancor. "You do realize, Richard, that if you cheat on my daughter and she catches you - which she would - she's liable to destroy everything of value you own - and physically harm you in the process?"

"I'm not the one who's cheating," Richard said, the blunt assumption startled out of him by Ella's forthright question. He quickly tried to backtrack, saying, "Not that she is. But I know I'm not cheating on Lois, and I know I won't either."

Ella merely nodded. "So, your dinner out to patch up the relationship, how did that go?"

That night at the Kasbah seemed years ago, as if it had taken place in the era B.K. - Before the Kidnapping. Richard felt a little rueful smile playing about his lips, and replied, "Pretty well. Not as well as I had expected, but ... it's no secret Lois and I are having problems right now."

"Mm-hmm. And your solution is spend as much time as possible away from her and with Ms. Lang?"

Perry was deliberately ignoring them; he'd made his feelings on the matter clear days ago. Richard was starting to get just a little annoyed with Ella's tone, and he replied a trifle sharply, "Mrs. Lane, *our* solution is to try and find the twins. If we're not getting along with each other, then we won't try to be on a search party together. That's just not going to be productive."

Those hazel eyes were all too familiar to him; he'd seen that speculative look from three generations of Lane women. Fortunately, Lana arrived with their coffee before Ella could ask another probing question. Richard sipped his to cover a sigh of relief, glad he wouldn't have to discuss the apocalyptic argument this morning.

Ella, on the other hand, bit her lip. She would've much preferred to continue dissecting Richard's motives - he was a good man, if not the perfect match for her daughter, but at the moment he seemed to be hiding something. And right now, dragging that secret out of him was far preferable to the worry that nagged at her mind.

Not only was Ella absolutely terrified for the twins, in spite of hiding it as well as only a general's wife could. She also had a terrible suspicion that she simply could not shake; her mother's intuition kept telling her that Lois was in danger, too. That her hot-headed child had done something impulsive, irrational ... and possibly fatal.

Lois felt as though her blood had frozen in her veins, leaving her momentarily incapable of action or thought. She could hear only her own breath, rapid and shallow, as Lex's cruel words wormed their way into her mind. *Kryptonite - he's threatening Jason with kryptonite...*

She had no choice left. "All right," Lois said, and hating the weakness she heard in her voice, she steadied herself forcibly. "I'm coming out. Don't hurt Jason."

"The gun first," Lex said quickly. "Put it down, and slide it toward the door as far as you can."

On the smooth deck, the Ladysmith glided several feet. Lois waited just out of sight, her heart thumping madly, as Lex spoke to one of his men. Footsteps, the faint clink of metal as the gun was lifted, and then Lex spoke again. "All right, Ms. Lane, very good. I'm sure your boy appreciates it. Now, hands on your head, come out *slowly*."

She, who had rebelled against virtually all authority from the time she could walk, complied absolutely. Stepping out from behind the wall, Lois' pained hazel eyes sought her son's clear blue ones. There was fear in them, yes, but also determination, and a mad kind of courage that he must've gotten from her... Lois shook her head slightly, warning him to be cautious. The shard of crystal that Lex held against his throat looked sharp enough to kill him. "Here I am, Lex. Let him go."

Lex's answer was to step back inside. "Not so quickly, Ms. Lane. That may not be your only weapon. Come inside." Turning to the tall blond man behind him, whom Lois recognized from the fire scene, he added, "Riley, search her. Thoroughly. I wouldn't put it past her to have a knife in her hair."

Inside the gym room, Lois stood absolutely still and watched Jason, reassuring him with her eyes as the other man approached her. And Riley was thorough, beginning at her boots and checking for a knife tucked into them, continuing upward searching for a pistol strapped to her ankle or perhaps another knife. He found no backup weapons by the time he reached her knees, and... *Getting a little personal there, mister*, Lois thought coldly, transferring her narrowed gaze to Lex, who was smiling at her with every evidence of good cheer.

Riley emptied Lois' pockets and checked around the waistband of her jeans, sliding his hands up her sides. She hadn't flinched, but when he obviously began to enjoy his task, Lois said sharply, "Those are real, and they don't have weapons hidden in them."

"Riley," Lex said, and the man moved his hands. He checked her arms and ran his fingers through her hair, making Lois wish she *had* hidden a knife in there. Maybe he'd cut himself... Riley stepped back with a nod to his boss, and Lex finally moved the shard away from Jason's neck. Just slightly, but enough to make Lois breathe easier.

"Lovely," Lex commented. "Thank you very much for being cooperative, Ms. Lane." Lois glared at him, not trusting herself to answer, and saw the woman standing in the doorway behind him. That face looked familiar ... Lois' eyes narrowed even further as she recognized the woman Superman had rescued from a runaway car, missing the museum robbery in the process. Her suspicions had been correct all along - Lex was behind everything, the robbery, the fires - any moment now he'd reveal his Grand Evil Scheme...

"Mommy?" Jason whispered. He hadn't tried to get away from Lex, not yet, but tears were beginning to shine in his eyes.

"Honey, it's okay," Lois tried to soothe. The glare hadn't worked, so she tried giving Lex a defeated look. "You got what you wanted - let my son go, Luthor." And though it cost her to do so, her throat closing on the word, she added in a whisper, "Please."

An art collector, at last standing before the *Mona Lisa* the day it was returned to the Louvre after being stolen and missing for years, might have had an expression of fulfilled delight on his face similar to the one Lex now wore. He released Jason, and the boy ran to his mother, stifling sobs.

Lois dropped to her knees, Luthor and his cronies and the rest of the world vanishing for an instant as she swept her son into her arms. Even Superman was forgotten as the reporter

hugged Jason tightly, choking back a sob of her own. While he was in the circle of her arms, no power on earth could harm him - and God help any that tried. Unable to put her relief into words, Lois kissed him on the forehead, temple, and cheek, all of her fierce love fraught in that gesture.

In a moment, Lois realized that Jason's breath was hitching from more than tears, and his skin was unhealthily warm under her touch. Her heart sank; so the kids *were* susceptible to kryptonite after all. She had always hoped that they would get immunity to that deadly substance from her... "Jason, honey, are you okay? Is your sister okay?"

He looked up at her, still trying to be brave, and those amazingly blue eyes went through her like blades. "Mommy, I'm sorry... I shoulda been watchin' out for us..."

Jason would never know how much it pained her to hear the shame in his voice, for not being able to stop something beyond his control. *Dear God, he's only six. Is this his father's legacy, this need to take responsibility for things that aren't his fault?* Lois had no time to examine the thought, too busy stroking Jason's hair and trying to soothe him. "No, honey, no - this wasn't your fault. You did the best you could, better than anybody else could've. *It wasn't your fault.*" She gently caught his chin to emphasize her words, willing him to understand.

"You sure?" Jason sniffled, his lip quivering, but never took those wounded eyes from hers.

"Of course, baby," Lois whispered, kissing his forehead again. The strength of her hug had pulled him to one side of her, and with the kiss she nudged him a little further over.

"You're so brave." Her heart just bled to have placed either of them in this kind of situation, regardless of not knowing what Luthor had been planning.

"The bad man was gonna hurt Kala, an' I stopped 'im," Jason told her, cuddling close.

"Very good," Lois replied, noticing that Lex chuckled but not knowing why. "You've kept the both of you safe, right?"

"Uh-huh." It seemed to be working; Jason was calmer, rubbing his eyes with his sleeve. "Nobody's gonna hurt my sister."

"That's my boy," Lois said warmly, and kissed his cheek.

"This is all very touching," Lex said, sounding bored, "but I'm afraid we don't have time for an extended reunion. Come here, boy."

The look of fear, mistrust, and blossoming hate that Jason shot at Lex was pure Lois; even as she continued trying to angle herself in front of him, she knew she'd never seen a look like that on Kal-El's face. Before Lois could say anything to stop Lex, Jason whispered, "They're saying Superman's our daddy."

That dark hair flew as Lois whipped around, hazel eyes startled. *So Lex told them? Why not? Just another twist of the knife. But I know my twins. It might just have the opposite effect. Their Daddy always saves the day.* Even as Lex started toward them, Lois smiled conspiratorially at Jason. "He is," she confirmed, a little surprised to feel her own courage rise at the words.

The sparkle of wonder in Jason's eyes was enough to sustain her, to make giving up that long-held secret in the presence of her nemesis a thing of delight for a moment. Just that admission seemed to bond mother and son even tighter...

And then Lex was beside them, the shiv in his hand, reached for Jason with the other. The boy yelped and hid behind Lois, and she stood up, glaring defiantly at Lex as she put her arms behind her to hold her son. "You have us, you have the gun, you're hiding Kala away, *leave him alone,*" she growled.

"I'm not leaving him with you," Lex replied warily. "No telling what you'd talk him into doing - you must know about his strength."

Lois' eyes glittered with hatred, and for a moment she looked as though she might lunge for Lex's throat like a rabid wolf. Riley sidled closer, but Lex didn't step back. The reporter muttered through clenched teeth, "You bastard. My mind doesn't work like yours, Luthor. I'd never willingly endanger my child."

He smiled at her, a terrible light gleaming in his eyes like the death of stars. "Doesn't it, Ms. Lane? You've already endangered your children - you endangered them the moment you lay down with their father."

Metropolis was in chaos. It seemed that the EMP had triggered an unheard-of number of fires. Most were small, not having been set with the intricate types of accelerants that made the larger fires so deadly. Still, even a burning wastebasket can become a raging inferno - especially if there are two dozen of them at once, taxing the resources of the fire department and a superhero with a great deal to worry about.

Lex is getting away, part of his mind insisted. You know perfectly well that this is just a distraction while he escapes to God-knows-where with your children - and with Lois, most likely. She'd never resist a summons like that.

No more than I can shirk my duty, the rest of him replied. Distraction or not, lives are at stake here. I can't let all these innocent people be endangered by my personal conflict with Lex, and my involvement with Lois.

Jason and Kala have been Lex's captives for two days now. And the last thing you heard was them screaming for help. The people of Metropolis can cope while you rescue your kids. It's what any father would do.

But I'm not just any father. All of a sudden, I think I understand why Lois wouldn't tell me they were mine. No one should ever have to make a choice like this...

In the end, duty won, though the choice itself was bitter. Lois is with them. Lex couldn't really hurt them - he needs them to lure me in. With Lois there, he won't be able to do them any harm, and she's perfectly capable of taking care of herself. Their danger is very real, but not immediate. These people will die, right now, and die badly if I don't help fight the fires.

*Damn you, Luthor. I **will** find them - you can't hide them from me forever. And when I do, there'll be hell to pay...*

For a moment, it had looked like a standoff, Lois glaring at Lex, Lex holding the shiv and not backing down. Jason peered out from behind his mother worriedly, still trying to be brave, and it was his expression that finally moved Kitty to act.

She came into the room with an exasperated sigh and a clatter of high heels, elbowing past Lex and hoping he'd be too startled to lash out. Her eyes met Lois' for an instant, and then she was reaching out to Jason. "C'mon, Jason. Let's let the grown-ups talk about boring grownup stuff, okay honey?"

He started to take a step toward her, then hesitated, looking up at his mother. Kitty gave Lois a pleading look, hoping the reporter would realize she meant the boy no harm, and added, "Don't you want to go tell Kala that Mommy's here?"

That thawed him enough to sidle toward her, but he still looked up at Lois. "Are you gonna be okay?" Jason asked.

Lois' heart almost broke for him then. As scared as he was, Jason was still wanted to

protect her. "Sure, sweetheart," Lois said, forcing herself to smile. "You go tell Kala I'm coming, okay?"

He nodded, and with a last belligerent glance at Luthor, he followed Kitty from the room.

"Riley, leave us," Lex said softly.

"Boss..."

"Go," the older man reiterated firmly. "You searched her quite thoroughly, Riley, I'm sure to be safe. Go outside, tell Grant to get moving."

Now they were alone, and Lois was looking down the barrel of her own gun, seeing the dark amusement on Lex's face. Hatred, fear, and shame twisted within her, coalescing into furious bravado. Though it was probably unwise, Lois couldn't stop herself from provoking her old enemy. "Thoroughly indeed. If he'd been any more thorough, he'd have strip-searched me - which you no doubt would have enjoyed. Why didn't you order it, Lex? You could've videotaped the whole thing and watched it when the Viagra's not working."

Lex had stepped back slightly when Kitty and Jason left, keeping himself out of easy range. He knew all too well that Lois could handle herself in a fight, and if he gave her the slightest opportunity, she would try to wrestle the gun from him. So he merely chuckled at her taunts. "Ms. Lane...or shall I call you Lois? We do know each other, after all. Anyway, I wouldn't dream of ordering the men to strip-search you. They've been sequestered without feminine company for months."

Again, that cold gleam in his eyes shone as he added, "And I don't share."

A Dangerous Mind

*You belong to me,
My Snow White Queen.
There's nowhere to run,
So let's just get it over.
Soon I know you'll see
You're just like me.
Don't scream anymore,
My love,
'Cause all I want is you...*

~Evanescence, 'Snow White Queen'

Every rescue worker in the city knew Superman's mind was on something else. He flew through the last of the fires, blowing it out with freezing super-breath as he passed, and paused only long enough to see that no one at the scene was severely injured. Then the hero was gone, leaving without a word to the firefighters or the gathering press.

This last scene was near the *Daily Planet* building, and he headed there. A thought had been brewing in Superman's mind as he worked. *The logical assumption, finding Lois' car near the shipyards, would be that he's taken her on the ship. Then again, the logical assumption on seeing the message about the island would be that he took the kids to an actual island, and while we followed it up, he was on the ship all along. Luthor is smart enough to deceive us again; he might have them somewhere else entirely, expecting me to look for the ship.*

Not to mention, he's done something fairly large-scale with the crystals he stole from me. I'm not sure exactly what would happen to most of them if you just dropped them in the water - they build various structures, including the chamber that stripped my powers away. And Luthor has kryptonite. If I go looking for the ship, I might just find a trap instead. He has the twins and Lois - I can't let him catch me, too.

He had seen Lois check her cell phone messages from her office phone, but doing so required a PIN number that checking them from the phone itself didn't. Unfortunately, though he'd watched her punch numbers into the keypad, Kal-El had never tried to figure out exactly what the code was. It was one of the invasions of privacy that he spent a great deal of time avoiding, precisely because it would be so easy to do.

Now I wish I was a little less moral... Maybe Perry will know what her PIN is. The man who spent so much time flying around the city had learned long ago to fold his Clark clothes up and stash them in his cape pocket. He looked a little ruffled after changing in the airshaft, but not enough to cause comment. When he walked into the conference room, no one noticed his clothing at all.

"Where's Lois?" Perry asked, Lana and Richard seconding the question. Clark was caught out, his double life once again causing havoc. *How did I forget? Damn, a cover story, quick...*

At his dumbfounded look, though, Ella spoke, her voice rising slightly. *"Where is my daughter?"* she demanded, feeling her fearful hunch proved.

"We split up," Clark said, and quickly continued, "Lois was with Superman. I figured she'd be safe. But when all the fires started, I guess he had to leave her and take care of the city. Lois didn't show up where we were supposed to meet, and I found her car by the shipyards. Everything was in it except her and the gun, and her phone was broken."

"The shipyards," Richard muttered. "Luthor has her and the twins now, you can bet on it."

And we have no idea where the ship is headed - wish we could get Superman to look for it."

"They might not be on it," Jimmy said, and Clark was relieved to hear someone else voice his own thought. "Luthor's pretty devious. It'd be just like him to send Superman after the yacht when Lois and twins aren't even there."

"You're right," Perry said gruffly. "And knowing that evil sonofa..." He glanced at Ella, and continued, "...gun, he'd have a trap laid for Superman."

"But if not the ship, where?" Richard said in frustration.

"I wish we had a way to get Lois' phone messages," Clark said. "It looked like she was listening to it and then dropped it. Maybe there's a message from Luthor on it."

"Mrs. Mackenzie..." Lana started to say, but Richard leapt to his feet.

"We don't have to go through all that," the International editor said. "Lois can get her messages from any phone. All we have to do is dial her number and hit the pound key when her message starts."

"Don't you need a password or something for that?" Clark asked.

Richard looked crestfallen only for a moment. "Yeah, but she has all her PIN codes and things stored in a file on her computer. Perry, you can access her files, right?"

The editor-in-chief shook his head. "She's a department head, Richard. Her files are password protected, even from me. I.T. might be able to get it for you..."

Richard shook his head. "They take forever to do anything. Call them, but I'll try to guess her password."

"Good luck," Perry told him.

Ten minutes later, Richard was still sitting in front of Lois' computer glaring at her password protect screen, and only Ella Lane standing behind him kept him from cursing. Knowing that Lois' password was usually whatever was on her mind the most, he'd tried everything he could think of connected to the blackout. Then he started trying names, but none of the family's names worked.

He seemed stumped, and despair made Lois' office stifling, which was already crowded with Lana, Ella, and Clark watching Richard. Then Richard gave an annoyed sigh and typed in *Clark*.

That didn't work; however, it did make Ella raise an eyebrow. Richard then tried *Superman* and *Krypton*, but neither worked. After a moment, he asked through gritted teeth, "Clark, what's your middle name?"

"Huh?" He'd been watching, but seeing Richard try his name had made him nervous all over again. When all of this was over, he and Lois would have to figure out what they would tell Richard ... and everyone else. "Um, it's Joseph."

Richard froze, his hands tightening into fists for a second. Ella whipped her head around, eyes wide. Clark found it easy to look confused; he had no idea that Kala's middle name was Josephine, and that his daughter was named for him twice over. The password wasn't *Joseph* either. Not even *Elroy*, the name of Lois' childhood cat, worked.

"Maybe it's a place," Ella said. "Try *Wiesbaden*."

"Wiesbaden?" Clark asked. "What's the significance of that?"

"It's the city in Germany where Lois was born. Sam was stationed at the base there at the time," her mother replied.

"No luck," Richard said. "But she does tend to use a place - when I met her, her debit card PIN was the building and apartment number she lived at. I just wish I knew what location was on her mind the most lately..."

Clark didn't want to say it - didn't want to *think* it - but he had an idea. "Did you try *Fortress*?"

"As in Solitude? Good thought." Richard tried both words, but the image of Lois on the screen kept shaking her finger scoldingly. "Damn!"

"Try *Arctic*," Clark said.

"Arctic?"

"That's where the Fortress is... Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because Lois said she couldn't tell us where it is," Richard replied, looking at him narrowly.

In spite of the icy chill running down his spine, Clark gave him a helpless grin and pushed up his glasses. "Well, she swore me to secrecy with everything about, you know, *him*." Which wasn't a lie - Lois had talked a lot about Superman before she figured out the secret, and she'd always said that if anyone else heard her going on about him, she'd have to kill them.

Richard typed in the phrase, but it didn't work either. "I could've sworn that would be it..." he muttered.

A sudden flash of inspiration hit Clark then. "Wait. How'd you spell it?"

"A-R-C-T-I-C," Richard said, looking confused.

"How does Lois spell it?" Clark said.

Lana felt very left out, as everyone else in the room knew about that particular quirk. "Try it A-R-T-I-C," Ella said, crossing her fingers. All four of them cheered when the password was finally accepted.

However, the moment was rather spoiled for Clark by the speculative way that Ella and Richard were looking at him.

I don't share. Lois felt her stomach lurch at the implication. But she would never show that to Lex. Instead she sneered at him. "Oh, please, Lex. I'm not your type - I have ethics."

"I'm not your type either, Lois, being *human*, but we could work something out," he said cheerfully.

"Oh, yeah, 'cause the first thing I ever slept with was an alien," Lois muttered, rolling her eyes and guarding her heart.

"I'm aware he wasn't your first," Lex purred. "Women like you never wait. For you, the first time was probably in the backseat of his daddy's car. How old were you, Lois? Fourteen? Fifteen?"

"You know *nothing* about me, Lex," Lois growled. "You're just displacing your hatred of women on me. What happened to you as a kid to make you such a misogynist? Did the biggest tramp in school refuse to go out with you or something?"

He smiled thinly. "Women are devious, treacherous creatures, Lois, ruled by fickle emotions instead of cold logic. And I know enough about you to know you're a prime example of the type."

"You think so?" She couldn't let him see that anything got to her, couldn't act hurt or frightened by anything he said. Her only chance was to keep him talking long enough to turn the tables on him. Long enough for Kal-El to find them.

"Oh, of course," Lex replied. "You fell in love with this hero and let your lust for him blind you to everything about him - including the fact that he's an alien. You do realize you're lucky to be alive? Giving birth to his spawn might've killed you, if they'd had their powers from the start. And what a legacy *that* would be, hmm?"

"So he's not from around here," Lois spat, edging closer to him. "He's still more human than *you* are. You don't even have his excuse; you're just a monster, a sick, warped, sad old man whose Mommy didn't hug him enough or something."

It wasn't working. Lex only smiled, circling to keep the distance between them the same. "Such spirit, such utter ruthlessness. You'd say anything to get the upper hand here, wouldn't you? You're just like me, Lois, only you have limits."

"I am *nothing* like you," Lois replied hotly, unable to keep the vehemence out of her voice then.

"You aren't?" Lex asked. "May I remind you that you were perfectly willing to shoot an unarmed man in the back? That's cold-blooded murder, Lois."

"That was justifiable homicide," she hissed. "Difference is, it was *you* I tried to kill. Anyone who knew you would do the same."

"No, no, no," Lex corrected her. "They'd say they would, of course. They'd even mean it. But when the moment came, most people couldn't pull the trigger. Most people aren't killers, Lois. You are - so am I."

"I'm not a killer except when it comes to you," Lois replied. "And the city of Metropolis would give me a parade if I did."

"You're still just waiting for a chance to murder me," Lex said, and knowing it didn't seem to bother him very much. "I find it amusing that your boyfriend is such a moralist, and you're so very ... practical. Maybe that's why he left you high and dry after he got what he wanted?"

Lois couldn't keep up the illusion of being unaffected, and she knew Lex had seen the flash of hurt in her eyes. But she tried valiantly to seem as though it didn't matter. "Oh, please. Lex, you're grasping at straws - you don't know the first thing..."

"Don't I?" he replied softly. "The two of you were very cozy at his little Arctic getaway. Had he taken you already, or were those hybrid brats conceived in the triumphant afterglow of having beaten me?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Not everything is about *you*, Lex," Lois snapped, disgusted by his insinuation. After fighting him and the Kryptonian villains, she and Kal-El had had a lot more on their minds than celebrating their 'victory'. Namely, their traumatic breakup...

"Oh, Lois," Lex chuckled. "Did you even realize how obvious the two of you were? The way you ran to him, that overly-long hug, and then the way you looked at each other. He touched your cheek, and his voice was infatuated when he asked if you were all right. If you two had been any more obviously sweet, I would've gone into a diabetic coma on the spot." Lex grinned wolfishly, seeing that he'd struck close to home. "You must've been so disappointed to see what he was really like. Barely a month later, he's not just failing to return your calls, he's left the entire *planet*. Even I have a hard time believing you were *that* bad in bed. Maybe he just wasn't ready for the pressures of fatherhood."

"He didn't know," Lois growled softly. "He wouldn't have left if he knew."

"They all say that, darling," Lex told her, making a mockery of the gentle sympathetic tone. "Lois, you're a smart woman - how on earth did you get yourself into a situation like this? All he had to do was take one x-ray-aided look in your belly. And you honestly believe he didn't know?"

Lois clenched her teeth, refusing to rise to the bait. *That isn't true*, she reminded herself. *He wouldn't lie to me - he wouldn't have left me if he'd known. Kal-El's a better man than that. This bastard thinks everyone's as cold-bloodedly self-interested as he is.*

Since she didn't react, Lex twisted the knife a little further. "What a terrible stain that would be on his heroic reputation. But then, you *did* get your revenge by writing my all-time favorite article, *Why the World Doesn't Need Superman*. I loved it."

"I love your boat," Lois retorted, his sarcastic comment rallying her. She *hated* it when people misinterpreted that editorial - it had been a wake-up call, not a kiss-off. "This yacht's a little rich for your blood, though. What'd you do, Lex, swindle some old widow out of her estate?"

His smile looked friendly, but so does a crocodile's. "On the grand scale of things, it wasn't much," he admitted coolly, "but I needed the practice after prison."

Lois nodded. "Nice. It's kinda big, though, you know? Almost looks as if you're compensating for something. I mean, we all know you're phalli- oops, I meant *follicly*-challenged."

A glint of anger in his eyes, and Lex took a step nearer. "Very amusing, Lois. Very amusing indeed. But you haven't exactly had a chance to judge, now have you? Though it can be arranged, I assure you."

Lois saw an opportunity there. Not a very pleasant one, but given the drift of his taunting, it might even work. *So this is what he wants. If it saves Jason and Kala...* "Fine, Lex. Let my kids off this boat, and you can do anything you want with me," Lois said, though her stomach churned with nausea. "You only need one hostage to guarantee Superman will come here. Let the twins go." And though it pained her like dragging a barbed fishhook out of her flesh, she added softly, "Please."

Lex moved even a little nearer, the gun slightly lowered. "Anything?" he asked, an evil gleam in his eyes.

Squaring her jaw, Lois looked at him directly. "I said anything, didn't I? Just let Jason and Kala go, and I'll stay."

Smiling like a shark, Lex murmured, "Tempting offer, Lois. Very tempting. However, I don't think bedding you would be very good for my health - you might try to strangle me in my sleep. No, much to my sorrow, I'll have to decline. Besides, you probably weren't aware of it, but the engines started some time ago. While our caped friend is distracted, we're heading out to sea."

Lois was still reeling from that knowledge when Lex added casually, "It's nice to know you'd do *anything* for your children, though. I suppose your protectiveness makes up for your lack of certain other parenting skills."

She tried not to flinch, but he must've seen it in her eyes and bored in on that topic. "You know, for someone who *is* so overprotective, you really should've taught them not to talk to strangers. Kala and Jason actually made friends with one of my employees, Brutus. Of course, there were problems." He was circling her again, his eyes greedy on her face, searching for signs of distress. "The security team was chosen simply for their muscle; I paid no attention to their record. No one knew that Brutus preferred his women young - very young. Apparently, he attempted something with little Kala."

Lois gasped. She couldn't help it. *Kala... Oh, baby, I should have been there. I should have been there to protect you...* And even as terror and heartbreak swept over her, rage began to well up. If this Brutus had walked into the room, she would've leapt at him with only her bare hands.

Lex wasn't done. "Fortunately, your son intervened. He threw a piano at Brutus - a grand piano. Completely crushed him. I don't think the boy even realizes that what he's done."

For one moment, Lois literally swayed with the shock of what she'd heard. That the twins had been left alone with a child molester - and that Jason had been forced to kill the man to protect his sister - horrified her almost beyond bearing. *A piano? He had the strength to push a piano at speed? No wonder he was so upset when he said he had saved Kala. Oh my God... You monster... How did I ever let this happen?* But Lex's next words brought her back to reality like a well-timed slap.

"Such a wonderful mother you are, Lois," Lex said softly, his eyes bright with the knowledge that he was finally getting deep under her skin. "Not even seven, already your daughter's a cocktease, and your son's a killer. I guess we know where they both got it from, don't we?"

He had one instant to see the sudden fire in her eyes, and to realize that he'd stepped too close. Then Lois leaped at him with a furious cry, grabbing the gun in her left hand with amazing speed. He caught her right hand as she went for his throat, and they held each other pinned like that, fraught with violence.

Lex laughed softly, luxuriating in her rage and pain. "Seems I hit a nerve there, Lois. A little too close to the truth for you?"

Her hazel eyes narrowed. In that blinding instant of unmitigated rage, nothing else in the world mattered except retaliation. In that instant, it was Lex versus Lois, and she was determined to win. Dropping his gun hand, she cocked her fist as far back as she could, popped one knuckle up, and punched Lex in the side with all the force she could muster. *You hit a nerve all right, you bastard,* Lois thought as she felt bone snap, *but I hit a rib.*

Richard quickly found the file that held all of Lois' personal information. He'd told her it was a bad idea to keep it all in one place, but she'd retorted that she needed all those endless codes and passwords accessible *somewhere*, and it was quite secure enough. *Guess she was right about that ... we'd have never gotten her password if not for Clark.*

It took him only a moment to dial Lois' cell phone number, hit the pound key, and punch in her code. He'd put her office phone on speaker so the others could hear it, but at the first syllable of Luthor's voice rasping across his nerves, he regretted it.

Everyone listened in silence, up until the moment when Luthor's 'musical interlude' began. Clark was standing by the window, looking out, and Richard saw his shoulders tense just before the twins started crying. Then Richard's own vision was too clouded by anger and fear to see anything else.

Lana's hand went to her mouth, and in those lovely green eyes the first glimmer of steely anger began to show. How dare Luthor... Lana could empathize now with Lois' desire to kill the man.

Ella stared at the phone, horrified. Her grandchildren ... that monster Luthor was in for a surprise when her daughter got hold of him. Her whole expression spoke of caged fury, and anyone who looked at her face would know where Lois got her iron will and fierce maternal drive.

And then, the kids' voices faded, and Luthor returned to the phone. "It will be in your best interest to come quickly, Ms. Lane. Come to bay 19 - the *Gertrude* is docked and waiting for you. I won't wait here very long. Our mutual friend in tights will only be kept busy for a while."

The end of the message occasioned a flurry of activity in Lois' office. Richard bolted to his feet, heading for the door. "C'mon, he's on the ship. I can call the port authority from my

cell phone and find out if it's still in the repair bay. If not, we'll track it through the air."

Lana was at his side immediately, as determined as he was to track down Lois and the twins. Any potential rivalry was forgotten - living in the city hadn't knocked the Smallville out of her yet, and she couldn't do anything but try her utmost to rescue them from Luthor.

For a moment, Ella considered going with them. But then she held back - this was a task for the young and the strong. "Go on," she said in a low voice. "Find them and bring them back."

Clark had hesitated as well, and Richard looked back at him. Based on what he knew, he expected Clark to be right beside them on the search. Instead, the taller man was hanging back. "Have you got her spare keys, Richard?" he asked incongruously.

"Yeah ... why?"

"Give them to me. I'll move Lois' car and try to get in touch with Superman. Hopefully if he sees her car being driven, he'll drop by, and I can pass the information on to him. You might need his help dealing with Luthor."

"Good idea," Richard said, pulling the car key off his key ring and tossing it to Clark. "We might be in the air, so tell him to look for my plane."

"Will do," Clark said, catching the keys easily. He was only a few steps behind Richard and Lana as they left, and waited for them to get in the elevator before he ducked down the maintenance corridor.

Most men, even strong men, would've faltered. Lex did so only for a second, but prison had sharpened his reflexes and his resistance to pain. The hand holding the Ladysmith was now free, and he swung it sharply against the side of Lois' head.

The barrel of her own gun smacked against her temple, and Lois felt her legs weaken, her vision graying out. Lex pistol-whipped her again, but because she was falling to her knees the blow only glanced off her shoulder. It still hurt, and against her will she cried out. Then she was trying to break her fall, and Lex's weight came down on her, the gun spinning away from both of them.

Lois fought, but Lex had his knee in the middle of her back and was holding one elbow. The harder she struggled, the farther up he twisted her arm. With strength born of desperation, Lois managed to get her other arm under her and push both of them off the floor.

Lex gave her arm another savage yank, and socked her in the jaw. He pulled the punch, but it was enough to let her know she was beaten - for now. Lois lay still, panting.

"Bitch," Lex muttered, his voice slipping into the dialect of Suicide Slum, where he'd been born. "You broke my fucking rib! Lucky for you I like your face the way it is, or I'd break your goddamn jaw."

Lois concentrated on breathing, her shoulder afire, all of his weight pressing down against her spine. Lex had to fight to regain control, and when he spoke again, his voice was once more the unaccented tones of an educated man. "Riley! Come here."

He'd called out loudly enough for the other man to hear even several rooms away, and Lois heard him approach warily. "Boss?"

"Give me a couple of those cable ties," Lex said coolly, his breathing shallow because of the cracked rib.

"I don't know what you're..."

"The cable ties you always carry with you, Riley," Lex elaborated, his low tone indicating that he'd almost run out of patience. "Just in case you meet a future movie star. Give me two

of them. Now."

Lois ground her teeth as Lex wrenched her arms behind her back and slipped the cable ties over her wrists. Looped into each other and zipped tight against her skin, the tough plastic was more secure than handcuffs, which at least had a lock she could pick.

Lex finally got off of her, hissing in pain as he stood up. "You okay, boss?" Riley asked.

"Fine," Lex said shortly, pressing his hand against his side. "Cracked rib, that's all. Get me that gun." Without warning, Lex leaned down and grabbed a handful of Lois' hair at the nape of her neck, hauling her to her feet.

Biting her lip to stifle a whimper, Lois scrambled up with difficulty, her scalp burning. Lex tightened his grip on Lois' hair and forced her to face him. "Not very smart, Lois. Brave, but not bright."

Hatred glittered in hazel eyes, but Lois refused to answer. Riley handed Lex the gun silently, and the reporter glared even more savagely at the easy way he gripped *her* revolver.

Lex tapped the barrel of the Ladysmith against Lois' cheek. "Behave, or I'll have to hit you again. And I don't want you unconscious for what comes next."

Lois didn't trust herself to reply. She kept telling herself to stay calm, to wait for an opportunity to get her hands free. That anything she said at this point might be taken out on the twins, who had been through so much already. Lex had apparently had enough of taunting her for the moment, and he kept the gun pressed against her side as well a tight grip on her hair as he forced her out of the room and down the corridor.

Going up the stairs wasn't easy with her hands behind her, and Lois nearly stumbled once. Lex kept pushing her onward until they arrived at a narrow door with one of the ubiquitous portholes in it. It had a view straight out onto the helipad, and Lois' keen eyes landed on the helicopter. If she could get loose, she'd be able to call for help on its radio...

Lex nodded to Riley, and he opened the door, revealing a small pantry with steel cabinets. "Like your new accommodations, Lois?" Lex asked, pulling her head back sharply so that she felt his breath on her neck. "I picked this room for you because it happens to be the exact dimensions of the solitary confinement cells on Stryker's Island. Quite cozy, don't you think? Don't bother calling for help. It's completely lead-lined and soundproofed." A soft laugh that raised the fine hairs on the back of her neck in revulsion, and Lex added, "I've thought of everything. Enjoy your stay, Lois."

With that he shoved her forward roughly, and though Lois caught her balance in seconds, she wasn't quick enough to stop Lex from slamming the door on her. Kicking the door and demanding release was futile, so she cursed Lex and his ancestry until she felt a little more in control of herself.

And then, left alone at last, Lois set about trying to find a way out of her predicament.

...

Clark moved Lois' car as he'd promised ... as Superman, he picked it up and flew it to a nearby parking area, leaving the doors locked. Then he flew high into the clouds, noting in the distance Richard's plane taking off. *Good*, he thought absently as he scanned the bay for the yacht.

There, already powering away from land, was the *Gertrude*. Superman scowled as he caught sight of it, and flew toward it well below his swiftest pace. To the growing anger that demanded he catch Luthor, *now*, he thought resolutely, *I can't fly right into a trap - Luthor has to know I'm coming. I won't be able to save Lois and the twins if I just go bursting in. I have to be wary...*

A low rumbling noise caught his attention, and he slowed still further to listen. That sounded suspiciously familiar, but he'd never heard it on the East Coast...

The rumbling grew louder, and he halted, peering down through the water. What he saw there chilled him: a widening crack in the sea floor, gradually heading toward Metropolis...

*Damn! The city is **not** prepared for an earthquake.* He looked once more at the yacht, and saw that although it was moving quickly by the standards of a large ship, he would be able to catch up with it easily. Of greater concern was the speck on the horizon. Kal-El had a bad feeling that he knew what that was - some outgrowth of the crystals, pressing outward on a crack in the sea floor and causing the seismic waves.

Cursing fate and duty, he reversed his direction and sped back toward Metropolis.

Lex went to lie down briefly after binding his chest. Unbelievable that Lois had broken a rib ... he'd known she was dangerous, but he hadn't realized she had the skill in hand-to-hand fighting to do something like that. He lay looking up at the ceiling and wondered, *Maybe I need to rethink my plans for her?*

After a few moments of deep thought, Lex closed his eyes. *No. A few particulars may need to be revised - a little more emphasis on the hypnotics, perhaps the use of stronger sedatives in the beginning - but the plan as a whole should still be workable. There is a certain amount of risk, but that has always existed. No one could hope to keep Lois Lane captive for any length of time without considering the consequences...*

With those pleasant thoughts, he began to drift into sleep. The caped hero should be busier than ever soon, and he would have ample time to set up both distractions. Lex relaxed as much as he ever did...

The door to his stateroom eased open, and a silhouette appeared in the doorway. After watching him carefully, the dark-haired woman slipped inside and closed the door softly behind her. She was shivering in fear and loathing, but her cheeks bloomed with bright roses of anger.

Creeping closer to Lex's bed, she kept her right hand close to her side. Only when she was right beside him did she raise it, wrapping both hands around the hilt of the large chef's knife she'd stolen from the galley. Taking a deep breath, Kitty rose up on her toes in order to give herself more distance to swing the blade down and build speed for the impact with Lex's chest...

Lois bit her lip at the searing pain in her shoulders. Just a little bit more... She strained to stretch her arms as far as she could, the cable ties biting into her wrists cruelly. *This will only work because most of my height is leg,* Lois thought as she struggled to get her bound hands underneath her rump. This particular escape skill was one she'd practiced before, just in case she was taken hostage while investigating a story. It required flexibility, and it hurt like mad at the moment, but if it worked... *I have to get us out of here, most especially Kala and Jason. If I can just keep us all in one piece until Kal-El gets here... Come **on**, dammit! Stupid ties...*

There! Lois sighed with relief, blowing a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. She was now sitting on her bound hands, which were quickly going numb from the pressure of the cable ties. All she had to do now was work them forward to her knees and then get her feet out of the loop formed by her arms. *Piece of cake, really. Now all I have to do is find out what's in those cabinets and MacGyver my way out that door.*

Just as she managed to stand up, however, a monstrous wave lifted the ship, and Lois

slipped to the floor again as the yacht crested the wave and rode down its trough. *What the hell?!*

I'm searching for answers

Not questioned before.

The curse of awareness,

There's no peace of mind.

As your true colors show

A dangerous sign...

It's in your eyes,

What's on your mind.

I fear your smile

and the promise inside.

It's in your eyes,

What's on your mind.

I fear your presence,

I'm frozen inside...

~Within Temptation, 'A Dangerous Mind'

Ties That Bind

*I'll find you
Somewhere,
I'll keep on trying.
Until my dying day.
I just need to know
Whatever has happened,
The Truth will free my soul.
Wherever that you are, I won't stop searching.
Whatever it takes, I need to know...*

~ Within Temptation, *Somewhere*

Ella and Jimmy were both in Perry's office, and Ella used his phone to call several of Sam's old friends in the military. While anyone else might've had to wade through a chain of command, General Lane's widow was immediately handed off to someone who could actually help her.

"This is concerning my daughter, Lois Lane," the two men heard her say. "She and my two grandchildren have been kidnapped by Lex Luthor. Yes, *him*. The one who caused havoc with long-range military weapons almost eight years ago... Why thank you, General Maggin. We know they're on a yacht called the *Gertrude*. They left Metropolis harbor this afternoon. Is there any way...? ... Thank you very much, sir. Yes, I'll be at this number, but you'd do better to contact Richard White, Lois' fiancé. He's a pilot - he's in the air right now, searching for her. Here's his number.... Thank you."

Perry was chuckling as she hung up the phone. "And what exactly do you find amusing about this, Peregrine?" Ella asked.

"Elinore Lane calls in the Army," he replied. "You've got more contacts than some of my best reporters. I have no trouble believing that three-star generals still salute the phone when you call."

"Why, thank you, Peregrine," Ella told him coolly, but a hint of a smile curved her lips. "It's nice to know you're capable of something other than sarcasm..."

She trailed off in mid-sentence, those hazel eyes narrowing as she stared out the window over Perry's shoulder. He and Jimmy both turned to look, seeing a glittering haze around the buildings further up the street. "What the heck is that?" Jimmy wondered aloud.

The haze was moving toward them ... fast. A chattering noise distracted Perry, and he glanced down, scowling at the pens seeming to dance across his desk. He and Jimmy were both perplexed by the phenomenon.

Ella, however, had lived in Japan. She felt the tremor and knew what it was. "Earthquake," she said quickly. "Perry, we have to get everyone out right now."

"This building's stood since 1938," he scoffed. "No little shake is gonna..."

As if it had heard his challenge, the seismic wave struck with its full force at that moment. All the glass - the huge windows as well as the office doors and interior walls - seemed to explode. The expensive new flat-screen televisions fell from their brackets, and stacked papers slid to the floor everywhere. Perry, Ella, and Jimmy instinctively shielded their eyes, hearing panicked yells from the bullpen as the floor bucked under the reporters' feet.

Once the noise of falling glass fragments stopped, Perry barked, "Everybody, outside, *now!* Take the stairs, let's have an orderly exit. C'mon people, *move!*" They were all so accustomed to obeying that demanding bellow that his voice reassured them, and everyone

started moving toward the stairwells. Lowering his voice, he asked of Jimmy and Ella, "You guys all right?"

"Fine," Ella said, taking hold of the bottom of her blouse and giving it a quick shake to dislodge any fragments of glass. "James?"

"Y-yeah," Jimmy replied, and then got hold of himself. "We'd better get moving."

"Just what I was saying," Perry grumbled, and they joined the press of people around the stairwells.

Kitty took a deep breath, and the knife came down. Her breath rushed back out with the force behind the blow, making a slight noise in the still air, and Lex's eyes snapped open. His mind jerked from sweet dreams of Lois' voice, pleading softly, into the reality of his death, inches away.

In prison he'd dealt with attempts on his life; he was a much lighter sleeper now, and he woke far quicker than he had six years ago. Lex reacted to the threat with reptilian speed, catching Kitty's hands in his own and stopping the knife just above his chest.

Kitty looked down at him, trembling, rabbit-eyed with terror, her breath coming in a shaky gasp. Lex smiled up at her, and for one long terrible moment they froze like that, their eyes locked. And then the giant wave struck, the cabin seeming to rise and pitch, unbalancing Kitty. Lex yanked her hands forward across his body, plunging the knife harmlessly into the mattress beside him. She fell atop him, and Lex rolled them both over, keeping his grip on her hands tight as he pinned her under him.

"Lex ... please ... don't..." Kitty whimpered, and the fear in her eyes was ambrosia to him. Even his cracked rib didn't hurt, his veins singing with exhilaration, feeling more alive than ever. He chuckled softly as he transferred his grip, holding both her slender wrists in one hand while he reached for the knife. "Lex! No!!"

"Shh," Lex purred, tickling the cold blade along Kitty's cheek, down to where her pulse fluttered in her throat. "Hush now, and I won't have to hurt you." The tip of the knife slipped under her blouse, her breasts rising and falling with her rapid breath, and the blade caught at the top button. It popped off when he flicked the knife, and Kitty shuddered to see the gleam in Lex's eyes as he added softly, "Much."

Richard banked the plane, peering out the windows at the horizon. There was definitely something there...

The radio crackled to life; he was still listening to Metropolis tower, and he heard the warning go out to all the planes in the area. "Attention all flights, abort landing procedures immediately! Metropolis International appears to be experiencing an earthquake. Resume holding patterns... Divert if possible."

Richard stared at the radio. "An *earthquake*? You've got to be kidding!"

"That wave we saw," Lana said. "Something's going on out to sea."

"Luthor," Richard muttered, and his voice had begun to take on some of the deep loathing that colored Lois' when she spoke the name. "Whatever he's done, it's huge."

Lana just kept silent, staring out the window as she tried to imagine how one man - no matter how brilliant or evil - could have caused an earthquake. Her attention only snapped back to Richard when she heard him say, "...take you home."

"What?" Lana asked, looking at him incredulously. "Please tell me you're not seriously talking about turning around and dropping me off someplace 'safe'."

He looked honestly perplexed. "Well, this is probably gonna be a little dicey..."

"As if I didn't know that," Lana scolded. She had to turn sideways in her seat to see his face, and the headphones brought every nuance of her voice to his ears clearly. "You listen here, Richard White. I may not be as good at this kind of thing as Lois - I'm not the type to carry a gun everywhere, I can't out-curse a merchant marine, and I try to drive within shouting distance of the speed limit. But you are not going to pack me off home as soon as things get dangerous like I'm some kind of ... of fluff-brained little *cheerleader* who doesn't know enough to keep herself out of trouble! I knew what I was getting into when I volunteered for this, and I'm not backing out now."

As much as he admired her spirit, Richard couldn't help being a little skeptical. "So you're telling me you've been in situations like this before and you know exactly how you'll react?"

Lana crossed her arms and scowled. "No, Richard, I've never been in a situation like this before. Have *you*? Because I very much doubt you spend every weekend rescuing your fiancée and her children from the clutches of some megalomaniac. Sounds like a very strange hobby to me."

"Okay, okay," he said, chuckling at last. "Point taken."

"Not to mention, it's an *earthquake*," Lana added. "I'm probably safer up here with you - I think."

"Lana, I'm glad you're here, all right? I just don't want you in danger, too," Richard said. "I'm not going to try to send you home."

"Good," Lana retorted, "because I'm not leaving you."

Silence reigned for a long moment, and they looked at each other askance.

"I'm not leaving you to do this alone," Lana elaborated. "Because you might screw it up." Richard started laughing at her choice of words, and she added a trifle sharply, "Your gender can't be trusted to go to the hardware store for a box of finishing nails and not spend \$150 - and forget the nails!"

"Excuse me?" Richard actually looked away from the controls for a moment; he was already piloting the plan toward the anomaly on the horizon. He just couldn't believe they were fighting the battle of the sexes at the moment. "Lana, *your* gender can't be trusted alone in a department store. *Lois* can't even leave Macy's without some makeup or a new pair of heels."

"At least we *use* what we buy," Lana shot back. "My ex-husband has enough darned spackle to last him until Judgment Day."

Both of them stared out the window in huffy silence, watching the peculiar bump in the distance grow larger. And then, replaying the conversation in their minds and considering it in light of the anxiety that had only become more pronounced when Lois went missing, Richard and Lana both started cracking up.

Lois had gotten her hands in front of herself, and managed to stand up again in spite of the suddenly choppy seas. She started rifling through the cabinets and drawers, hoping, praying.

And coming up empty. Lex was *thorough*. He hadn't left much in here, just a silicone spatula and a box of cereal forgotten in the back of one cabinet... But wait. In the bottom of the last drawer Lois tried, she found a heavy marble rolling pin.

Lois hefted it and eyed the porthole. Just maybe... She didn't let herself think too much about it, just ran at the door and smashed the rolling pin against the porthole with every ounce of force she could muster. The shock of the blow ran up her forearms and jarred every bone in

her body, making her stagger back to see the damage she'd caused...

Nothing. Lois swore softly as she looked the glass over; it wasn't glass at all, but thick Plexiglas. *Anything with 'Lex' in it is bad friggin' news*, she thought savagely, slapping her palm against the door angrily.

There was nothing to do but try again, and this time her efforts were rewarded by a tiny chip flying off the surface. Encouraged by this small sign of the porthole's vulnerability, Lois struck at it again ... and again ... and again. Into every blow, she put all of her fear for the twins and all of her rage at Luthor, persevering even though her arms started to shake and her shoulders burned from the effort.

Ultimately, she had to take a break, leaning against the door and looking out at the helipad across the way. Lois was panting with exertion, and the porthole in front of her now had many tiny chips missing. Hopefully she was weakening the structural integrity of the damned thing.

She saw Stanford first, walking to the helicopter and looking over his shoulder nervously. Behind him came Kitty, clutching the Pomeranian like a security blanket and acting skittish as a stray cat. For a moment her eyes met Lois' through the porthole. A bleak terror had taken up residence in them, and Lois could only surmise that the swollen lip and bruised cheek had something to do with it.

Circumstances didn't give her much chance to pity, however. Right behind Kitty, Grant was holding Jason's shoulders lightly and directing him along the walkway to the helicopter... Lois' breath caught in her throat, eyes widening, as she saw Riley doing the same with Kala. And at the rear of this little parade was Lex, his hand in his pocket presumably keeping a grip on that damned kryptonite shiv. He saw Lois and waved to her, smiling cheerfully.

"No," Lois whispered, but her voice didn't stay soft for long. "Oh, no, you sonofabitch. No, you're not... How dare you! Leave them alone! *Where the hell are you taking my children, you bastard?!*" She reared back for one penultimate blow, feeling something break as she slammed the rolling pin against the porthole and not knowing if it was her wrist or the pin or the Plexiglas.

Jason was already inside the chopper, Grant getting back out, and Riley pushing his sister up to it. Kala's head whipped around at the thudding impact from the pantry, and two sets of hazel eyes met for just an instant. Lois couldn't hear her daughter's voice, but she saw the sudden light of mingled relief and terror in Kala's countenance, saw her mouth moving to form a scream for *Mommy*. She almost broke free of Riley's hands, darting so suddenly when she'd been quiescent for so long.

But Lex was there, and the shard was in his hand, and Kala backpedaled in terror of that green crystal. Lois screamed at him, knowing the room was soundproofed but not caring, screamed at him to leave Kala alone until she felt something in her throat give and her voice descended into a harsh croak.

Coughing, her throat on fire, Lois collapsed against the door as the men loaded Kala onto the helicopter. She looked out again in time to see the chopper lift off, trying to memorize which direction they were going.

I won't let him win, she silently promised them. *I'll get out of here, and as soon as your father can hear my heartbeat, he'll come after me. Then we'll both come and get you. Hang on, Jason and Kala. Hang on, sweethearts, Mommy's on her way.*

With that thought in mind, she found the rolling pin and grimly set to work on the porthole again.

Metropolis had never been built to withstand an earthquake. As the wave of seismic energy passed through the city, windows shattered, signs fell, streets buckled, and citizens panicked. Superman found himself pushed to his absolute limit dealing with multiple crises, and all the while in the back of his mind he prayed that Lois and the twins were still all right.

Even as he dealt with all of it, he worried about those he loved the most. Out at sea, the yacht would feel little effect from the earthquake - its size would protect it, if it met the waves head-on. And Richard and Lana were in the air, safe from the chaos on the ground. Perry, Ella, and Jimmy were at the *Planet* ... in the center of town...

He caught a falling construction worker while barely pausing in his flight, setting the man down and rocketing toward the building he knew so well. His x-ray vision quickly revealed that everyone had gotten out of the building safely in the first tremors, and Superman slowed, taking a deep breath. But the rain pattering down around them perplexed him; why was it raining in front of the *Planet*, and nowhere else? Superman looked up, and saw the gigantic globe balanced atop the cistern on the roof. His mind froze as the metal structure began tipping forward ever so slightly...

Fortunately, his body reacted to the threat instantly. No time to fly around the buildings blocking his path; the *Planet* globe came tumbling down incredibly fast once gravity caught hold of it. Superman went *through* the office building next door, punching through steel and plaster, no more than a red and blue blur past the empty desks.

Not even the quickest camera could've captured him as he ducked under the globe. Catching it was easy; holding it balanced was not. Superman had to lower the massive structure very gently, though it pleased him to hear Jimmy's camera whirring down below. *This ought to win him a Pulitzer of his own*, he thought distractedly as he landed, looking for some place to set the globe down.

A wrecked car would have to do, and Superman let the weight of the globe crush it. *I'll have to come back for that later*, he thought, glancing at the crowd. Jimmy was staring at his camera as if it had suddenly turned to gold - which it might as well have. Perry, who had been standing right where the globe would've landed, was mouthing *Great Caesar's ghost*.

And Ella Lane hurried down the steps into the street, while everyone else hung back. "Superman!" she called as she came right up to him. "Superman, Lois Lane is missing. She's ... we think Luthor has her."

"I know, Mrs. Lane," he replied. "Clark Kent told me. I'm on my way there as soon as the city's secure." He didn't have time to say more than that, and flew off to the next crisis.

Which left Ella staring after him, looking troubled. "You all right, Elinore?" Perry asked gruffly. "Never thought I'd see one man drive *two* Lane women speechless."

"He knows who I am," she mused aloud.

Lex hummed to himself as he watched the screen on the little black device he held. It looked like a PDA, but had no brand markings. It presently showed a map of Metropolis, streets in glowing green against a black background. One red dot moved rapidly around the screen, leaving faint afterimages behind it.

Kitty was sitting across from him, the twins on either side of her. None of them would've sat beside Lex if their lives depended on it, and they were perfectly willing to cram into one seat together to avoid him. Even Tala growled softly at him.

"Twenty minutes to location, boss," Stanford said loudly, and Lex nodded.

"Good. He's still busy," Lex replied absently. The alpha-wave tracker had gotten a lot sleeker since the prototype that had led him to the Arctic years ago, and it was an even more efficient means of keeping tabs on his nemesis.

Kala and Jason glared at him. Lex had placed the shiv in his pocket, but that was no real insulation, so they both felt weak and feverish in its presence. At least he hadn't actually touched them with it. Both twins were beginning to hate Lex Luthor ... but of course Kala would have to be the one to say something about it.

"My mommy's gonna kick your butt," she announced.

"Your mommy will have a hard time finding me where we're going," Lex replied easily.

"Our daddy'll get you. Both of our daddies will," Jason muttered sulkily. "Superman never lets the bad guys win."

Lex chuckled. "Oh, I have plans for your daddy, too."

"Lex, leave them alone," Kitty said, but a hard look silenced her again.

Kala was seething. The bad bald man hadn't let her see her mother - he'd let *Jason* see her, and of course her brother had told her about it, but the reality of Mommy-on-the-boat didn't really strike her until she actually saw her mother through the porthole. And then she'd been livid, trying to get to Mommy, but Lex had threatened her with the green rock again.

"You're gonna wish you were nice to us," Kala grumbled. "You're gonna say sorry-I-didn't-mean-it, and nobody's gonna believe you. 'Cause you're a bad, bad man."

Lex only smiled at her, and the rest of the helicopter ride was spent in tense silence. Gradually the shadow on the horizon drew nearer, and revealed itself to be a modestly-sized island.

"Not quite as big as we hoped," Stanford fretted.

His visions of a kryptonite continent fading, Lex appraised the landmass. It was still big enough to make a nice base of operations - not to mention the kryptonite that could be mined from it. "Size isn't everything," he mused as they circled the island.

"You'd know," Kitty whispered poisonously. Lex turned to her, a cold look in his eyes, and Tala's lips peeled back in a savage snarl.

Ignoring the dog - it was high time he chucked the little furball overboard - Lex warned, "Katherine, you're in danger of becoming superfluous."

"I hope she kills you," Kitty said. "*He* might be too good a man, but Lois Lane will rip your heart out with her bare hands if you ever give her the chance."

"Such charming sentiment, my dear," Lex replied. "Are you still angry with me for earlier?"

He'd spoken in tones of such tender solicitation that Kitty was sickened, and turned to look out the window, hugging Tala tighter.

Stanford didn't like the conversation going on behind him, so he ignored it and landed the chopper on a flat patch of crystal. It looked like dark stone, its color and translucence suggesting Metropolis' worst smog coalesced into solid form.

Lex practically bounded out of the helicopter while the blades were still spinning, saying to Stanford as he did so, "Fire up the ultrasonic signaler. By the time he gets here, I'll be ready for guests."

Aftershocks were still trembling the foundations of the city. A suspension bridge had become twisted, its roadway hanging by only a few cables. He knotted the broken cables back together as a temporary fix, and flew stranded motorists across the river to firm ground.

Subway trains had jumped their tracks - he flew down the tunnels to right them and carry injured passengers to safety. Tenement buildings in Suicide Slum had collapsed entirely, and Superman located the survivors and moved tons of rubble to rescue them.

Some of this work simply couldn't be hurried, no matter how keenly aware he was of the danger to Lois and the twins. This was a taste of his future: the rest of his life, he'd be balancing his duty against his obligation to his son and daughter, and if he was lucky, to their mother.

Just a little faster... Please, Lois, be all right. Keep the kids safe just a little longer for me, please... I'm on my way.

At that moment, a sharp noise cut across his delicate hearing, making him freeze in midair. The voice he least wanted to hear resounded in his ears, carried on ultrasonic waves.

"Greetings, flyboy. This is your old friend Lex. I'd like to request your attendance at my little housewarming party. I'm sure you're very interested to see the other guests of honor. Come find me eighty miles offshore, and come quickly - I might get impatient and start the festivities without you."

That was very close to a blatant threat. Superman paused, listening; the city was still crying out for his help, but Metropolis did have emergency workers. He had to make a choice ... and with the worst of the disaster averted, he chose to take on Luthor.

Turning in midair, he rocketed toward the anomaly on the horizon.

Lois had to rest again, and she was leaning against the opposite wall when the door opened from the outside. At first, seeing on the tall, broad-shouldered silhouette, hope leaped up in her chest. But then Riley stepped into the room, grinning broadly, and Lois' smile of joyful welcome fell. "You," she growled.

"Hello, beautiful," Riley said. He was carrying a collapsible police baton in one hand, and kept flipping it like he was in a parade or something. The expression of long-awaited happiness on his face nauseated Lois. "I'm going to make you famous."

"I'm already famous, you moron," Lois retorted.

"Oh, feisty," Riley said happily. "I like the spirited ones - they last longer."

"Really?" Lois said, sounding bored. *Keep him talking*, she thought to herself, surreptitiously eyeing the doorway. She backed away, hoping to draw Riley far enough into the small room that she could dart past him. "Seems to me like anything more than thirty seconds would be wasted on you."

"Witty banter, I like that, too," Riley said. "Most of my films don't exactly have much dialogue. You'd make an interesting change of pace."

"Oh, please," Lois groaned. "Spare me, all right? Do you even know how much you sound like every pathetic loser in junior high who wanted me to go to the spring dance?"

"And you were too busy running around with the boys who smoked outside the gym, right?" Riley asked, teasing. He stayed close by the door, but now he was smacking the baton against his palm. Maybe she'd rattled him - maybe he was just psychotic.

"No, actually," Lois spat, sidling along the wall. "I was the *leader* of the kids who smoked behind the gym. And before you imply something disgusting, most of them treated me like I was just one of the guys."

"How charming. Don't try getting past me - if I have to hit you, I'd like it to be on camera."

Lois didn't know what was creepier - the casual way he tossed off that line, or the

cheerful little smile when he did. "And I thought Luthor was nuts," she growled.

"Oh, you're right about him," Riley said. "He's not keeping-three-hundred-cats crazy, but that man isn't right. He let *you* break a rib, remember?" Even worse than the smile was Riley's amused chuckle.

Definitely psychotic. Lois glared at him, getting nothing but the grin and the rhythmic tapping of the baton. *How the hell am I gonna get myself out of **this**? Okay, Lane, this is the part where you come up with a terrifically brilliant plan. The audience cheers, and you beat the crap out of the bad guy.*

Any minute now...

Kal-El circled the island at a safe distance, thinking, *I know this is a trap. I **know** it is. Luthor has access to kryptonite, he's had the crystals, he has Lois and the kids - he might even have all three of them here as bait. I have to be careful...*

And even while he thought that, a part of him was screaming to hurry, to get it in high gear; there was no telling what Luthor was doing to Jason or Kala right now, no telling what he might've done already. Dark possibilities lurked beneath his conscious thoughts, but he wouldn't let them be voiced even in his mind. Some things were too terrible to contemplate.

Kal-El moved in a little closer as he continued around the island. It was crystalline in structure, he'd expected that; the stone was strangely dark, though. For the moment he was looking for signs of movement, of a trap, and left analyzing the exact molecular structure for later. If there was a later.

Which, given the fact that he was facing Luthor, and Lex had had this all his own way from the beginning, there might not be a later. *He's driven me back and forth like Shelby running the chickens*, Kal-El thought ruefully. *The worst thing is, I **know** I've been herded, but what else could I do? How could I choose between Lois and the twins - **our** twins - and the fate of hundreds of innocent bystanders in Metropolis?*

This is just what Jor-El warned me about. Lois and Jason and Kala are in peril because of me. Everyone in Metropolis was in danger today because of me...

*No. Lois would smack me for that. They're endangered because Lex Luthor needed a little distraction while he was setting up his master plan. **He's** the one to blame here, he's the one...*

*He didn't. He wouldn't **dare**...*

Kal-El had almost finished his circuit around the island when he saw it, and stopped abruptly in his flight. At this point, the island's surface dipped down abruptly, like a small canyon. The open end of the canyon sloped to the waterline, leaving a broad avenue up to a very familiar structure of interlocked crystals.

He did. Luthor, you utter bastard.

Fury at this latest insult coupled with his fear for those he loved, and his guilt for having gotten them all involved. Abandoning caution, Kal-El blasted to the open space in the middle of the canyon, landing with a resounding boom that cracked the crystal floor for many yards around him.

Seething with anger, he raised his eyes to the ugly, dark mockery of his Fortress, a blasphemy against that place and all the memories it held for him.

"See anything familiar?" Lex called sardonically, his voice echoing.

Kal-El turned, loathing in his eyes as he saw Luthor coming out of the anti-Fortress. That expression - equal parts wrath, outrage, and disgust - said everything that he needed to say.

Paying Penance

The open door beckoned, and Riley was watching her carefully. Lois knew if she screamed now, Kal-El would hear her ... but if he saw the helicopter, maybe he'd go there first. She'd left her phone at the car, he would find it soon enough and come after them. Rescuing the twins was more important than saving her from this jerk, so she kept quiet for the moment.

"Weren't you the one videotaping the fires?" Lois said, trying to needle him again. "You know what they say about kids who start fires, right?"

"I'm not the guy who started them," Riley replied. "I just film them. I'm like the other guys Lex hired - I'm being paid to do a job. Although I don't object to the perks, either." Again he smiled at her, that asinine little *we-have-a-secret* smile.

"The perks? You mean like annoying me with your half-assed little threaten-and-flirt routine? If you're gonna do something besides stand there and stare at me, come on and do it already. I'm getting bored." If that didn't goad him into action, nothing would.

Lois' effort was rewarded. Riley snapped the collapsible baton to its full length - flicking it in her direction, too. "Fine, Miss Lane. Let's go start your cinematic career, shall we? Come here."

"You think I'm gonna make it that easy for you? Come and get me," Lois challenged.

Grinning, Riley feinted toward her, then moved to cut off her escape. Lois had been expecting something like that, and dodged him. But she had spent half an hour hammering at the stupid Plexiglas porthole, and she wasn't as fast as she needed to be. Riley grabbed her upper arm from behind, squeezing it painfully and jerking her backwards, almost off her feet. *Shit. Why the hell do prisons let guys like this lift weights? Even as tall as he is, my life would be a lot easier if the sonofabitch wasn't **strong**, too!*

Even while she thought that, Lois kicked backwards, hard. He pushed her off balance, and her boot only struck his shin a glancing blow. In the next instant, Riley yanked her back against him, too close for a kick to have any real force, and brought the baton down sharply on her leg.

Lois clenched her teeth and didn't cry out - that would only excite him. "Bastard," she hissed softly.

Riley chuckled richly and hit her again, right atop the bruise forming from the last blow. This time she yelped, and he said in a low, persuasive voice, "C'mon, Miss Lane. I'm bigger than you. I'm stronger than you. Your hands are tied, and I'm armed. Plus, I've done this before - more times than the district attorney had any idea about. Did you really think that was going to work?"

She kept silent, waiting. Riley was still holding her arm, and he began to push her ahead of him, out of the pantry and down the stairwell. Lois held her tongue; he kept her moving, but not so fast that she was in danger of stumbling. At last they arrived at their destination.

"The specs of this yacht call this the Aquatic Gallery," Riley said as Lois surveyed the huge room. Her swift glance took in all of its particulars while Riley kept talking. "Most of us just call it the ballroom. It's big enough to waltz in, don't you think? Do you dance, Miss Lane?"

"Not with you," she shot back, and he only laughed.

"You will by the time we're through," Riley promised, and gave her a hard shove. Lois stumbled away, made a few steps toward recovering her balance, and then fell to the floor. She smothered a cry of pain as her arm scraped against one of the broken bolts that had secured the piano.

Riley closed and locked the door behind him, using the same high-set bolt that had foiled Kala and Jason. "I happen to think this is one of most lavish rooms on board," Riley continued, as Lois lay where she fell. "And it's got more space, though I had to set up four cameras to cover it all. A nice change from my other films. The lighting's good enough to show detail, too."

Lois rolled onto her side, watching him warily, but she didn't try to get up yet. Riley was moving around the large ballroom, adjusting a detail here or there - moving one of the couches, taking a duffel bag from near the door and opening it atop the table. Inside Lois saw coils of rope and, disturbingly, the gleam of steel.

Riley's back was to her as he laid out the tools of his trade; apparently he had no fear that she would creep up behind him. It was probably justified, given that she was wearing boots and the floor was hardwood and glass. He would hear her if she moved from this spot, so Lois forced herself to watch and wait.

Lex sauntered out of the dark Fortress, hands in his pockets and beaming with self-satisfaction. "Hmm, I think I'll turn a couple of those caves over there into apartments. One for the boys, one for Kitty - but I'm living here. I happen to be partial to this place - memories, you know." His insolent smile reminded his opponent of all the memories connected to the Fortress, the bitter and the sweet.

It only increased his determination. Kal-El glared and stalked toward him, his voice almost a growl as he said, "You have something that belongs to me." The hero had never been this furious, never known he could feel such wrath. Anger was making him light-headed.

That only made Lex grin more broadly. "Really? I thought I had *everything* that belonged to you." He stood at the top of the steps and looked around coolly, ignoring the deliberate way Superman approached him.

Kal-El's eyes narrowed. How dare he... "Luthor, you've gone too far this time."

"What are you going to do, Superman?" Lex mocked. "Kill me? You should've done that last time. Would've saved you a lot of trouble, and the lives of a lot of people only you care about."

"I don't have to kill you, Luthor," he said. "You won't get out of prison on a technicality this time."

"Yes, well, I don't intend to go into prison this time," Lex said casually. "I'm far too busy. For instance, I've been keeping better track of Lois Lane than you have. Such a pity she wasn't faithful to you ... but what can you expect from a woman like that?"

That stopped him in his tracks, a wave of almost feverish heat sweeping through Kal-El. His pulse was beating in his temples now, his vision hazy as the combination of anxiety and outrage threatened to overwhelm him. Deliberately he advanced toward Lex.

Seeing dark rage burning in those sapphire blue eyes, Lex took one step back. Insulting Lois had been perhaps a mistake ... but he couldn't resist taunting his enemy further. "Careful there, Superman. You don't want to hurt me - I know where Lois is, and you don't. I can call her the Whore of Babylon if I want; you still need *me* to find her."

It was true, Lex held all the cards in this situation. Too true, and both men knew it. Gritting his teeth with frustrated wrath, Kal-El ground out, "Where is she, Luthor?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Lex chuckled. "But I know something you don't, *hero*. I know who the father of her children is."

Kal-El felt his knees go weak. All of a sudden he felt sick. If Luthor knew that ... he

barely suppressed a shiver, forcing himself to continue up the steps as if he wasn't affected. "Luthor, you know *nothing* about Lois' children," he said, trying to sound disdainful.

Luthor gave him a catlike smile full of cruelty. "My, my, my. How disappointed your father would be in you. Jor-El sent you here to guide us weak mortals, to be the light to show us the way. Superman, savior of the earth, fighter for truth, justice ... all that stuff. Rescuer of kittens." Lex couldn't help snickering as he remembered that early article. "Oh yes. All that, and a deadbeat father. Really, Superman, how *could* you? Honestly, not even *I* pictured you as the love-them-and-leave-them-pregnant type. No wonder Lois wrote that article about you - hell hath no fury like a woman who gave birth to aliens."

The revelations came too fast. Luthor knew about the twins. He'd managed to listen to the recorded crystals. He knew everything, and he even had ... kryptonite...

Some part of Kal-El's mind had wondered why Luthor didn't simply spring the meteorite on him as soon as he landed. Now he realized that what he'd thought were manifestations of his emotional upheaval - the fever, the sweat beginning to dot his skin, the weakness - were actually responses to kryptonite nearby. *How could I be so stupid?* he scolded himself. *He's keeping me talking just to weaken me with it! But where the heck is it? Feels close ... too close.*

"Sorry, Luthor," Kal-El said abruptly. "I'm not playing your game."

Lex's eyes brightened. "Oh, you're not? Then I suppose you'll forfeit the stake." With that he stepped aside, and Kal-El saw into the false Fortress behind him. A man and a woman stood there - *Katherine*, the woman he'd saved! Even her runaway car was part of this!

But there was no time to be outraged. Behind them, sitting on the floor with their hands bound in front of them, were Jason and Kala. "I told you I had everything of yours, *Kal-El*," Lex purred. "Even your bastard children."

Riley hummed to himself as he arranged his tools. Of course, he'd found it rather difficult to replace his entire collection, most of which was still in police evidence lockers. But he was reasonably satisfied with what he'd managed to come up with on short notice. *I love the internet. You can order practically anything. Thankfully Luthor let us receive packages in Nevada.*

He glanced over his shoulder at Lois and gave her his most charming grin. She met it with a look of flat disgust, which was new to him. Usually by now they were starting to get a little scared. He'd set the tools of his trade neatly on the table before him. Some women got nervous just seeing rope and handcuffs. Others kept a brave face until he laid out the frayed electrical cord or the pruning shears, and then they abruptly broke down and begged for their lives. But Lois was something else.

"You're an odd one," Riley said, turning back to his work. "How come you're not afraid?"

She actually laughed, and that was a very difficult reaction to fake. Riley was impressed; she was either a superb actress, or brimming with bravado. "Why on earth would I be scared of you?"

"Oh, maybe because you're my first celebrity," Riley replied jauntily, placing the lighter and pack of cigarettes just so. He didn't often smoke, but the fear of fire tended to produce extreme reactions. "You do realize I'm going to have to take my time to be sure everything is just right, don't you? This is a historic event."

"Please," Lois snorted derisively. "I just can't get scared by someone who's essentially just a little boy who never grew out of the pulling-wings-off-butterflies stage."

That made Riley whirl around, and Lois flinched slightly. He smiled, relaxing; so she wasn't made of stone after all. She just hid her fear very well - that would make this much more interesting. With a low chuckle, he turned back to his tools. What to start with? The baton hadn't impressed her...

Ah yes. Riley turned to Lois with a slender filet knife in his right hand. "You know, they had a big chef's knife in the galley that I was hoping to use, but someone took it. That's all right - this little knife is sharper and easier to control. I wouldn't want to slip and hit a major vein, you know."

He prowled toward her, eyes avidly searching her face for the first glimmer of terror. Of course he wouldn't use the knife so soon; one cut made just a little too deep would ruin all his careful preparations. But Riley hoped that the gleam of light on the blade would capture his victim's attention, keeping Lois compliant for the moment. A knife was so much more fear-inspiring than the roll of quarters in his pocket, which he would use to subdue her if necessary.

And Lois seemed to be going along with his plans, her gaze fixed on the blade. "So tell me, Miss Lane, what are you most afraid of losing, hmm? Your looks? Plastic surgery's good, but it'll never give back what I can take. Or maybe it's your career? If I sever the nerves in your hands you'll never type another story."

Her eyes went from the knife to his face, and to Riley's surprise their hazel depths still held more scorn than fear. "Did you miss the part where Lex said he'd liked the way I look? Assuming you succeed - which I doubt, you're more talk than action - Lex is going to feed you to the sharks one small piece at a time for touching me."

Riley laughed, but now he was the one whose voice sounded forced as he bent over her, knife poised. "Luthor is going to get himself killed. He's out there 'tugging on Superman's cape', just like that Jim Croce song. Once ol' Supes figures out those kids are his, he's gonna cream Luthor, island-made-of-kryptonite or not."

Lois' eyes suddenly blazed with terror, but not fear of Riley. Only then did he realize just what kind of woman she was; Lois' booted heel lashed out and caught him in the wrist, the knife flying. Then she was up, her hands free somehow, and darted across the room too quick for him to capture.

How had things gone so wrong so quickly? Riley chased her, jumping the short set of steps up to the area where Steven Vanderworth had had his office. He was already reaching into his pocket for the roll of quarters he carried, a sure pacifier if ever one existed, but first he had to get hold of this troublesome reporter.

Lois yanked savagely on the desk drawers as she raced past, but they were securely locked. She managed to kick the chair into Riley's path, and he cursed her as he stumbled. "Don't you run from me," he snarled, eyes wild now, but she didn't listen. They never listened, really...

She dodged around the table, grabbing the large brass trophy there for support as she made the corner. It bent on its bolts, and Lois nearly stumbled, giving Riley time to catch up. He grabbed the back of her blouse, his other hand pistoning forward with the quarters tucked into his fist.

Lois yelped in pained surprise when his fist connected, and Riley grinned savagely as he spun her to face him and cocked his fist for another blow. But he *still* didn't see the rampant fear in her eyes that he expected, still had no sense of Lois' capitulation. Confusion made him pause for one second too long, searching her face for some acknowledgment of her defeat and

his superiority. It had to be there...

He was concentrating so closely on her expression that he never saw her hand grip the heavy geode on the table behind her. Stunning pain lashed through him, and Riley's bewilderment deepened as he sank into unconsciousness.

Kal-El felt his heart stutter, locking eyes with the twins. It was too late now ... even though he knew the kryptonite was weakening him, he didn't dare leave Jason and Kala. *Please let me be strong enough*, he thought as he mounted the final step and came face to face with Luthor.

"This isn't a game, Luthor," he said warningly. The sound of the twins sobbing quietly tore at him.

Lex grinned up at him, tense and bright-eyed. "Oh, but it is. A wonderful little game I like to call, *Winner Takes All*." The two men stood very close, and Kal-El was trying to watch Lex's eyes as well as keep track of Stanford and Katherine.

Glancing away from Luthor was a mistake. Moving like a striking snake, Lex brought his hand out of his pocket and darted it forward. Kal-El gasped as burning agony stabbed into his ribs, flinching back automatically. He heard something snap and clasped his hand to his side, feeling wet warmth.

Another couple of steps back away from Luthor, seeing him run his thumb over a green shard in his hand. "Or perhaps we'll call it *Pin the Kryptonite on the Alien*," Lex chuckled, pocketing the shiv.

Kal-El took his hand away, dumbfounded to see it sheathed in red. "Blood?" he whispered. Fiery pain still gnawed at him, and he realized with dull horror that part of the kryptonite shard was still embedded in his flesh.

"Seems even a hero can bleed," Lex hissed, far too close. Kal-El looked up just in time to catch Luthor's fist on his chin, the force of the blow knocking him off balance. Shocked by it - he hadn't felt pain like this since he'd given up his powers - he couldn't recover in time, and fell down the steps, snapping off protruding spikes of crystal as he tumbled. The surface sloped toward the water, and he rolled across the rough surface.

His mind seemed to be in vapor-lock. The weakness - the pain - those unfamiliar sensations ruled him, bringing back memories of that humiliating beating in the diner. Kal-El felt frozen, unable to do more than try to breathe and deal with the blazing pain.

Luthor laughed, and the sound had a chilly edge. Stanford, sickened, kept his gaze glued to the ground at his feet. Kitty turned away from the scene unfolding outside, petting Tala's fur nervously. She looked at the twins, bit her lip, and whispered, "Don't look, okay? Just ... don't look." Kitty knelt beside them both.

Lex bounded down the steps, unable to stop chuckling gleefully. "Crystals! They're amazing, aren't they? They inherit the traits of the minerals around them. Sort of like a son..." His gaze darted to Jason, still watching in helpless horror in spite of Kitty's attempt to shield them. "...inheriting the traits of his *father*," Lex snarled, kicking Superman in the side as he tried to stand up. Both twins screamed, and Kala turned her face against Kitty's shoulder, crying.

Kal-El's breath blew out, and he coughed, tasting something metallic. If only he could get a handle on the whirl of sensation and emotion - it was too much. Pain, fear, anger, malaise, weakness, outrage, shock, burning ... all of it tore through him relentlessly.

Lex hadn't quit, giving him another savage kick in the ribs. "You know, with a pound of

kryptonite and one of those wonderful crystals from your Arctic hideaway, I've created an entire *island* that happens to be lethal to you." Kal-El coughed blood, trying to get his hands under him, dizzy with recognition. No wonder he couldn't tell where the kryptonite was ... it was *everywhere*. Tons of it...

"The brats seem to be holding up a little better," Lex said nastily. He stepped back and snapped his Italian loafer into Kal-El's face for emphasis as he continued, "Thank their mother, I guess. The same *human* frailty that kept them out of Little League is keeping them alive now. Although they did inherit something of *yours* as well."

Blue eyes, hazy with shock and pain, looked up as Lex bent over him. No question now of what Luthor was - madness danced in his eyes. "Your son there - d'ya think old Jor-El would be proud of him? The little *murderer*. He killed one of my men. Threw a piano at him."

The haze cleared slightly, anger burning it away. Kal-El glanced at the children, seeing the way that they held onto each other, and knew that if it *was* true, it was in defense of himself. Or his sister. *He's my son*, he thought. *Lois' son. He'd protect Kala with his last breath or the last ounce of his strength...*

No time to think further on that. Lex saw the return of awareness, and aimed another kick to coincide with end of his next vicious line. "What a perfect *legacy*," Lex spat, and his foot lashed out.

But this time it didn't land. Kal-El caught his ankle and held it. Still disoriented, he was surprised to find that he had the strength to hold Luthor off balance. For a moment they struggled awkwardly, Lex hopping on one foot, Kal-El trying to knock him to the ground.

"Dammit!" Lex yelled, but neither Stanford nor Kitty was moving to help him. Muttering curses at them, he reached into his pocket for the shiv.

Kal-El couldn't let him reach it. He couldn't be stabbed again. He found an extra notch of strength, and *tossed* Lex over him, the megalomaniac yelling in surprise as he crashed to the ground. Luthor landed even closer to the edge, the crystal damp with salt water, but he didn't fall off the island.

Superman began the laborious process of getting to his feet again, still coughing blood, green spots swimming before his eyes. He heard the faint chime of crystal on crystal as Lex struggled to get up, heard the man panting and cursing. He had to get up, had to defend himself against the next blow, had to...

He didn't even see Luthor heft a chunk of kryptonite ore the size of a toaster, getting ready to throw it at his prone body. All he heard was Lex's harsh voice hissing, "You stole six years of my life. I'm just returning the *favor*."

"Luthor lied," Lana said over the headset. "This is more than eighty miles."

Richard looked at the island on the horizon, getting nearer now. He could make out just a few details - the dark surface seemed fractured and craggy, but no signs of life were visible at the moment.

A gravelly voice came over the radio then. "Flight November 7241 Hotel, this is General Maggin, do you copy?"

Startled Richard flicked a switch and responded, "I copy, sir, this is Richard White aboard November 7241 Hotel, go ahead."

"Mr. White, the Coast Guard informs me they have a yacht offshore that might be the *Gertrude*. Radar contact only at this point, but it's not in a registered lane of travel. Now, you have your cell phone on you, son? Over."

Lana scrambled for it before Richard could even ask. "Yes, sir. Over."

"Good. Coordinates are being sent to you via text message directly from the Coast Guard ship that's on route. You'll be updated continuously. Over."

"Thank you, sir," Richard said, then asked, slightly puzzled, "General Maggin, sir, how did you know to contact me?"

"Ella Lane called me," he chuckled. "You just bring Little Laney home safe, you hear? Over and out."

"Little Laney?" Richard said softly, his nose wrinkling.

Lana was staring at the phone. "Richard, you've got a message."

"I know, give me the coordinates."

"No, it's from Clark," she said, and he turned to look at her, seeing the concern in her face. "He must've sent it right after we left - Clark is trapped by the earthquake debris. He says he's fine, Superman found him, but he's safer where he is. And he gave his phone to Superman before he left. Superman's on his way."

For a moment they stared at each other. "You mean we have a way to contact Superman?" Richard said, hope rising.

Riley started to groan, and Lois cursed him under her breath as she tightened the cable ties around his ankles. His hands were already secured behind his back.

"Whuh... Wha' happen'd?" he muttered thickly, trying to turn his head to look at her.

Lois slipped two of the cable ties through the loops around his wrists, fed them through the ties on his ankles, and cinched them tight, leaving Riley hog-tied with his own restraints. The reporter stood up and glared at him, a hard bright smile flickering across her face as she said, "What happened? You underestimated the power of an angry woman, just because I'm pretty. Don't worry, I'm sure you won't make that mistake again... It's going to be a long time before you even see another woman."

Resisting the temptation to kick him a few times - her leg still hurt from the damned baton - Lois walked away from him. Her subconscious was screaming at her to get moving, but at least one other man remained on board. There might have been more, but she doubted it. Either way, she'd need some kind of weapon, and here was Riley's little bag of goodies...

Lois wrinkled her nose at the assortment of supplies. She didn't even want to know why Riley needed a dozen clothespins and a can opener. Suppressing a shudder, Lois picked up the police baton, looked it over, and with a sharp flick of her wrist extended it to its full length. "Nice," she said with a small smile.

Riley made a strangled groan when he saw her, trying to roll over and get to his feet. Bound as he was, all he managed to do was thrash around like a broken-backed snake. Lois walked over to him, tapping the baton against her palm thoughtfully.

He tried to laugh, but his voice was shaky. "Hey, c'mon now," Riley said, and his voice was a pathetic attempt at jocular. "Don't ... you don't have to do that. I mean, I was just kidding with you... I wouldn't have hurt you. You know that, right? Right?"

The smile on Lois' face was not friendly. "Oh, so you *weren't* going to torture and rape and kill me, after all? This was all just a joke?"

"Yeah, yeah, a joke," Riley said desperately. "I mean, you said it yourself. Luthor'd never let me live if I did something like that. He ... he kinda admires you, he wouldn't want you hurt."

"Where did he take my kids?" Lois asked sharply, and the man flinched. "Where are they, Riley? And keep in mind, if I don't like the answer, it's *my* turn to play."

Nothing on earth was more pathetic than a grown man sniveling in terror of a woman almost a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter than himself. And still he tried to brazen his way out of it. "Nah, you're not like that," Riley said, grinning sickly. His shirt was damp with sweat. "I mean, you're a nice lady - you're a class act, investigative reporter. Hell, you're *famous*. You ... you wouldn't do anything like that to me. You're Superman's girlfriend - you're the mother to his kids. You're a good person."

Lois grinned, her eyes gleaming fierce and predatory. It was everything she had not to kick him in the teeth right now. "You forget, Riley. *I'm not him*. Superman wouldn't hurt you - he can't conscience hurting anyone. *I can*. If you don't start talking..."

Looking at her face, he believed her. Before Lois could even finish the threat, Riley was babbling. "I don't know exactly! Really, I don't! Grant's the one who steers this thing, he's got the coordinates... Listen, you gotta believe me, I don't know anything! Go get Grant, he'll tell you. Hell, I think he's got it written down in the bridge..."

"Shut up," Lois snapped before he could drown her in words, and Riley did, his eyes unnaturally bright as he watched the baton in her hands. Her knuckles had gone absolutely white. "Now tell me what Luthor's been up to with those crystals. And why did he take my kids with him?"

It quickly became clear to Lois that Riley was a pure coward under all of his swagger. She wouldn't even need to hit him once - he started spilling everything he knew just seeing the weapon in her hands. *Too bad*, she thought coldly as she glared at him. *I'm not gonna have an excuse to hit him again. Sometimes it really sucks to be one of the good guys.*

"No!" Jason yelled, seeing Lex about to throw the heavy chunk of crystal at Superman. He tried to struggle to his feet, but he'd used much of his strength in throwing the piano, and the kryptonite was making every bone in his body ache. Jason just couldn't get up; his coordination was gone, his body didn't seem to be listening to the orders his brain gave.

Kala had looked up at her brother's cry, her face tear-stained. What she saw horrified her. The bad bald man was about to hit Daddy with a rock! Unlike Jason, whose very strength made him more vulnerable to the green crystals, Kala had been held in place by despair, not weakness.

One glance at Stanford and Kitty told Kala that the grown-ups weren't going to help. If only Mommy was here, Mommy would kick the bad man's butt...

But Mommy's not here, Kala thought, and it galvanized her to act. Bolting to her feet, she tore away from Kitty and ran down the steps, momentum helping her keep her balance in spite of the savage ringing in her ears. Her sneakers gave her a good grip on the crystalline surface, and she wasn't even aware that she was running faster than any six-year-old should be able to.

Lex had paused to say something, the rock - which was heavier than it looked - held at the level of his shoulder. Kala hadn't actually thought about what she would do, so she simply yelled, "Leave my Daddy alone!"

"Kala! No! Don't!" Jason's small voice reverberated throughout the structure, his blue eyes locked on her.

Luthor turned slightly, and that was the moment when Kala cannoned into him, knocking him off balance. He dropped the chunk of kryptonite - it narrowly missed both Kala's head and Lex's own foot - and grabbed for Kala's shoulder, his eyes alight with fury. "You little bitch!" he snarled, ready to shake the child.

But Kala was Lois' daughter. And she was both terrified and furious. She whipped her

head around and bit Lex's hand, sinking her teeth into his flesh and thinking, *That's for beatin' up Daddy an' making Jason sick an' takin' us away from Mommy!*

Lex yelled, snatching his hand back, and saw the blood. He reacted without thinking, slapping Kala. Hard.

She'd been feeling like the island was spinning ever since she started running, and the blow destroyed what was left of her equilibrium. Kala staggered, seeing the edge of the dark crystal, hearing the water just below, trying to keep it together.

For one moment it seemed as though she'd make it, teetering on the very edge. Jason screamed for her, but it was Kal-El who met her gaze. Father and daughter shared one look full of desperation, and then the fragile edge crumbled under Kala's feet, spilling her off out of their sight with a despairing cry.

A Glimmer of Light and Hope

Grant kept one hand on the wheel, watching the waves outside. He didn't like being alone on the yacht with Riley and that Lane woman. But then, he liked this job less and less every minute.

I signed on for the money. This was supposed to be an easy job, if not my usual line of work. Grant was a hitman by trade, a killer for hire. He'd had to turn informant to escape the death penalty, and knew that any of his old contacts would kill him if they found him. No, now that he was free, he was going to have to start at the bottom of his trade and work up again, with a new name and in a new city. Running security for Luthor was supposed to be something simple and profitable until he could get back into the swing of things.

This is way more complicated than Luthor led us all to believe. "I'll break you out of prison if you come work for me. You don't have to do much - just look intimidating at the right times, and keep other people out of my business." Grant gave a skittery glance out the window at the stormy seas, trying to wrap his mind around this mess he had found himself in. *He never mentioned we'd be kidnapping kids or famous reporters. Or messing around with Superman - **that's just stupid.***

Grant checked the GPS and glanced meaningfully at the radio. He wished Luthor would get back here... The longer the boss was gone, the more worried he became. If anything happened to Luthor and Stanford and Kitty, he'd be stuck here looking like whatever happened to the reporter was *his* fault.

No way. Soon as we hit land, I'm gonna disappear. I didn't sign on for all of this crazy bullshit. This is too damned much...

That particular train of thought was well-traveled, and Grant let it preoccupy him. He didn't realize his error until he felt something hard and cylindrical poking him in the middle of the back, and heard what could only be the Lane woman growl in his ear, "Start telling me everything you know about Luthor's plans, or so help me God I'll use this." She jabbed the muzzle of the gun against his spine. "And I really would *love* to use it."

Dammit. I shoulda known...

When Kala hit the water with a splash and a high-pitched shriek of terror, even Kitty cried out. Lex glowered at her for her disloyalty, and then stood glaring at the hero. Even now Superman was trying to get up - obviously the kryptonite was affecting him, but he wasn't quite dead yet. Like a cockroach sprayed with Raid, he was still twitching. *Doesn't he know he's **dead**? This is all very noble, but he's **lost**.*

Lex wanted to stay, wanted to watch the light in Superman's eyes die away. He wanted to see all of his plans and hopes come to fruition - this alien menace at last destroyed, along with his spawn. But Lex's troops were getting restless ... Stanford was halfway down the steps, hesitating only because Lex was watching him, and Kitty was crying brokenly. If he gave them time to think about it, they just might turn on him out of some misguided vestige of morality. "Stanford, Kitty, get back to the helicopter," Lex said forcefully. "We're done here."

The scientist obeyed, reluctantly. Stanford wasn't happy about any of this, and Luthor knew it. But he took orders well - the sooner all of this was finished, the sooner he could return to his quiet lab and the endlessly fascinating crystals.

Lex wasn't quite finished yet. He got as close as he dared to the fallen hero, leaned down, and whispered, "Sorry I can't stay. Lois is back on the yacht, and I don't want to leave her alone too long. She's going to be terribly lonely without you or the twins around. Although, I'll

try to ... comfort her ... as best I can."

Superman was gasping for air, seemingly out of touch with events. At those words, however, sudden horror and outrage lit his eyes, and Lex savored it. A momentary victory, and only a tenth part of the vengeance he'd hoped to mete out, but sweet nonetheless. He sauntered away, leaving his enemy utterly broken and soon to die...

But wait. Kitty wasn't moving. She was still standing by the steps, Stanford already at the chopper. Lex gave her a hard, cold stare. "Kitty, go *on*."

"I'm not going with you," she said, her voice trembling. At that moment she suddenly reminded him of Eve Teschmacher. Something about the spoiled-little-girl pout masquerading as stubborn defiance.

"Yes, you are," Lex replied flatly. He could see now what Kitty planned - to stay behind, and somehow aid Superman. The resemblance was accurate to the last detail. *Why the hell do all my women turn on me as soon as they get a good look at his blue eyes? Traitorous bitch. She'll be lucky if she lives as long as Eve did. Oh well, I have her replacement already.* "To the helicopter, Kitty. Now."

Luthor stalked toward her, and Kitty took a few skittery steps back, clutching Tala like a security blanket. The little dog snarled at him, struggling in her arms as she tried to get at the man she hated. Her owner's voice gained strength as she retorted, "No, Lex. I'm done with you. You can't make me."

"You're right, I can't," Lex said, pausing, then suddenly lunged forward. But it wasn't Kitty he was after; Tala's snarl rose to a high pitch as he grabbed hold of her fur and yanked her from Kitty's hands.

"No!" Kitty yelped, but Lex stepped back quickly, holding the dog high in the air while she writhed and snarled. Luckily for him, he had hold of the back of her neck and she couldn't bite him. Tala tried valiantly, however, shrieking in mad fury as she strove to sink her teeth into his hand.

"Get moving," Lex said threateningly. "Have your ass strapped in the seat before I count to twenty, Kitty, or I drop-kick the furball over the side. At least the little girl will have some company while she drowns. *Move!*"

As Kitty hurried away, she glanced over her shoulder at the stricken hero, still valiantly trying to lever himself up. *I'm sorry*, she mouthed, tears spilling down her cheeks. *I'm so sorry.*

Whistling softly, and shaking the dog slightly to keep her from twisting around and biting him, Lex followed her.

Seeing his daughter slip out of sight, Superman had lunged to his feet ... almost. The sudden movement made the shard in his side cut deeper, and he cried out in agony as he fell back to the ground. Jason screamed, but he could barely feel his legs, much less move them.

The boy wheezed, his entire body one huge ache. His head throbbed savagely in time with his pulse. The bad guys were going away ... And the Bald Man was making Miss Katherine leaving them too. She might've helped more, he knew she had tried, but now it was just him and Superman.

It was still hard for him to wrap his mind around the man lying on the ground below him, his breath as tortured as Jason's. Superman - Clark Kent - his father. His *father*, beaten and stabbed and trying so hard to get up. Trying and failing, the sound of the helicopter loud in Jason's ears, the little boy sobbing to see the hero so helpless.

"C'mon," he whimpered, dragging himself forward with his hands, his legs useless and

numb. "C'mon, we gotta save her." Tears streaked Jason's face, but he wouldn't stop, wouldn't give up, crawling to his father with his thready voice echoing faintly around the canyon.

It didn't matter to Jason that he would have to drag himself down the steps, over the snapped-off bits of crystal, and across the cracked floor to Superman. The distance looked like forever, but that meant nothing. Jason had his father's strength and his mother's determination. He'd saved Kala before, he would save her now - with a little help. *I won't leave Kala*, he told himself stubbornly, *me an' Superman are gonna save her, and save Mommy, and beat up that bad ol' Luthor! I'm ... not ... gonna ... give...*

Grant had nothing left to lose; if Lois Lane was running loose and carrying a gun, Riley was dead or hurt. "Damn fool shoulda left you alone," the hitman muttered after he'd finished giving her the details of Luthor's plan, such as he knew it. He was still standing in front of the wheel, his hands on his head, and the barrel of the gun was still pressed tightly against his back.

"Yeah, he should've," Lois agreed. "Now do me a favor and don't struggle while I slip these cable ties on. I wouldn't mind hurting you, but it'd piss off my police contact, not to mention Superman."

"Luthor's been gone too long," Grant fretted, letting her bind his wrists. Maybe she'd forget to search him and he could get his pocketknife out and cut himself free... "Something's wrong... I get the feeling your kids' dad kicked Luthor's ass."

"I hope so." Lois marched him over to the wall, keeping her doubt and panic walled up tightly inside. For the moment she also ignored the indignant little voice inside yelling, *Does everyone know who their father is now? Was that little bit of gossip just too good for Luthor to keep to himself? God!* Aloud, she controlled her tone and only said, "See that bar there by the door? Grab hold of it."

Grant's hopes fell. The bar was for keeping one's balance in rough seas; it was securely anchored, and he wouldn't be able to get to his knife once she strapped his bound hands to it. "Lady, are you sure you wanna do that? Do you even know how to drive this thing?"

She jabbed the gun against him roughly to prompt his obedience, and put three cable ties around the bar and his wrists. "No, I don't. But you're gonna tell me what I need to do to keep it afloat. Because if you don't, I'm sure I can find a life boat, but I'm leaving you here." Her voice was low and deadly serious; no bluff there.

"Then get to that wheel and keep her headed into the waves," Grant said quickly. He watched the swift, competent way the reporter took over the controls, and had a moment to wish she was on his side of the law. And then he saw what was really in her hands, and both admired her guts and hated his own gullibility. No gun after all, just the handle of Riley's stupid police baton. He had been tricked.

"Hey," Grant said after a moment, seeing her eye the radio and trying to distract her. Those sharp hazel eyes turned to him again, and he knew better than to smile and charm her. Instead he spoke plainly. "You know this's just a job, right? I ain't got nothing against you personally, your man neither. Nobody told me we was gonna mess with kids. I just needed the money. You understand?"

"No," Lois told him coldly. "I don't understand you and I never will. But you should understand this much - the only reason you're conscious and unhurt right now is because you cooperated with me. Got it?"

"Got it," Grant said. "Didja kill Riley or just hurt 'im?"

"He's alive," Lois said shortly, picking up the radio handset with fierce determination. "Now shut up, I'm making a call."

Kal-El gritted his teeth, the pain like a spear in his side, burning and tearing... He could hear Jason sobbing, hear the helicopter fading away, hear Kala splashing below. But the pain consumed his world...

No. No, the twins are depending on me. I'm the only one who can save them - my twins, my son and daughter. Jason and Kala need me. Lois still needs me... With those thoughts to spur him on, he took a deep, ragged breath, reaching around to feel the crystal in his side. It burned his fingertips to touch it...

Kala's voice, so small, cried out several times only to be cut off an instant later by the seawater. Being only a little girl, she could only fight the tug of the waves and gravity and the cold of the water for so long... Another cry for help rang out and was suddenly cut off, then no more. Jason yelled her name, and Kal-El heard a rolling crash as the boy fell down the steps.

No more time for this, he thought grimly, and clenched his teeth as he forced himself to grip the ugly little shard. Pulling it out was worse than Lex stabbing it in - a low scream tore from him as he ripped the crystal out of his flesh, feeling blood spill from the wound.

But his head cleared the instant he flung the thing away from him. He was still sitting on top of an island made of the one substance that could kill him, but the relief of no longer having it *inside* his body was palpable. He could *breathe* again.

Still weak, he struggled to his feet. Jason was sitting up, wheezing heavily, but Kala ... he couldn't hear her calling anymore. The choice was agonizing. "Jason, wait," he said, trying for his old firmness and certainty. "I'll be right back with your sister." After all, Jason was safe for a few minutes; Kala might drown right now.

"No," Jason whispered with a wide-eyed shake of his head, reaching up. "Take me ... with you ... I can help..."

Kal-El couldn't resist those tiny arms held up so trustingly. And when he picked Jason up, he was surprised to find his son - *his son* - clinging to his arm with much more strength than that small body had seemed to possess.

Now all he had to do was fly down, pick up Kala, and get all three of them as far from this damned island as possible. *Sure. Easy*, he thought, and dove off the edge.

It was no use calling Superman over the roar of the engines. Lana sent him a text message instead, feeling weirdly presumptuous. Not even telling herself that this was Clark's phone helped her; she still couldn't quite believe she was texting a superhero. *What next, I email a chain letter to the President?*

At least he now had the latest information on the yacht, and knew that she and Richard were going after it. She closed the phone reverently, and Richard glanced over, chuckling at her. "What, you never sent a text message before?" he teased, trying to distract himself from their dire situation as well as genuinely amused.

"Oh, and I suppose you call up superheroes every day, *Mr. White?*" Lana said archly. "When and if he responds, I should ask *him* for your number, then, right? I mean, you *are* on Superman's speed dial, from the way you talk. C'mon, Richard, drop the blasé act. You sounded pretty impressed by him the night he stopped by to check on Lois."

"I wasn't *that* much of a gibbering fan," Richard said defensively. "I mean, I like him, he *is* a hero. But I wasn't asking for his autograph."

"No, because you'd just drugged his ex," Lana retorted swiftly.

That was the wrong comeback, and Richard's various anxieties boiled over. "Did *everyone* but me know that? Hell, you were in *Kansas* and you knew it! How come I was the last person on the planet to find out about Lois and Superman?!"

"Because you didn't *want* to know," Lana shot back. "You told me she kept refusing to talk about him - obviously that means there was more to them than press agent and hero."

Richard shot her an exasperated glance. "Not talking about him means she was in love with him - you know, there's a *reason* men don't understand women. You don't make any damn sense!"

Lana fumed, "Lois would slap the daylights out of you for a sexist comment like that! As it is, *I'm* seriously considering it!"

For some reason, that amused Richard slightly. "Lana, you're just not the aggravated-assault type."

The designer crossed her arms and spat, "Okay, so I'm *not* your fiancée, but you'd better quit comparing me to her if you want this relationship to..." Green eyes widened as she heard her own words, and Lana slapped a hand across her mouth.

Utter silence, but for the engines. Richard felt his heart beating in his throat, and over the headphones came Lana's muffled murmur, "What the heck am I *saying*?"

Another long pause, both of them looking out the window and not at each other. "Why are we arguing?" Richard finally said in conciliatory tones. *Geez, I'm totally screwing this up with Lana ... and I shouldn't even be **thinking** about it!*

"Stress," Lana sighed. "We're both worried about her and the kids."

"Yeah," Richard said slowly. "After all of this is over, though ... we need to figure some things out."

Lana had no reply for that, other than a wordless murmur of agreement. She turned her attention to the radio, adjusting the volume slightly. Static crackled in their ears.

And then Richard's face went white as he heard a very familiar voice on the channel. "Mayday, mayday, this is Lois Lane aboard the *Gertrude*, presently located latitude 40 north, longitude 73 west."

For one heart-pounding moment it seemed as though he wouldn't be able to fly, would plunge to his death carrying the fates of both his children. But then Kal-El found another notch of resilience beyond what he'd ever known he possessed, and his fall became a swoop that captured a now nearly-unconscious Kala just as her head ducked under the cold waves. Holding her with one arm, he strove for height. *If I can break the cloud cover, I can neutralize some of the worst effects...* Such desperate thoughts were all the hope he had. All three of them were weak from kryptonite radiation.

Jason clung tightly to him, and reached across to grab Kala's hand. She was still weakly coughing up seawater and shivering, but managed to return his grip, her other arm looping around her father's neck. Both twins were feverish and breathing raggedly, barely lucid - yet holding on tightly, to him and to each other.

Deep into the cloud layer, rumbling thunder somewhere in the distance, cool moisture closing around them. This wasn't good, cut off from the sun, and Kal-El reached for more height. At last, just as he thought he'd reached the limit of his strength and would fall back to the sea, they soared upward and out of the clinging mist. The difference was immediately noticeable: Kal-El took his first full breath since being stabbed, golden sunlight bathing him

and the two children.

The warm rays suffused him, baking away the tension and pain. Eyes closed, head tilted back, Kal-El hovered and soaked up the life-giving rays of the yellow sun. In his arms, Jason and Kala began to breathe easier, both up them turning their faces up to the golden disk above. Their eyes closed before the fierceness of its light, but their fevers cooled in spite of the heat washing through them. And then something curious happened.

Jason's numbness vanished, replaced by soothing sense of warmth and power. Far from hurting and weakness, he felt as refreshed as if he'd just awakened, ready to bound down out of the sky and take on the world. The ringing that had plagued Kala's ears disappeared into a strange kind of clarity, full of rustling voices each separate and distinct from each other, yet all of them easy to ignore when she focused on the sunlight pouring into her and her father's steady heartbeat.

Something was *very* different to Jason and Kala as they were held bathed in sunlight. The utter amazement of what was happening, of just how instantly *well* they felt, the relief that they were finally safe from the bad man, and the absolute fascination of just *where* they - not to mention *who* was holding them - were all conspired to keep the twins stunned into silence.

Relief was not so swift for their father. The wound in his side still pained him, although blood stopped flowing from it. And he still felt generally debilitated, much the same way he had after returning home. It had taken two days in the Kansas sun to cure him then, and he wished wryly for the luxury of time to spend basking here.

His pure Kryptonian lineage left him far more sensitive to kryptonite radiation than the twins, apparently, though they seemed to draw their strength from the same source as himself. "Are you two okay?" he asked gently. "Is the sun making it better?"

Kal-El thought he already knew the answer - they both looked much better already - but couldn't help wanting to hear it from them. His feelings about the twins were still a muddle of surprise and caution and delight, but the strongest of all was a fierce protectiveness that went beyond even what Lois inspired in him.

Two sets of now-bright eyes gazed up at him seriously, one pair as blue as his own, the other hazel like their mother's. "Yes, sir," Jason replied in a very respectful tone. This was his idol, his rescuer, his favorite adult pal around the office - and his father. "We ... we didn't tell them you were Mr. Clark." The quiet addition rocked Kal-El to the very foundations of his soul - his long-held secret, which of course the children must eventually know, was something he'd been wondering in the back of his mind how to tell them. Lois hadn't said anything; they were so young, no one would have expected children this small to keep such an important secret.

And while Kal-El was still staring at him in wide-eyed shock at that newest revelation, his daughter spoke up. "Thank you for saving us," she whispered, looking at him with wonder so reminiscent of Lois that it broke his heart. And then Kala added something in a voice only she and he could hear, surprising him breathless with one word. "Daddy."

Lex sat beside Stanford, keeping a wary eye on Kitty behind him. She'd been cooing over Tala since he'd given the mutt back to her; plenty of time to destroy the vicious little puffball later. For now he wanted Kitty's compliance, and got it simply by letting the dog go unharmed.

Still, she wasn't entirely trustworthy anymore. *I only need her for a while, if all goes well*, Lex thought. *Just until I can break Lois to my will*. He sighed at the thought; while Lois' spirit would never be *completely* broken, and he knew that trying to keep her for too long

would result in death for one or both of them. Still, just the idea of having her in his possession brought a wistful smile to his face.

The crackling radio intruded on Lex's glowing self-satisfaction, and he eyed it unhappily. Stanford was scanning channels, listening for the Coast Guard or anyone else they didn't want to run into. Suddenly, the last voice Lex expected to hear at that moment spoke clearly in his headphones.

"-hell did you get here so fast?" Lois Lane said, her voice shocked.

Lex sat bolt upright, eyes bulging. *How did she get loose?* he wondered. "Get us there *now*," he snarled to Stanford, ignoring the small triumphant smile on Kitty's face. She'd pay for her indiscretions later.

Another voice came over the airwaves, and Lex belatedly remembered Lois' fiancé, the pilot. "We managed to trace the boat," Richard was saying. "Your mother called in a favor..."

Lex leaned forward, cupping his hands around the headphones as he listened to Lois cut him off. "Dammit, the military was supposed to stay *out* of this!"

"He already had *you*, Lois," Richard argued. His concern for her was plain in his voice, but so was a certain harried aggravation. "We couldn't waste any more time. They're not *involved*, they're just sending me the coordinates for the yacht. Lois, *where are the twins?*"

Luthor smiled at the choked-off sob that sounded in his ears. *Delicious*. "Luthor has them - Richard, he took them to an island made of kryptonite. He's using them as bait." Her voice firmed, and she continued, "I'm fine here for a while - the two guys Lex left are both under control, and I can steer this thing for now. You go find the kids and keep Superman away from the island."

"No, Lois, we're closer to you," Richard was saying. "We sent Superman your coordinates - if he's not there, then he's either still busy in Metropolis or already on the island. We'll text him to let him know to stay away..." His voice faded for a moment, and Lex looked out the window at the right moment to see the seaplane below them. Stanford was keeping to the clouds, so it was unlikely that the pilot saw them...

Which was confirmed in the next radio transmission. "We're only about ten minutes away, Lois. We'll get you first and then go for the twins - there's no telling when Luthor could come back. He has a helicopter on the ship..."

They commenced arguing, and Stanford kept the chopper flying at top speed toward the yacht. It amused Lex to hear both of them being so noble. Of course, neither of them knew he could reach the yacht far more quickly than the plane. He'd only have a few minutes on board, but as long as Lois kept talking, he knew exactly where she was.

It was painfully obvious now what must have happened. *Riley. That pea-brained idiot must've tried to cast her in one of his documentaries. Damn him - I hope she killed him. No, wait - I hope she left him alive. I'll kill him for this stupidity!*

"I guess things aren't working out quite you planned," Kitty said poisonously.

Lex smiled slowly at her, held that wickedly amused expression until she became appropriately fearful again. "Oh, no, Katherine. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. Just wait and see - I've saved the best for last."

To Dance With the Devil

"Perry, are you sure you're all right?" Loueen's voice bordered on frantic. "I saw the *Planet* globe come down on the news..."

"Honey, I'm fine," he soothed. A few feet away, Ella's cell phone rang, and she scowled at the number as she answered it. "We're all safe, everyone in the building got out. Superman showed up and caught the globe - the Olsen boy got some pictures of it. Great ones, I'm even in 'em."

"As long as you're okay," Loueen fretted.

"It'll take more than an earthquake to retire this editor," Perry promised her. Just as he was about to offer yet more assurances, he saw Ella's eyes grow wide, heard her gasp.

"Elinore, what's wrong?" Perry barked, thinking, *If that's Luthor, I'll strangle him myself.*

Hazel eyes, blank with shock, snapped back to focus. "It's Jason," she said, and Perry realized it wasn't horror that paled her skin - it was wonder. "He's ... he's with Superman. The twins are okay. He wants us to meet them at Centennial Park. Perry, the twins are all right!"

That news, so unexpected and so desperately wished for, surprised Perry so much that he closed his phone without even hearing Loueen's frustrated sigh. "I *knew* you were with Ella Lane!"

Richard pushed the throttle forward as far as it would go. "Lois, we're almost there. Luthor could be anywhere - I wouldn't see him in these clouds. It doesn't make sense to turn back now..."

"Dammit, Richard, I don't care what happens to me!" Lois' voice exploded into the headphones, Lana wincing slightly at her vehemence. "Go get the twins. If Luthor wants to kill me, fine, I don't care as long as Jason and Kala are safe!"

"Some of us have some slight objections to you being murdered!" Richard roared back at her.

"And the twins are probably first in that line," Lana cut in hurriedly. She'd finished sending an update and a warning to Superman via Clark's cell phone, and she didn't want to hear this particular argument played out over the radio waves. "Lois, Superman's after them - Luthor might not even have made it to the island with them. We didn't see the helicopter there."

"I am so not in the mood to have sense talked into me," Lois growled. "Fine, you just get here quick..."

They heard a man's voice say something in the background; it sounded strangely like a warning. Then a crash, and Lois' voice again, "Oh fu-" before the radio cut off.

"*Lois?!!*" Richard said sharply. He turned up the volume and adjusted the radio dial slightly. "Lois? If you can hear this, Lois, come in. Lois, please, answer me..."

Lois was in the act of growling at Richard for being so sensible when she heard Grant call out, "Boss!"

The door smashed open almost in the same instant, and Lois muttered a curse at the very *last* person she wanted to see. Luthor slammed the door back and charged her, not even giving her a second's pause in which to raise the baton. If not for the wall beside her, Lois would've been tackled to the ground.

That didn't mean she was defenseless. The infamous Lane elbow swung up and into Luthor's chest, aiming for that cracked rib. Lois snarled at him furiously, "Bastard! How dare

you hurt my kids!" She cocked the other arm back, ready to sock him one.

Lex was trying to pin her arms against her sides, and he used all of his weight to slam her against the wall before she could hit him again. He didn't waste his breath talking; Grant was tied up, Riley was out of commission, and he'd sent Kitty and Stanford off on other errands. Lex knew perfectly well that the woman he was scuffling with was more than a good-looking reporter; her father had been a general, and had trained her in combat skills.

Living in Metropolis had further honed Lois' proficiency in self-defense. Lex was trying to stay close, minimizing her chances to get momentum behind any of her blows. So instead of swinging at him, Lois stomped down, the heel of her boot striking his instep.

"Bitch," Lex hissed, and grabbed her hair again. That freed her to punch him, but he used the hold to swing her head against the wall. Lois turned her head slightly, seeing stars for a moment but not losing consciousness as he'd hoped. Writhing in his grip, Lois kicked his shin and clawed for his face. *How many more times can I get hit in the head before I have an aneurysm or something?* The thought floating across Lois' mind eerily echoed her rough flight on the inaugural Genesis launch.

She broke away slightly, trying to get around him and get at the baton. Lex, panting with exertion, grabbed for her again, snaking an arm around her neck. Lois was brought up short, struggling to break his grip. *Chokehold ... the sonofabitch is going to strangle me*, Lois thought desperately, her nails raking Lex's forearm as he started applying pressure. She tried the stomping trick again, but he was wise to it now, avoiding the heels of her boots.

The edges of Lois' vision started to darken. Lex kept tightening his hold on her neck, the pressure cutting off circulation and air. Lois gasped, trying with every ounce of her strength to pry his arm away from her throat. *My God, he's really going to kill me ... I'm really going to die like this. I don't know where the twins are, I don't know where Kal-El is, I don't even know if they're alive... After all this time, I'm going to die without even knowing...*

Tortured breath, her lungs on fire, sight dimming, and still Lex held on like a bulldog, his harsh breathing loud in her ears. Other than to curse her once, he had not said a word to her from the moment the attack began, and that was perhaps most terrifying of all. To die without even knowing precisely why she was being murdered - without some kind of justification, no matter how warped, for Luthor's sudden violence.

Lois began to fade, her oxygen-starved muscles going limp. *Thank God I told Kal-El about the twins ... thank God I told him I love him. If I have to die, he'll keep them safe if he's still alive...* That thought seemed to be her final one, wavering on the edge of consciousness, her vision completely dark now except for a narrow point of light.

Feeling her struggles grow weaker, Lex murmured against her ear, "Hush now, Lois. When you wake up all of this will be over with ... for good."

Those ominous words pierced through the core of her soul, but then Luthor did the unforgivable. Gently, almost affectionately, he kissed the back of her neck.

Rage fueled a last burst of adrenaline, and Lois arched her whole body into one last clawing strike at Luthor's face. She had the satisfaction of feeling his skin tear under her nails before darkness finally claimed her.

The streets of Metropolis were crowded, people milling about frantically. Perry, Jimmy, and Ella managed to make their way to the edge of Centennial Park, only a few blocks from the *Daily Planet* building. There they waited, letting the crowds flow around them, until a familiar blue and red shape in the sky above occasioned cheers from everyone who could see

him.

"Superman!" "It's Superman!" "Hey, Superman, over here!" The mass of people surged toward him as he descended, almost knocking Ella off her feet.

"Be careful," Superman said sternly. "Give me some room to land, please." The crowd backed off enough for him to set Jason and Kala down, and both of them charged their Nana, hugging Ella until she thought she'd see stars. "They're going to be fine," Superman said.

"Thank you," Perry told him, Jimmy hanging back to snap a picture of the Chief and the hero.

"You're welcome," came the cordial response, along with a friendly nod to the photographer. Those amazing blue eyes turned serious again as he spoke to Ella. "Take care of them, Mrs. Lane. I'm going back for your daughter."

"Wait," Ella said. Something about his tone bothered her. The kids didn't like it either, both turning to look at him. Kala even scowled.

"You're gonna come back, right?" Jason asked worriedly.

Superman looked at his children with a sigh. He'd meant to sidestep Ella's questioning voice, but the looks on the twins' faces halted him. *They know. They know I might not come back this time.* "Jason, Kala, I'll be right back with your mom, okay?" *If there's any way on earth I can survive this, I'll come back. They were dear to me even before I knew they were mine.*

He looked up, meeting Ella's hazel eyes, the sharply interrogative look in them so very familiar. "Bring her home to me," she said softly.

"I will, ma'am," he replied. *If it kills me to do it, I'm not leaving Lois in Luthor's clutches.* With that thought, he rocketed upward.

Kitty hurried alongside Stanford, holding her purse by her side. Tala was twisting around angrily inside the oversized bag, but at least she was close by and out of Lex's sight. No telling what he'd do to her... or to Kitty herself.

Both were bound for Lex's study, rushing to complete the tasks he'd assigned them in the few minutes before Lois' fiancé caught up to the yacht. Stanford made it through the door first - running in heels slowed Kitty down - and he went directly to the large steel locked case. Only he and Lex had the combination, and he spun it open before Kitty could even see what the numbers were.

Stanford took out a small plastic package, then closed the case quickly and handed it to Kitty. She glimpsed an instant of pity in his eyes, but the scientist wouldn't help her. He was too frightened of Lex - not quite as scared as Kitty herself, who had tasted Luthor's violence more fully than the men. His eyes... She shivered as she took the case, and turned to hurry out again.

The latch clicked slightly as she turned just outside the door, and Kitty had to stop suddenly to keep the case from falling open. Stanford didn't see her; he was busy with his own errand. An idea, terrible and wondrous, began to take shape in Kitty's mind. Unlike Lex, who loved his elaborate, multistage plans, Kitty tended to think on her feet. It took her only seconds to decide what to do, and begin doing it.

Holding the case very carefully, to keep it from coming open or latching fully, Kitty rushed to her own room. No time to close the door, even - if Lex caught her at this, she'd be dead whether he had to break it down first or not. Kitty set the case on her bed and opened it. She quickly plucked the Kryptonian crystals out of the foam that cradled them, hiding them

under her pillow. Forcing her alarm clock inside, she hefted the case to make sure the weight was about right, then latched it firmly shut.

No going back now. It's done. Katherine, for once in your life, you're being heroic. So why the hell are you scared out of your mind? That was an easy answer - when Lex figured out what she'd done, he would probably kill her. *Forget 'probably'!* But he'd have to catch her first, and if she could get herself and Tala away from him, so much the better. The life she'd been raised to - a con woman, a grifter like her mother - was no peach, but it was better than this. *I can forgive a lot, but what he did today... never.*

At the last second before she bolted out the door, inspiration struck. Kitty grabbed a handful of her jewelry and carried it with her as she raced back to the main deck.

Stanford had been almost as quick in his work as she was, and he didn't even look at her askance as they rushed up the stairs. He'd been keeping his head down lately, refusing to make eye contact with anyone, and some distant part of Kitty's mind pitied him for making the same mistake she had - getting in way over his head. Most of her was shivering in terror of discovery, trying not to let any indication of her treachery show.

The sight that greeted her and Stanford silenced those thoughts. Lex had carried the unconscious reporter to the helicopter, and through the open door they could see her head lolling back as he buckled her in. Her hands were cuffed in front of her, and from the rumpled look of her hair and clothes - not to mention the blood dripping down the side of Lex's face - subduing her had been particularly difficult.

What made Kitty's flesh creep was the way Lex looked at Lois. His expression had frightened her months ago, when she'd seen him watching Lois on television. Now that he had her helpless, though, the avid gleam in his eyes renewed Kitty's determination to get away from him at any cost.

Stanford, beside her, shuddered a little. He had seen such looks before, in the eyes of fellow geologists who had found their first vein of gold, or plucked their first diamond from the earth. A kind of fever that mere possession could never satisfy - such men would level a mountain and leave a barren wasteland behind them in pursuit of riches.

Things were not looking good for Lois, and neither Kitty nor Stanford made a sound, not wanting to disturb Luthor when he was so absorbed. After a moment in which he stared silently at his prize, Lex stepped forward and bent over her. The top two buttons of her blouse had come undone in the scuffle, and he was almost tender as he re-buttoned them.

"Mr. Luthor," Stanford said quietly, and the boss' head snapped up. "Here you are, sir." He held out the speed-loader that Riley had taken from Lois when she boarded the yacht. The simple plastic and aluminum device held six .357 cartridges in exactly the same spacing as the Ladysmith's cylinder, which made reloading the revolver much faster.

Lex took it and inspected the rounds Stanford had doctored. "Excellent. Thank you, Stanford. Kitty?"

She held out the locked case, trying not to shiver. "Here's your rocks. Can you put my jewelry in with them, Lex? I don't have any more room in my purse."

Luthor had touched the latch as soon as he took the case from her, but at her wheedling question he left it locked. Snatching the fistful of gold and gemstones from her hand, Lex flung the jewelry over the railing. "I said *bring nothing*, Kitty! We don't have time - you'll have plenty of trinkets later. Get belted in."

He ignored her completely as she scurried past, handing the case to Stanford. "Secure this and start the helicopter. I have a little unfinished business before we leave."

"Yes, sir," Stanford said, then hesitated minutely. "He'll be after us."

"I know that," Lex snapped. "I saw him moving on the alpha-wave tracker. Somehow he survived the island - but we're not beaten yet. Be ready to take off in five minutes."

The scientist hurried to obey, and Lex rushed down the stairs in search of Riley. He'd actually had the audacity to take over the aquatic gallery, and Lex found him trussed like a turkey on the floor. The three cameras set strategically around the room confirmed Lex's suspicions, and he set about destroying them first.

Then it was time to deal with his employee's unsatisfactory job performance. "Riley, you disappoint me," Lex said silkily as he approached the prone man.

"Boss, be careful," Riley urged. "Ms. Lane got loose..."

"You mean you set her free," Lex replied, standing over him.

"No, boss, she-Ow!" Riley yelped as Lex kicked him in the side.

"You were trying to play with her, weren't you?" Lex questioned, and the very softness of his voice bespoke danger. "She was going to star in one of your pathetic little films. Only this time, instead of a frightened college girl or an unlucky housewife, you picked General Lane's daughter. Your mistake, Riley, and it cost me."

Riley looked up at him, finally seeing the blood on his cheek. "Boss, I'm sorry..."

"You are," Lex mused. "Riley, Riley, Riley. You poor little lust-crazed fool. I suppose I brought this on myself, didn't I, by not allowing you to satisfy your... creative urges... in Nevada, hmm? How could I expect you to resist a woman as delightfully tempting as Ms. Lane? After all, she hardly looks dangerous - she's petite and pretty, not the sort you'd expect to fight back."

Riley was nodding frantically. "Yeah, yeah - it's been rough, you know, Nevada, nothing much to do there, no women in the place... I hadta have something, some kind of entertainment... It'd been so long..."

"So it was all my fault, then?" Lex asked.

In spite of his mounting terror, Riley recognized the danger. "No, no, boss, no, it was me - I shoulda left her alone, I shoulda listened to y-Ow! Ow, *that hurts!*"

"Yes, you should have listened to me," he snarled, kicking Riley repeatedly just below the ribs. "You should have followed orders - all I asked was that you do as you're told, and you couldn't even accomplish that! Six years I planned this, and you almost ruin it in a few minutes just to sate your pitiful lust!"

He suddenly stopped, breathing heavily, and forced himself to calm down as Riley whimpered in terror and pain. "Be glad you didn't succeed, Riley," Lex finally said, his tone almost casual. Riley's eyes rolled up to meet his gaze. "If you'd actually touched my prize, I'd have to spend weeks planning an appropriately painful death. Lucky for you, Lois was more than capable of defending herself against an incompetent buffoon like yourself."

Riley coughed blood and rolled onto his side, panting. "So you're ... you're not gonna kill me?"

Lex smiled cruelly. "I won't waste time plotting a torturous end for you. A pity, really - if I was creative enough, do you think the fans of your little movies would buy the film of your demise?"

High in the air, Kal-El took out his cell phone. Surprising that it had remained intact this long - lucky, too, since it had enabled him to get in touch with Mrs. Lane. *Got to write the manufacturer a letter of recommendation. But sign it Clark Kent, not Superman. A hero can't*

do product placements...

Jason had said that it beeped while he was talking to Ella, and sure enough, the screen was showing text messages. Kal-El quickly scrolled through them, chuckling wryly at the most recent. 'Island made of kryptonite - be careful.' *I wish I'd known that half an hour ago*, he thought resignedly. The rest of the message was more hopeful - Lois was still on the *Gertrude*, and Richard had sent him the coordinates.

Kal-El took off in that direction, his far-seeing eyes scanning for the yacht. The wound in his side still burned painfully when he exerted himself, but there was nothing he could do for it now. *Hold on, Lois*, he thought, the fervency of his hope making it almost a prayer. *Just hold on, I'm coming. No matter what happens to me, I won't leave you to him.*

Lex hopped into the helicopter just as Stanford finished the preflight. "Move it," he snarled, and Stanford rushed into the air. He headed straight up at first, disappearing into the heavy cloud cover. Then the geologist forced the throttle all the way forward, and sent the helicopter scything away southward.

Stanford asked, "South out of range, and then inland? We'll wind up refueling somewhere like Charleston."

"Fine," Lex said. The rear of the helicopter had two bench seats across from each other, and he sat down across from Lois. Kitty squeezed herself as far to one side as she could, wanting nothing to do with the avid gleam in Lex's eyes.

Lois' head still lolled back, and she slumped bonelessly against the seat belt. Lex grinned cruelly as he flicked open the cylinder of her Ladysmith, shook out the cartridges, and replaced them with the altered rounds from the speed loader. Clicking it shut, he leaned forward and took hold of the short chain that linked her cuffed wrists. "I don't think you're sleeping, Lois," he purred.

No response from Lois, and he considered that she might actually be unconscious still. But her pulse beat steadily in her throat - ah, such a lovely neck. Lex watched her carefully as he crossed his feet at the ankles and slid them between Lois' feet - no chance for her to kick him in the groin now, which she would surely try at some point.

Lex glanced at the alpha wave tracker beside him. Superman had just left the Metropolis area and was moving quickly toward them. Not good - hopefully his improvised plan would halt the caped wonder once and for all. Until then...

Tapping the cold barrel of the revolver against Lois' cheek, Lex said, "Playing possum won't help you now, Lois. You're mine - once and for all."

"Fat fucking chance," Lois snarled. Hazel eyes shot open, and Lois tried to kick, catching him painfully on the shin.

Lex smiled broadly even as he winced, and yanked on her handcuffs, pulling her closer and pressing the revolver hard against her throat. "None of that, now. I don't want to have to hurt you too much yet - have patience, my dear. We'll have plenty of time later."

Lois sneered in disgust and outrage. "God, you're worse than that twit Riley," she spat. "I'd sooner slit my throat with my own *fangernail* than touch you."

"I'll do the touching, thank you," Lex chuckled. "I don't trust you with your hands free. One scar is enough to remember you by."

Growling in frustrated fury, Lois reared back away from the pressure on her throat. "In your dreams, Lex," she muttered. "You just want me because I'm a trophy. Well, fine. Go ahead, rape me. But you'll *never* have what *he* had from me. That's one thing you can never

possess, much less taint."

Lex pulled steadily on the handcuffs, forcing Lois closer to him. He casually kicked her feet further apart and leaned toward her, his knee now brushing hers. Lois couldn't fight the belt that held her in the seat, nor the constant pressure on her arms, but she could tip her head back. Lex merely chuckled and slid the gun up behind her ear, pressing the muzzle hard against that sensitive point until Lois was forced to tilt her face toward him. Thus violating her personal space, his breath mingled with hers as he spoke. "Oh, we'll see about that, Lois my dear," Lex purred, so close that she could feel the air disturbed by his words. "You haven't made the extensive study of pharmacology and hypnosis that I have. Let me assure you, there *are* ways." His voice lowered, and Lois' lips curled back like an angry dog's as he added, "Though I'd *love* to have your compliance *and* your hatred, for my safety I may have to settle for less."

He could almost have kissed her with those words, and for a moment it seemed as if he would. Stanford was ignoring them, concentrating on flying the helicopter, and Kitty was trying to block out what she was hearing, curled protectively around her purse and Tala within.

Lois was not yet beaten, swallowing back bile, she darted her head forward, teeth snapping. If Lex wanted to kiss her, fine - he'd lose a healthy chunk of flesh for the privilege. He jerked back, narrowly missing the bite, and laughed delightedly. "I'll see one of us dead first," Lois promised with a snarl.

"Such spirit," Lex said genially, a mad possessive gleam in his eyes. "Oh, Lois, it would almost be worth dying to finally break you."

"Good," Kitty hissed. "Too bad she didn't tear your throat out just then."

The laughter died in Lex's throat, and he cut Kitty a venomous glare. She didn't turn away like she had before; something new and fierce had come into her eyes, and Lex distrusted it. *She's outlived her usefulness*, he thought, then turned back to Lois with an apologetic smile. "You'll have to forgive Katherine," he said gently. "She's a little upset with me at the moment. I'm afraid I committed one of those unpardonable relationship sins earlier; I said the wrong name at a... delicate moment."

Richard was leaning forward, peering through the windshield for the yacht. They were very close to the last set of coordinates...

His phone chirped in Lana's hand, and she looked at the little screen. A perplexed frown stole over her pretty face at the message, which was simply *Look left*. She did so, and quickly tapped Richard's shoulder, pointing.

The pilot turned, and his startled expression matched Lana's. Superman was right outside the window, keeping pace with the plane, and gave them both a little wave. He was carrying Clark's cell phone, and quickly typed out a message one-handed, his fingers blurring with super-speed.

Lana read over the headphones, "Twins are safe with Mrs. Lane & Mr. White. Yacht ahead; no heartbeats on board. Am checking it. Will meet you there."

A lot of information to process quickly. "Thank God the twins are okay - thank God *he's* okay," Richard sighed, shooting him a thumb's-up. He impulsively snapped off a salute, and Superman grinned and saluted back. Then the hero took off in a blur of speed that left Richard's flight-loving soul aching in envy.

As the seaplane corrected course slightly behind him, Kal-El heard Lana's voice saying, "Wow... That was really him..."

And Richard's reply, a little exasperated, "Oh, so now you're a fangirl too? What *is* it with every woman in my life falling all over him?"

"Who said I was *in* your life, *Mr. White*?"

"Who said you weren't?"

Kal-El just shook his head, chuckling. *Oh, dear. I really ought to be upset on Lois' behalf, but they're just too amusing. And I badly need the levity.* He winced slightly at the throbbing in his side - would it never *stop*? - and angled down toward the yacht. His vision revealed at least two lead-lined rooms which would need to be investigated...

While they were making their way to Centennial Park to meet Superman, Perry had managed to get hold of Lieutenant Sawyer. With all of the turmoil in the city, including continuing aftershocks from the earthquake, even off-duty Special Crimes Unit officers were doing whatever they could to help. Maggie managed to carve out a few minutes to escort the Lane twins to Metropolis General Hospital. Jason and Kala seemed pretty much okay, except that they were less interested in riding in the police car with its flashing lights than Maggie would've expected. She stole glances at them in the rearview mirror, sitting on either side of Lois' mother and holding her hands tightly.

"Other than exhaustion, they seem all right," Sawyer murmured to Perry, who rode up front beside her.

He nodded, adding, "Awful quiet though."

"I want Mommy and Daddy," Kala piped up, right on cue, and her brother seconded the plaintive wish. Fortunately, the adults all assumed they meant Richard - if asked, the twins would've clarified that they wanted *both* daddies.

"It's okay, kids," Maggie soothed. "First we have to get you to the hospital so the doctors can make sure you're okay."

"Nooooo," they whined in unison. "I don't wanna shot," Kala added, sniffing.

"I want Ignatius," Jason added petulantly, provoking a snort of tired laughter from the adults.

"Hush," Ella said. "We just have to make sure you're okay, then you can go home. Probably no shots."

The twins looked at each other across Ella's lap, both scowling slightly. They were old enough to know that 'probably' didn't mean 'for sure', but they both felt good after their sunbath. Except for being tired and cranky, but that was Luthor's fault for messing up their schedules and ruining their sleep.

"Godzilla should squish Luthor," Jason opined.

"Splat," Kala said emphatically. "Let's tell Superman he should make friends with Godzilla next time."

Richard and Lana had just come into view of the yacht when a red and blue blur soared toward them. Richard banked the plane slightly, circling above the *Gertrude*, and Lana checked his cell phone. The message appeared in seconds, and she read it aloud: "Lois not on board. I hear the helicopter heading south. Alert Coast Guard and follow me."

Lana looked up, meeting his amazingly blue eyes through the glass windshield. Superman looked ... worried? "What's wrong?" Richard asked rhetorically, seeing the same expression on the hero's face.

The cell phone chirped again. They had both forgotten that Superman could hear them

with perfect clarity in spite of the noisy engines and the wind speed. "Luthor has kryptonite. I may need your help," Lana read, then forced herself to swallow on a suddenly dry throat.

"Our help?" Richard said, his voice suddenly small. "Holy..."

Lana nodded, biting her lip. If Superman needed their help, the situation was truly dire. "Anything we can do," she said.

"Anything," Richard affirmed. "Let me radio the Coast Guard, and we'll be right there."

This time it was Superman who saluted first, and Lana had the awful sense of something final about the gesture. Then he was gone, heading with determination and speed for his most bitter foe ... and the woman he loved enough to risk his very life for her.

"Poor Clark," Lana sighed. Richard glanced at her, but only nodded. The hero's love was obvious to both of them. What possible chance did an ordinary guy like Clark Kent - their friend - father of the twins or no - have against the feelings between Lois and the superhero?

"Lower," Lex said tautly, staring at the alpha wave tracker, and Stanford brought the helicopter even closer to the waves. Lois was still holding herself tense against Lex's grip on the cuffs, waiting for an opportunity to strike. She had spent the past few minutes listening to Lex's plans for her, and his low hypnotic voice had chilled her blood. It was all she could do to keep an expression of cold fury on her face and suppress her rising gorge; her razor-tongued wit had deserted her in the face of Lex's diabolical designs. The fact that he had been stroking her cheek with the front sight of her own damned gun didn't help.

Lois was also torn between praying for rescue - for her future, if Lex had his way, was nothing less than hell on earth - and praying for Kal-El to stay safely away. Regardless of her prayers, he was coming. Words from the recent past echoed in her mind. *Superman would never deliberately abandon Lois Lane. Especially not now.*

She bit her lip to stifle a sob, but couldn't help the tear that trickled from the corner of one eye. *Kal-El, please know what you're doing - please be careful. If I have to die so you and the twins can live, then so be it. But I couldn't live knowing you were gone.*

Lex smiled at that tear and Lois' throat working. He ran the sight of the Ladysmith gently over her cheek again, almost a caress of cold steel. "It's almost over," he murmured softly.

The alpha wave tracker beeped loudly, and Lex swung his attention back to it. "Stanford, bring us as low as you can and hover," he commanded, then unbuckled his seat belt. He reached across and did the same for Lois, hauling her to her feet by one arm and turning her toward the helicopter's door. The Ladysmith was now pressed firmly against its owner's throat, Lex growling, "Try anything - speak one word - and the last thing he'll see is your brain splashed across the roof."

Lois swallowed, not trusting herself to nod. She might have one chance, but it would be slim and desperate. Still, she had to hope for that chance, or there was nothing left to hope for. The General's daughter steeled herself to be ready for any action as Lex pushed the helicopter's door open.

The rotors whipped up cold spray from the ocean's surface, close enough that the salt water stung Lois' eyes. Lex forced her forward, and Lois braced her elbow against the door and leaned out, into the roar of the blades above and the sea below. Luthor stood securely behind her, the gun steady as death, as he gripped the back of her belt and pushed her even further out.

For the first time since falling out of another helicopter so many years ago, Lois knew true terror. The spaceplane had been more disbelief and grief than anything else - this was an

all too familiar fear, the drop yawning below her and her feet sliding on the wet floor.

And here came a familiar savior, his suit vivid against the gray sky. Lois' felt palpable relief wash over her at the sight of him, a naïve reaction considering all she knew of Lex but one she couldn't deny. Kal-El slowed as he neared the helicopter, seeing Lois' precarious position. "It's over, Luthor," he called, voice strong against the sound of the helicopter. "Give Lois to me."

"Come and get her," Lex challenged, giving her another slight push to make her lean even further into peril. "Of course, she'll be of no use to you dead. Agree to my terms or I'll put one of her own bullets into her skull."

Lois snarled wordlessly at Lex, her vision reddening in rage. How dare he use her to bait Superman! His softly-spoken threats were terrible, but this was far worse torture than anything he'd promised her. He surely planned to somehow use her to kill Superman - just as Jor-El had predicted so long ago.

Kal-El drifted closer warily. It was hard to negotiate when both parties had to bellow to hear themselves. "What are your terms, then, Luthor?"

Lois cut him a pleading look, heartbroken hazel eyes meeting his stern blue ones. *Just go, she thought. Leave me and go on, take care of my babies - those are my terms. You can't always save me; let me die so you and the twins can live. Please...*

"I just want one small favor from you," Lex said.

"What is that? I'm in no mood for games." Kal-El had closed the distance to only ten yards, and his voice was now close to his normal speaking tone.

"What?" Lex called loudly. "I can't hear you over the rotors!"

Closer still, twenty feet away, every instinct of Lois shrilling at him to stay back. "I said I'm in no mood for your games!" Kal-El called. The look on Lois' face burned him worse than the shard had; he would give anything, even his life, to erase her terror. "What do you want me to do?"

Lois felt Lex tense, and he abruptly swung the gun away from her neck, aiming it at Superman. *What the hell is he thinking?* The thought flashed across her mind, and then she finally caught a glimpse of her gun as it moved. The hollowpoint bullets had been doctored somehow; something green protruded from the point of each...

Kryptonite! "Kal-El, GO!" she screamed, but Lex was already pulling the trigger. The last son of Krypton had never feared bullets; had stood patiently and let one bounce off his eyeball only a few months ago. He saw the cluster of minute kryptonite fragments one second too late, and the bullet smashed into his chest. The deadly crystal penetrated his flesh with all the velocity of Lois' prized .357 magnum rounds.

"Now fly," Lex said as the hero tumbled from the air with a shocked expression on his face. Before Luthor could pull the trigger a second time, Lois pistoned her cuffed wrists forward, then back, her elbow catching him in the ribs. Luck finally decided to smile on her, and she struck the same rib she had cracked earlier. Lex released his hold on her with a pained yelp.

Only one place to go. Kal-El struck the waves hard and went under almost instantly. Ignoring the height and her handcuffs, Lois dove after him without a second's hesitation.

Requiem For a Dream

The seaplane's engines labored to maintain its maximum speed, but Richard didn't back off the throttle. He had a bad feeling about this...

They broke through the cloud cover, and Lana gasped at the sight that met their eyes. Luthor's helicopter hovered close to the waves, Superman nearby. Suddenly the hero fell into the sea, and someone jumped from the helicopter after him. Richard and Lana only had a glimpse over the distance, but the flash of red was probably Lois' blouse. Only she would dive so unhesitatingly after Superman.

The 'copter wheeled about, moving slowly after Lois. Watching its flight, Richard noticed something odd about the pilot. Whoever was controlling the stick didn't seem too confident, a trait that chopper pilots rarely seemed to lack. It gave him an idea ... a dangerous one, but it offered hope. Below them, Lois' head bobbed to the surface.

He turned to Lana, torn. She shouldn't have been part of this - she shouldn't have to take this risk. They only had seconds in which to act, but he couldn't bear the thought of harming her. "Lana..."

Her heart beat quickly with fear. *This isn't just a search for missing kids - this is war, against a psychopath with no regard for human life. How did I get mixed up in this? I'm just a small-town girl who happened to become a fashion designer. How did I wind up a deciding factor in the fate of a hero?*

*That's right - I started out helping a childhood friend... No. Be honest. Most of the reason is this man beside me, whom I shouldn't be falling in love with. But I am. And in some weird way, it fits that I'm here with him now, while he tries to save the woman he's engaged to ... who happens to be the beloved of that friend. **And** the hero we all adore, who also loves her.*

That resolved, sea green eyes met his with perfect equanimity. "I trust you, Richard. Whatever you've got in mind, let's do it."

"Lana, we could... I think I can chase the 'copter off - he's more maneuverable, but I'm a gutsier pilot. It's just..."

"We could all die?" she said gently. "I know. But we're their only chance - the Coast Guard can't get here in time. And she can't hold him up that long. We *have* to."

Richard nodded slowly, swallowing past the lump in his throat. "Yeah. You're right. I just... This is damn dangerous - I doubt he'll let me hit him, but we could hit the water, and that'd be the end."

"So be it," Lana said, calm now. Her hand slid over his atop the throttle, fingers tightening slightly. "Richard, do it. At least if we all die together, we can figure out who's walking through the pearly gates with whom before we actually see St. Peter."

Chuckling against his will, Richard nodded and pushed the throttle all the way forward. He twisted the yoke, sending the plane directly at the helicopter. Over the howl of the engines, which penetrated even the headphones, Richard said loudly, "Lana, just in case we die here... I'm in love with you."

She whipped around to stare at him, eyes wide with shock, but before Lana could reply the nose of the plane tipped down, and they began a steep dive that threatened to pull her out of the seat. The speed of their fall filled the cockpit with the wild scream of the wind as Richard bared his teeth and aimed at the 'copter.

In that terrible moment, racing toward the sea at speeds the plane was never designed to withstand, Lana saw the world with a new clarity. All of a sudden, she felt totally and

completely alive...

The shock of icy water drove the breath from Lois' lungs as she dove in, instantly penetrating her clothes. Her soaked jeans seemed to weigh a ton, but she kicked hard and her head broke the surface.

Gasping for air, Lois flailed her cuffed arms to stay afloat, blinking to clear the salt water from her eyes. Kal-El wasn't far away, thrashing weakly. The helicopter's engines snarled behind her, coming closer... *I can barely keep myself above water like this; I'll never be able to hold him up. Gotta get the cuffs off.*

She wouldn't let herself think of anything else. If she started wondering how long Kal-El could keep fighting the waves, she'd panic, and that wouldn't help her pick the lock. Lois twisted her head and pulled one earring out, straightening its fishhook loop in her teeth. These were most likely Riley's cuffs, bought from a novelty store and not police-issue. If so, they wouldn't be too hard to pick.

Working on the lock meant she couldn't move her arms to swim, so Lois took a deep breath and slid the earring post into the lock. As she hurriedly felt for the tumblers, the water closed over her head...

The human heart is capable of monstrous deceits... His father's voice. It couldn't help him now - Luthor had tricked him. The twins were safe - he had that much to be thankful for - but Lois was still in Luthor's clutches. He'd failed her, again...

The old wound from the shard stung where the salt water touched it, and his whole side ached now with a deep throb. The right side of his chest seemed about to burst from pain; the bullet was lodged deep in his muscle, and its kryptonite-studded tip radiated burning lines of agony throughout his upper body. Even breathing was painful, each desperate gasping breath seeming to dig the bullet deeper.

Not even the city was safe ... that kryptonite-impregnated monstrosity was still out there in the ocean, still growing. He could hear the sea floor creaking, the sound conducted better through water than air. *I've failed... I've failed them all...*

The helicopter circled back, and Kal-El dimly saw Luthor leaning out of the open door, his gaze fixed on the waves. The hero's vision grew dark, and he saw the chopper jerk away, Luthor falling back inside.

That was the last thing he saw before blackness rolled over him, and he let himself sink with one final thought chasing him down into unconsciousness: *It wasn't all in vain - as long as Jason and Kala are alive, then everything I've lived for, everything I dreamed of, is more than just ashes on the wind...*

The damned lock *finally* gave just as Lois' lungs threatened to explode. With her hands free, she lunged for the surface, taking a rasping breath of the salty air. Only when her lungs filled again did she open her eyes.

Lois almost dove back under. The seaplane passed over her with a tortured roar, one of its pontoons only a few feet above her head. Lois turned to look, and saw the helicopter dodge it, just barely. The door was still open, and she could hear Lex screaming in fury, but the words were unintelligible.

None of that matters, she thought, scything through the heavy sea toward the spot where she'd last seen Kal-El. Waves blocked her view, and her sodden clothes threatened to drag her

down, but Lois forced herself onward.

A glimpse of black hair above the water, swiftly disappearing, and fear gave Lois the strength to reach him. Her arm plunged down through the tossing waves, desperate for one last little miracle...

She caught his cape, and hauled on it. Her arms burned with effort, her eyes stung from the salt water, and her entire body trembled just from these few moments of fighting the ocean. But her legendary stubbornness served her well at last - Lois managed to drag Kal-El to the surface, get her hand under his chin to keep his head back and above water.

He wasn't responding. She couldn't even tell if he was breathing. And using one arm to hold him up meant she was in imminent peril of sinking herself. Kal-El didn't seem to have any natural ability to float.

"Come on!" she yelled, her voice lost in distant thunder, the slap of waves, and the snarl of aircraft engines. "Come on, Kal-El, *help me!*"

But he lay limply, his head tipped back on her shoulder, and Lois felt exhaustion begin to weaken her furiously pedaling legs. She flailed with her free arm, striving to keep them both up. "I won't lose you like this," she panted. "Not again..."

"Goddammit, Stanford, it's just a seaplane!" Lex bellowed. "Just dodge him!"

"He's crazy!" Stanford yelled, overcorrecting as he swung out of the seaplane's path. One of the 'copter's skids clipped an unusually high wave, and Stanford hauled on the collective, striving for height. The geologist was sweating, his eyes constantly flicking back and forth between the front windows and the sides. "Mr. Luthor, he's trying to kill us!"

"He hasn't got the maneuverability," Lex snapped, holding on to the back of the seat as Stanford turned the helicopter in a tight circle. "Keep dodging him until the damn fool crashes. I am not giving up now!"

"He's a fighter pilot," Stanford retorted nervously. "You sent me to a twelve-week course! He's gonna smash right into us - oh, shit!"

The seaplane dove at them out of a cloud, engines howling in protest. Stanford yelped and jinked to one side, but it was a narrow miss. "Boss, he doesn't care if he kills himself!" he yelled. "As long as he takes us with him!"

Lex scanned the sea angrily. They couldn't hear the plane coming over their own engine noise, and the clouds worked against them as well. Stanford was losing it, Kitty was in hysterics, and he'd lost sight of Lois...

There! He just barely saw her, the top of her head cresting a wave for a few seconds. Lex started to yell to Stanford to bring them around, when Lois slipped underwater. "**NO!**" he roared. "Stanford, get us there! Now!"

"Boss-"

"*Do it!*" Lex snarled. *I won't let her go - I worked too hard to win this prize. She's the trophy that makes this victory complete. I won't let her get away from me...*

The rotor wash flattened the surface of the waves, and for a moment Lex saw Lois barely ten feet from him. She was clinging to the alien, who lolled limply against her, his complexion pasty. In spite of the fact that he was much bigger than herself, Lois was holding him up. *Fool, he's already dead*, Lex thought, and gripped the doorframe, getting ready to haul her out of the ocean by her hair as soon as Stanford got them close enough.

Just then, they heard an unfamiliar voice over the radio. "Hey, chickenshit, you ought to land that thing somewhere before you get killed! Be glad I don't have a 'copter or I'd take your

tail rotor out and watch you spin!" Richard White laughed crazily, and Stanford glanced at the radio only to see that he'd been transmitting his conversation with Luthor.

The seaplane dove again. It seemed to appear suddenly as if by magic, but the damn pilot had merely used the bright rays of the sun shining through broken cloud cover to hide his approach. Stanford screamed in terror and wrenched the cyclic, making the entire craft sway abruptly. "Boss, we're all gonna die!" He was answered by a war whoop from the radio and more laughter.

Lex had tumbled to the floor with that last move, and he saw Lois sink one more time. Six years ago, he wouldn't have accepted this defeat - he would've pressed on. Which got him arrested then; it would kill him now. Stanford didn't have the guts to outfly Lois' fiancé, and if he kept forcing the geologist he'd lose. Time to cut his losses. *Fine. Let her drown with her alien lover. There's always plan B.* "Let's go," he said coldly.

Stanford practically sobbed with relief now that this part of it was finally over. He pointed the 'copter's nose south and got them out of there at top speed.

Lois forced herself to the surface one more time and coughed for air, spitting out seawater. Her muscles burned, her eyes stung, her wet clothes weighed more every second, and Kal-El was dead weight... *Don't think like that!* she reprimanded herself, tearing another rasping breath from the salty air. *He's not dead!*

But she could feel no movement from him, and the dark thought took root and blossomed. *What if he is? What if he **is** dead? And Luthor's circling around, looking for you - Richard can't fend him off forever. How long can you hold the both of up?*

Long enough! The reply was a fierce snarl in her mind. *Long enough to save us both, or die trying! I won't lose him!*

You've already lost, the persuasive murmur told her. *He's already gone. Just let him go... Or hold on, and let yourself go. You don't want to live in a world without him, just stop fighting and let it happen...*

That deep pessimism knew nothing of Lois' willpower. Her entire life had shaped her for this moment; every setback, every challenge at the office, every callous remark from her father, had hardened her resolve. And she would not stop fighting now - not when everything hung in the balance.

"**No!**" Lois screamed, defying the part of her that wanted to give up. "*Kal-El, say something! Anything! Let me know you can hear me! **Kal-El!***"

And, amazingly, his blue eyes opened. They looked into hers dazedly, full of pain. But he saw her; his eyes focused, and the ghost of a smile curved his lips.

Lois barely had time to process that miracle before she heard splashing behind her. Turning sharply, furious enough to take on a shark, instead she saw Richard swimming smoothly toward her. "Let me take him," he said, looping one arm through the hero's. "C'mon, Lois."

She wouldn't relinquish her hold, forcing her trembling limbs to help support Kal-El as they towed him back to the seaplane. It wasn't far, but every yard seemed like miles. Lana was in the open door of the seaplane, reaching out to help Richard aboard. He turned and hauled Superman out of the water, half-dragging the larger man into the plane. Lana held her hand out to Lois.

The reporter was exhausted. She had nothing left; every last drop of her strength had gone into saving Kal-El. Now she could barely cling to the pontoon, and a part of her was

ready to let go, ready to accept the darkness and surcease from pain that the deep water offered. Kal-El looked so pale...

A larger part of her was too Lois to quit. She reached up, and Lana caught her wrist. The two women locked eyes unexpectedly, weary hazel with wide green. Something passed between them then, some unspoken knowledge, and then Lana pulled Lois aboard with more strength than the raven-haired woman would have thought she possessed.

We have to get the bullet out. Lois thought she said it aloud, but her teeth were chattering so hard the sentence was unintelligible. Lana took one look at her and whipped off her own coat, wrapping it around Lois' shoulders. "Richard, first aid kit?" she said. "She's hypothermic."

"I'm fine," Lois said, forcing the words out. "I'm shivering, that means I'm not hypothermic. *He* needs help." Even as she spoke, she was navigating across the pitching floor toward Kal-El.

Richard was kneeling beside the hero, feeling for a pulse. He looked up at Lois, and his face paled. "So do you. Under the passenger seat, Lana - thermal blanket." She hurried to get it, and Lois collapsed to her knees by Kal-El's side. God, he looked so pale...

"Kal-El? Can you hear me?" Lois asked, touching his face. His skin was cool; compared to his usual warmth, this chill was ominous. Her hazel eyes turned to Richard even as Lana wrapped the thermal blanket around her. "He's been shot with kryptonite; we have to get him to a hospital, Richard."

"Luthor could come back any minute," Lana said. "We've got to get out of here. Richard, I'll keep an eye on them while you fly."

It wasn't an easy decision for Richard to make, but a necessary one. He didn't want to leave Lois' side or Superman's - they were both in poor condition. Logic prevailed. "Lois, try to keep warm," he said, and with a quick kiss to her forehead he hurried to the cockpit.

The gesture barely registered with Lois. She had found the bullet wound; it was closer to the shoulder, which was good, but the kryptonite was making Kal-El progressively weaker. He was wheezing now, coughing weakly, but seemed to be unconscious. Lois took the opportunity to peer closely at the wound, gritting her teeth at the sight of torn flesh.

Lana knelt beside her, holding the first aid kit. "Lois, I don't think..."

Lois cut her a savage look, and she hushed. The reporter's shivers were slowly subsiding now that the door was closed and she was wrapped up in the warm coat and the blanket. She'd only been exposed to the water for a few minutes, even if her clothes were still soaked in it. Grimacing, she pulled the blanket off and wrapped it around Kal-El, still worried about his temperature. "That bullet has to come out," she said quietly. "It'll kill him if it stays there much longer."

The plane's engines roared, and the floor vibrated as Richard strove to take off. Lana gulped nervously. "What do you want to do?"

Lois held one hand out, staring at it with a frown of concentration. She could steady it with an effort; good enough. "Are there tweezers in that kit? Forceps, something?"

Lana rustled through it. "Hmm ... there's these." She held out a long, slender pair of hemostats sealed in a sterile package, and Lois grinned.

"Perfect," she said, and took them. Now for the hard part...

"Please don't bite my head off," Lana began, "but do you really think you should be doing that?"

"One of us has to," Lois said coldly. "And forgive me for saying it, but I don't trust you not to stop if he wakes up. Besides, my father was a general. I'm certified in first aid and

survival techniques, including minor field surgery."

The designer swallowed again, her throat making a dry click. "Good point," she murmured, surprised by how easily she could picture Lois probing the hero's wound while he groaned in pain. "Then do it."

"Alcohol wipes," Lois said, and Lana handed them to her. She quickly wiped down her hands and the surface of the wound, then stripped the hemostatic forceps from the sterile wrapping. The entire plane was shaking with every wave they clipped, and Lois forced herself to wait until Richard actually took off. Then, taking a deep breath, she spread the wound open as far as it would go. Blood oozed from it, and the tissue was an angry, inflamed red.

Lois bit her lip and probed for the bullet, trying to be gentle but knowing she really couldn't. And all the while, that pessimistic little voice in the back of her brain said, *You know the kryptonite could've shattered on impact, right? It could be spreading throughout his body right now.*

"Shut up," Lois growled under her breath, and Lana looked at her worriedly. The engines were making the plane vibrate, and Lois had to brace her right elbow against Kal-El's chest to steady her hand. *I have to just do this. Whether it hurts him or not, I have to. It's better to try to save him than sit here panicking and watch him die.* With that resolution she sought the bullet again.

Kal-El was still unconscious, but he moaned thickly in pain. Lois bit her lip harder and kept on, tasting blood. It seemed like forever before the tip of the forceps touched something hard and metallic. The bullet was lodged too deep to see, so Lois had to feel for it, getting the tip of the forceps around it and then locking them on.

Please, God, let the damn kryptonite still be stuck in the hollow point, Lois thought. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and pulled the bullet out, smooth and fast.

Kal-El screamed, his eyes flying open. The sight that met his gaze was not exactly encouraging; Lois looked down at him, her eyes wide with horror, clutching the forceps with the kryptonite bullet in them. After a moment in which they stared at each other, each wracked by emotional and physical pain, Lois realized that just being in the same room with crystal was weakening him. She bolted to her feet, nearly stumbled over Lana, and rushed to the door.

Richard barked a startled curse as Lois flung the door open, the seaplane suddenly canting as its aerodynamic shape changed. "*Close the goddamned door!*" he bellowed as he fought the controls, but Lois flung the kryptonite bullet away first.

Then the door *wouldn't* close on its own, and Lana had to scramble to help her yank it shut. Lois had started shivering again in the cold wind that had blown into the cabin.

When she turned around, Kal-El was sitting up, his hand pressed to the wound in his shoulder. "Lois?" he croaked, and then his voice found strength. "Richard, Lana... How...?"

"She went in after you," Lana said as Lois fought the chattering of her teeth. "Luckily she managed not to get shot or drowned. We were right behind."

"Where's Luthor?" His breathing was still a little ragged, but they could see the color coming back into his cheeks.

Lois went to him and then hesitated, glancing toward Richard. She came to a decision and helped him to his feet, letting him lean on her, as she replied, "The sonofabitch got away. You were more important."

"Richard chased him off," Lana said quietly, holding onto the back of the front passenger seat. Strange how talking to the superhero seemed so natural after you'd watched someone rip

a bullet out of his chest. "I ... I'm glad we could help."

"So am I," he said, those intense blue eyes locked on hers. "Thank you, Lana. Thank you, too, Richard. That was very brave flying."

"It was crazy," Richard replied, looking back for a moment. Weird, the way he said their names was almost ... familiar.

But then he turned to Lois, and Richard and Lana both knew they were forgotten as soon as hazel eyes met cerulean.

"You saved me," he said softly, and Lois felt unexpected tears well up in her eyes.

"Returning the favor," she replied, trying to joke and failing miserably. She couldn't tell if he really felt that much better that fast, or if he was just trying to be strong in front of his audience. The past rose up between them...

The helicopter seat belt sliding through her fingers, Lois screamed louder than she ever had before as she fell. Nothing but air under her for sixty-five stories, and then pavement. No Pulitzer, just an epitaph. And at that age, a very short one.

Then strong arms around her, his slightly amused smile as her scream cut off in surprise. "Easy miss, I've got you." Grinning at her so much the secret should've been blown right there.

*Lois' eyes wide and startled. Utter incredulity at this most impossible of things with his arm around her waist. "You've got me?" She looked down, saw nothing supporting him. "Who's got **you**?!" And then thinking, the hell with it if we're both crazy, he saved my life; I'm holding on. Locking her arms around his neck so tight that her perfume clung to his uniform for hours, holding each other so tightly that the sensation was forever burned into their minds.*

Now it was he who had held on, clinging to life and hope long enough for her to rescue him. Kal-El touched her cheek, so gently. "Thank you," he whispered. "Lois, I never meant for any of this to happen to you..."

And he never had. Lois remembered walking tentatively through the Fortress *that* night, looking for him after having stepped away to get her mind together on current events, wondering if she'd totally misconstrued the look in his eyes and the warmth in his touch. Wondering if she was being a fool to hope. And coming upon him arguing with the hologram of his father, Jor-El coldly dismissive of this human his son fancied himself in love with. Seeing the determination in Kal-El's face, hearing him say, *Father, I love her*. In the face of all that had happened, their audience mattered little. "I know," she soothed gently, eyes closing at the touch, hand slipped over his. "It's the price I pay... the price I was always willing to pay. For you."

"I know," he replied. Kal-El cupped her face and looked at her for a long, searching moment. Her eyes opened and met his again, hers still full of fear and wonder, his both joyful and sad. All the thousand unspoken things between them shivered in the air around them, sang in their locked gazes.

Lana's eyes widened in shock, and she turned to Richard, the blood draining from her face. He had been watching them too, and the look he turned to her was just as startled. Richard nodded once; he had seen what she saw. Lois and Superman both stripped of all their masks and pretensions, reduced to the elegant simplicity of their love for each other. The same thought crossed both Richard and Lana's minds: *I guess we don't have to worry about Clark Kent having to compete with Superman. He's **been** the competition all along... and Lois has known it from the beginning. This explains everything.*

Kal-El leaned forward and kissed Lois once on the forehead, conscious of Richard and Lana watching so silently. Then he stepped back, as if the closeness was too much. His voice was very low as he whispered, "I never stopped loving you."

Lois looked up, worried now. Why did his voice sound so very final? Why would he say that in front of Richard? Her heart began to race, but she was rooted to the floor by a presentiment of disaster. She knew that look; her spine turned to ice. Lois' brows knit as she watched him take a few steps away from her, eyes widening as she started to shake again. A few steps *toward the door...* "What are you doing?" she asked, voice sharp with fear.

"I have to go back." Kal-El opened the door resignedly, Richard scrambling for the controls again as the force of their airspeed tried to spin the plane off course.

"You're hurt," Lois pleaded lamely, knowing even as she said it that he wouldn't stop for that. Tears began to well up in her eyes again, her voice hitching with her swifter breath. *Kal-El, don't be a virtuous idiot. Stay, stay with me, stay with the twins. Rest; you'll die if you don't. The island will keep. Stay with me...*

He took a deep breath, but before he could say something reasonable, Lois cut him off. "Don't do this," she said quickly, tone rising in panic. She sounded terribly heartbroken and lonely, so much like she had that morning in her office, just before he'd kissed her to take the pain away. But there was no kiss to be used now. "Don't you do this to me. Not now, not like this." Lois' voice dropped, forgetting who else was listening, and she added, "I can't lose you a second time. Not after all of this."

Kal-El's eyes on her were infinitely sad, the roaring wind whipping his hair and his cape. For a long moment he looked at her silently, memorizing her face again as if it were not already a permanent part of his memory. To his aching heart, she had never looked more beautiful than she did in this last moment. "Goodbye, Lois," he whispered huskily, and then he was gone.

For one long instant, Lois' heart stopped, and she stood frozen in place by horror. *He is! He's going to try something incredibly stupid and noble, and get himself killed. And he knows it - he's never said goodbye to me before. Never. Oh, God...*

Her heart contracted in a painful beat, and sobbing "Kal-El...!" she lunged after him. Lois would've gone out the open door - knowing he would come back to save her - if not for Lana grabbing her shoulders and pulling her back from the brink.

Lois fought her, the floor tilting as the plane canted, and Richard yelled, "*The door!*" while trying to hold level flight. Lana shoved Lois away from the door and reached out to grab the handle, yanking it shut even though she felt something in her shoulder tear with effort.

"*No! Kal-El!*" Lois screamed, trying to get past her, and Lana did the only thing she could think of to control the madly struggling reporter. She locked one arm around the back of Lois' neck and hugged her close, wincing as she got kicked in the shin.

One last intense effort to break free, and then Lois collapsed so abruptly she frightened Lana. Moaning, "No, no, no, it can't end like this, I can't lose him after this," over and over, she leaned against the redhead's shoulder and sobbed as if in pain from a mortal wound. Which, in a very real way, she was. With this, she could be destroyed in a way much more profound than any of Lex's plans for her.

Lana held her, marveling at how petite Lois actually was - as soon as she broke down, she seemed to lose several inches of height. The designer couldn't even offer comfort. She'd seen the finality of that goodbye in Superman's eyes. In *Clark's* eyes. Her own began to mist with tears. To discover something so amazing about an old friend moments before losing him

forever just wasn't fair...

Richard had far too much to think about, so he concentrated on flying the plane. They needed to get Lois to a hospital - God only knew what had happened to her while she was missing, and the ocean was dangerously cold. He forced himself to focus on being a pilot while anxiety over his fiancée, fear for his friend and idol, and worry over the twins chased each other around his mind.

Kal-El had heard what they could not: the deep discontented growl of crystal against stone, the earth protesting as the island forced a widening chasm into the seafloor. He knew what it portended. The salt water continued to react with the Kryptonian crystal that Lex had used to create the island, and the virtually unlimited supply of water meant that the crystal structure would continue to grow. Eventually it would become a new continent ... drowning most of Europe and North America in the process.

That was the long-term threat. More immediately, the new crack in the ocean's floor was expanding in the immediate direction of Metropolis. The city had already endured an EMP, fires, high waves, and an earthquake. If the island was allowed to continue its growth, Metropolis would be struck by more earthquakes, each one more violent than the last, until the city was literally torn in half by the chasm in the seabed.

Every moment that Kal-El delayed, his task became even more daunting with the island's continuing expansion. Still, he stole a few moments to rise above the clouds and soak up the sun's healing rays.

He listened carefully to the baleful song of the crystal below, trying to gauge how long he could afford to wait while he replenished his strength. Kal-El also heard Lois, heard her screaming for him before her voice broke down into sobs. *Oh, God, there is nothing more I want than to go to her and hold her. Now that we've finally reached this point - we both know how we feel about each other, and we both know about our children. Even the children finally know who I am. It seems like Richard would be willing to step aside gracefully. Everything I ever wanted for myself - the woman I love, a family - is finally in my grasp.*

But I can only seize it at the price of millions of innocent lives. How can anyone possibly envy me? All of this power comes with its own price. I can't be the man I am and turn my back on this.

I can't be the man Lois loves and refuse my duty. Even if it kills me to carry it out.

Images of his life flashed before his eyes as he soaked up the sunlight. His youth in Smallville, racing the wind through rippling winter wheat, his late afternoon conversations on the porch with Pa, standing beside Ma in the cemetery. Then finding the ship that had carried him to Earth, the years of tutelage with Jor-El, leaving Ma to go to Metropolis.

Then Lois crossed his path, challenging his preconceptions - challenging *him* - from the first moment of their meeting. She had been the first person he publicly saved, and even now he could see the startled look on her face. Their lives remained entwined from that moment on; even when he gave up his powers and nearly lost the world, she hadn't given up on him. The look in her eyes when their bodies finally joined, the pure trust and surrender, was almost worth all of that pain afterward - had he been the only one to suffer for their decision, Kal-El would consider it a fair price for the joy. But the agony in Lois' eyes after they ended their romance wounded him more deeply than physical pain ever could, and he'd chosen to take those memories from her.

The best of intentions, and the worst of results. Seeing her after that was torture; he knew

what had been between them, and her flirtatious smile pierced his heart when he had known her lazy, satisfied grin. Faced with that, Kal-El had to leave the planet, hoping Lois would go on with her life, be happy without him.

I was a fool. The thought saddened him even as he plunged out of the clouds, arrowing toward the island. Lois had been carrying his children even then, that last discussion they had had on her balcony, when he hadn't had the courage to tell her that he was going away. Because of his own decisions, Kal-El had missed their birth, their early years. And now, flying toward an island made of kryptonite, he knew he would very likely miss seeing them grow up.

Jason and Kala would never know their father, except in stories and the memory of a few moments they'd spent together. With Mr. Clark at the office, and then seeing Superman beaten before he found the strength to save them all. *Will they remember me? Will they be able to understand why I had to leave them? Will Lois? I don't know which tears me apart worse - having to leave her, or having to leave the twins.*

No more time to think on it. Kal-El's heat vision vaporized the water ahead of him as he flew down toward the seabed, already feeling nauseated by the huge mass of kryptonite ahead. The sea floor also evaporated before his heat vision, and he tunneled rapidly down toward the base of the island. Kal-El undercut it, hoping to leave enough stone between himself and the growing kryptonite to shield him from its effects.

Grasping the stone above him, he began pushing it upward. The weight was incredible, but Kal-El found he *could* move it. As he strained to lift the entire island, he prayed, *Please let this work. This island wouldn't be here if not for me; I brought this threat to my adopted world. Please let me have the strength to right this wrong. Even if it kills me.*

Fallen

Richard tried to steady his hands on the controls, flying through the worsening rain, but the implications of that revelation were making him shaky. *I was right on both suspicions. Clark is the twins' father and so is Superman. They're the same person. My God, what a perfect disguise.*

Seeing Lois and Superman had reminded him too strongly of that moment in the supply room between Lois and Clark. The same magnetic attraction fraught with tension - the same yearning look in Lois' eyes, the same heartache in his. The resemblance was too much to deny then. It was amazing how much a pair of glasses, a gray suit, and a completely different set of mannerisms could hide. If he'd never seen Lois and Clark in an unguarded moment, Richard might not have recognized the similarity.

But he had seen it. *I really did steal Superman's girlfriend. And I've been raising his children. Oh, holy... Kala's hearing! I **knew** that wasn't natural! And Jason breaks more of his toys than he really should. Those kids have been developing freaking **superpowers** right under my nose! How did I miss that?!*

Lana was easing Lois into a seat just behind him, and Richard grinned wryly. *That's how. Lois has been keeping his secret all this time.* Strangely, the knowledge made him feel just slightly better. Lois had lied to him, but given whom she was protecting with those lies, they didn't sting him quite so badly anymore.

It was a lot to think about, but Richard had even more worries. Lois' teeth were chattering; he could hear them from here. She needed to go to a hospital, and getting her to sit still long enough to be examined was usually difficult. She was currently being quiet, but he didn't expect that to last very long. And Jason and Kala had been on that island, exposed to kryptonite. They were safe now, according to Superman, but Richard's heart wouldn't rest easily until he saw them with his own eyes. Their human heritage should have protected them from the deadly radiation, but what if they'd inherited their father's vulnerability?

Behind him, Lana tucked the thermal blanket around Lois and sat beside her. Water was still dripping off the reporter's hair, and she was huddled into a miserable ball on the seat. Lana tested her temperature with the back of her hand and found it a trifle low, but not dangerously so. Lois was unresponsive, drowning in her own pain, and she didn't even move when Lana unzipped her boots and poured off the icy water inside them.

The designer didn't like leaving her like that, but she went up to the front to check on Richard. He had also been immersed in the cold ocean, but one glance told her he would be fine. Physically at least; his mind was another matter, churning with anxiety and shock. "Richard," Lana said gently, resting one hand on his shoulder. "Do you have any towels or anything on board? She needs to get dried off - so do you."

He blinked at her for a second, and then pointed out a cabinet in the wall. Lana found a couple of towels inside, and tossed one to Richard, frowning at the abstracted way he caught it. Then she returned to Lois, tousling the excess water out of her hair.

The reporter's eyes focused on Lana's face for the first time since Superman had woken up, eyes full of defeated sorrow. It was the first time in this entire escapade, from start to finish, that she looked once and for all as though she were going to give up. "He's going to get himself killed," Lois said bleakly.

Those words stung Lana. She was already getting a headache from trying to wrap her mind around the fact that the boy who'd watched her so wistfully all those years ago was the same person as the world's defender. She'd seen the same mix of joy and sorrow in Clark's

eyes, watching Lois and the twins in the Chinese restaurant. Seeing that yearning look again on Superman's face just moments ago made the truth very plain. To think she would lose him forever - the love that never was, the good friend he had become, and the hero she admired - that was just too much for Lana to contemplate. Lois' pain, in light of her own feelings, was impossible to even comprehend. How difficult all of this must have been for her all these years, just watching her now.

"No," she said firmly to Lois, letting her words convince herself also. "Don't you think like that. He's Superman - he can do *anything*. He managed to save the twins, Lois, and get them back to Metropolis. We have to have faith in him." *And in Him above*, she thought silently. *Dear Lord, please spare Clark. He's needed here.*

Lois was still shaky and disconsolate tears still sparkled in her eyes, but she made herself nod. What Kal-El was attempting was dangerous - incredibly, insanely dangerous - but Lana had a point. If anyone could succeed and survive it, he could. He had before, with nearly every odd stacked against him. He *could* do this, she tried desperately to convince herself. She couldn't silence the part of her heart that had already begun to mourn him, but the rest of her could pray as Lois had never prayed in her life.

The two women were silent, lost in their thoughts, until they heard Richard mutter, "What the...? Whoa." He was staring out the window, and Lois and Lana looked out the seaplane's windshield just in time to see what had put that amazed tone into his voice.

The weight was crushing, almost unbearable. Almost. Lifting the island made a mockery of all those times he'd flown swiftly and confidently, bearing burdens that made people stare in awe. A car? He could lift it one-handed. A jet? It had been difficult to stop, but once it lost its acceleration it wasn't particularly heavy. The *Daily Planet* globe? Awkward to handle because of its shape and size, but no test of his strength in the end.

This was a test, one in which he was very nearly overmatched. Kal-El strained with every fiber of his being against the monstrous weight of the island, his hands and shoulders already sore. The massive conglomeration of crystal, stone, and earth inched skyward almost imperceptibly at first, but Kal-El didn't let himself stop even for an instant.

Millions of gallons of water poured off the sides of the island as it rose above sea level. Huge chunks of rock broke away from the underside of the structure as well. Both of those reduced the weight by tons, but Kal-El felt very little relief in the terrible pressure across his shoulders. He could hear the low squalling of crystal grinding against crystal above him, and felt his heart sink as he realized that the kryptonite was still growing down through the stone toward him.

An involuntary shiver rippled through the hero. The reasonable, rational response to the deadly radioactive substance creeping closer to him was to flee, but he couldn't do that. No one else could have attempted this task - no one else could even dream of succeeding at it. It was his responsibility, just as the invasion by General Zod and his followers had been his responsibility.

And I very nearly failed then, Kal-El thought, his face fixed in a grimace of effort as the island rose a few more feet. *I almost wasn't able to win against them, and every life lost during their brief conquest still weighs on my conscience. I don't regret being with Lois - even if we didn't have Jason and Kala - but I regret the timing. And I regret letting myself be convinced that I couldn't be the hero and the man. I regret believing that I had to choose between Lois and the world.*

The memories were bittersweet now, but he didn't try to suppress them. From the moment Lois pulled the gun on him to the moment he'd awakened with her in his arms, those were the memories that gave him strength to continue in his Herculean task.

After seeing the twins safely into the emergency room and getting Kala a blanket to keep her warm, Maggie Sawyer headed back outside to her patrol car. Her radio crackled with updates, officers all over the city trying to keep the peace in the face of panic and disorder caused by the EMP, the fires, and the earthquake. It wasn't an easy day for the Metropolis police department. *Why couldn't I have listened to my mother and become an insurance saleswoman instead?* The wry thought made Maggie chuckle - she was a cop to the marrow of her bones, even when her city was coming apart at the seams.

"Lieutenant Sawyer!" The call over the radio was so full of astonishment that the officer forgot to code it. Sounded like Davis, maybe - she'd have to talk to the younger cop later. "Lieutenant Sawyer, look! Up in the sky!"

"Ten-four," she said brusquely. Metropolis General Hospital was situated not far from the river, and from the emergency room Maggie could look down the broad avenue and see almost all the way to the bay. The skyline was just clear enough for Maggie to see what had Davis so flustered, in spite of the rain clouds moving over the city.

"Holy Mother of God," Maggie muttered. Something huge was slowly rising into the air - something that looked like an island. For a moment she was frozen in shock, simply staring. She only knew one man who could do such a thing.

Maggie turned and hurried back into the emergency room. In a low voice, she told Perry, "Come with me." He left the twins with Ella and followed her outside to the ER's covered circular driveway, where the sight of the island lifting toward the clouds left him speechless.

"Listen, White, you'd better not roll on what I'm showing you until I say so, or so help me I'll have your head on a platter," Maggie said threateningly.

"Are you out of your mind, Sawyer?" Perry growled over the sound of the raindrops. "Ella and I have been getting updates from the Coast Guard and the Army - that damn island wasn't there yesterday. *That's* what caused our earthquake. And that's where Luthor had the twins. Now Superman's taking the thing out of our atmosphere? Something *huge* is going on, and *that* is just the tip of the iceberg."

"Still-" Maggie started to cut in, but Perry overrode her.

"And my best damned reporter is right in the thick of it! I don't know exactly where she is right now, but you can bet if Superman's carrying a whole *island* up into space, Lois will be involved somehow! We sat on the news about her twins getting kidnapped - we even held the presses when Lois herself got snatched. You really think I'd roll on something this big without her eyewitness account?"

"You're a shameless newshound, White," Maggie said. "Lois and the twins are mixed up in this, and I don't want them dragged through the papers if I can help it."

"Then talk to Raines' tabloid," Perry retorted. "The *Planet* won't print a word of this until we have Lois' input. The story wouldn't be complete without her, true. But Jason and Kala are pretty much my grandkids, and I wouldn't endanger them no matter *how* big the story is. No, we're going to have the exclusive straight from Lois herself - and *she'll* decide how much we can print."

Lieutenant Sawyer looked at him in mild surprise. She'd known for years how close Lois and Perry were; in spite of all their quarreling, they truly were like father and daughter. But

she hadn't known until this moment just how deep the editor's affection for his successor was. That he would sacrifice a story, give up the chance to be the first paper publishing news of this magnitude, spoke volumes of his concern for Lois and her twins. Hell, if Perry was as cutthroat as she was accusing him of being, he'd already have interviewed the twins.

Maggie just nodded at last. People were stopping in their tracks, cars screeching to a halt at the wondrous sight above them. No one on Earth had ever seen an island fly ... and it seemed no one, besides than the policewoman and the newspaper editor, wondered just what it was costing Superman to perform this amazing feat.

His strength was bleeding away like water running out of a sieve, and he had no way to staunch the flow. Pure kryptonite had pierced the stone above him, huge jagged crystals glowing an evil green as they grew closer. Even worse, the sheer size of the island kept him in its shade, cut off from the life-giving sun. Kal-El struggled upward, the muscles in his arms trembling with effort, a vein standing out in his forehead.

A quick glance showed him that he was just above the clouds, with many miles to go before the massive crystal structure was free of earth's orbit. But he couldn't give up. Letting go now would cause the island to fall back into the ocean, causing a tsunami. *I have to find the strength to go on, I have to.* The thought was desperate, his determination fading in the face of the pain and weakness radiating through him.

Jor-El's voice echoed in his mind. *Kal-El, my son, you're all that remains of a once-proud people. And in you Krypton's glory will live on...*

The words galvanized him. *I'm not the Last Son of Krypton anymore. I have Jason and Kala... I have to do this for them. Even if kills me.*

Of all the images that had flickered before his vision, each bolstering his strength on the long journey up, the last one was the most powerful. The twins, *his* twins, Jason and Kala looking up at him with such wonder as they bathed in the light of the sun. For them - he had to do this for them. The island and its growth of kryptonite would always be a threat to them if he didn't force it far enough out into space. That gave Kal-El the will to clench his teeth and force himself onward, temples throbbing with agony, every muscle shaking, his entire body on the verge of collapse.

Faces swam before his blurring vision, each with its own memories: Pa teaching him to drive the tractor; saying goodbye to Ma before he left in search of Krypton; Jimmy getting his first front-page photo and buying everyone cigars as if it were his first child; Perry trying to scold him into showing a little more spine around Lois - oh, Lois, how he regretted leaving her like this. For an instant, she was there with him in his mind, a reminder of her impish grin, usually tossed over her shoulder just as she was gearing up to get into some trouble. *Thank God, I told her I love her. I never want her to doubt what she meant to me ever again. She already had to for long enough.*

Weak as he was, there was no way Kal-El could foresee surviving this. Surely this would end at any moment, his body closing down and floating forever in the frozen void of space. Although it did little to console him, at least he'd said goodbye this time...

He was high above the earth when his strength finally trickled out. With one last feeble push, Kal-El began to drift backward from the island. Though his sight was dimming, he saw that the mass of stone and crystal was moving steadily away from him. *I did it - it's out of orbit, it'll keep going until it hits a comet or something. Thank God...*

Conscious thought blinked out then, those cerulean eyes rolling closed, and as the hero

began to fall back into gravity's grasp, a last memory came to comfort him. *The twins. Jason's bright blue eyes, so merry and so calm at the same time. Kala's crooked mischievous smile, the mirror of her mother's. Their small arms around his neck, so trusting, his daughter's voice murmuring, "Daddy."*

When Richard and Lana had flown back to Metropolis that morning - *was it only this morning? It feels like a lifetime*, Richard thought - they had docked the seaplane as close to the *Daily Planet* building as possible. That marina happened to be close to Metropolis General Hospital, and Richard's car was now parked in its garage. It seemed as if luck was with them for the moment. He taxied the plane over the choppy surface of the river, and jumped out to hurriedly secure it, ignoring the rain on his already-wet clothes.

Lana managed to get out before Lois did, and turned to help the reporter onto the dock. The wood planks felt a little unsteady under Lana's feet, as if the surge from the earthquake had loosened the pilings. Not a very pleasant thought.

Lois held onto the door for a moment. Her entire world still felt utterly askew, her thoughts and emotions twisted by ongoing events to the point that standing, let alone even walking forward was difficult. Despite how long she had been out of the freezing water, her toes were still a little numb, and even with her boots dried off and back on, her feet weren't warming up. In spite of that, it wasn't in her nature to show hesitancy, and she covered her reluctance to jump down onto the dock by looking up at the sky.

The island was no longer visible above them in the storm-tossed sky; Kal-El had taken it above the cloud cover some time ago, no sign of either him or it, which could only mean one thing. Closing her eyes in relief, Lois' heart swelled as she let a small smile of thankfulness spread across her lips. He *had* done it. He had done the impossible, *again*. *Oh, thank God*, she thought wearily and with more gravity than she ever had before.

But as she opened her eyes again, Lois startled when her sharp vision caught something bright burning in the sky above. Some part of the island falling through the atmosphere, heating up with the friction of re-entry? But for all its brightness, it seemed very small...

Lois' heart froze in her chest as the grateful smile drained off her face, watching the object's descent with utter dread. Icy chills ran down her spine, her stomach knotted, and her breath stuttered. Not a chunk of rock burning up like a meteor... The orange glow left the falling object as it slowed against the air, and Lois could just barely make out its shape and a flash of red swirling around it...

The intensity of her devastation roared in her ears as her gaze remained locked on the plummeting object, which was becoming easier to see by the instant. *Kal-El*, she thought, her heart breaking, and it seemed as if her mind had shattered, too. Her traitor thought of what seemed like years ago echoed back to her, *What if we save the twins, only to lose their father? What if it's a trade?* Then as if awaked by a vicious slap, Lois jumped without hesitation, trying to hit the dock running, screaming his name. The world was surreal around her, her now-rapid heartbeat the only sound she could hear in that awful moment. She had to get to him, she had to fix it, had to take back everything. It couldn't end like this, not like this...

Lana had to grab her again, nearly yanked off her feet by Lois' hysterical attempt to get to the falling hero. "*Richard!*" Lana yelled, in tears herself as the situation nearly undid her as well. He hastily knotted the lines securing the seaplane and rushed to help Lana.

Between the two of them, they managed to stop Lois from running headlong in the direction they'd seen Superman falling. She'd screamed herself hoarse, the unfamiliar name still

falling brokenly from her lips when Richard picked her up and carried her off the dock.

No one was in attendance at the marina, fortunately, and they were able to get the sobbing reporter to Richard's car. Still holding her, he told Lana, "Get my keys - left front pocket. I'll drive, but I'm not putting her down anywhere but the back seat."

Lana nodded; Lois was being incredibly unpredictable, nearly catatonic one moment, possessed of extraordinary strength and determination the next. The redhead couldn't help blushing a little as she reached into Richard's pocket for his keys, but she quickly got the back door unlocked and got in with Lois as soon as Richard set her inside.

Richard got in the driver's side, glancing at both women in the rearview mirror. "Lois, we're taking you to Metro General," he said firmly.

"No," she murmured, swallowing painfully. "No, I have to go to him..."

"An ambulance will get there first," Lana said, her voice gentle. "They'll probably take him to Metropolis General, too."

Richard nodded as he started the car. He actually had no idea what would happen to Superman, to Clark, but he'd say anything to quiet Lois while they drove. Lana could only attempt to soothe her as the raven-haired woman whimpered, curled up near her in her own anguish. Now they could see that she had a necklace of bruises forming on her throat, and Richard wondered fearfully how badly she'd been hurt before she ever jumped into the water.

Traffic was dreadful. Simply, utterly, awful. Not only was it raining, not only were there wrecks on most major streets, but some cars had simply been abandoned as their owners gawked at the island and the falling hero. Richard gripped the wheel and cursed under his breath as he drove into oncoming lanes and up on sidewalks, weaving a path to the hospital. He was more conscious than ever of Lois' pale skin and haunted eyes in the rearview mirror, and his mind insistently reeled off a list of calamities she could be suffering from: broken bones, internal injuries, shock, hypothermia, internal bleeding... The worst of them was shock. Lois wouldn't even know the extent of her own injuries if she was in clinical shock, and her condition could rapidly worsen.

Just hold on, he prayed, listening to Lana's soothing murmur as the redhead tried to keep Lois warm.

Sirens howled ahead, and Richard snapped his full attention to the road. A cavalcade of police cars roared through the intersection in front of him, leading an ambulance with its siren wailing. The cruisers were actually nudging abandoned cars out of the road to make a clear path for the ambulance.

"That's him," Lois whispered, sitting up.

Richard couldn't fault her logic; no other person would get that kind of urgent treatment at a time like this. "Buckle up," he said, and floored the accelerator.

His Saab fell in line right behind the ambulance, chasing the procession to the hospital. Richard gritted his teeth as he drove; he knew he could follow any turn the ambulance could make successfully, but their course felt more like slalom skiing than driving down one of the largest streets in Metropolis. *Lois could do this without turning a hair, wet streets or dry*, he thought wryly, wrenching the wheel left around a stalled pickup and then right around two wrecked taxis. *I'm a lot happier working in three dimensions.*

They made it to the hospital before the pulsing sirens managed to give Richard a migraine. Richard didn't even slow down at the security booth, just followed the squad cars and the ambulance right into the emergency bay. He pulled the Saab up onto a concrete median and opened his door just a fraction of a second after Lois opened hers.

"Hey! You can't park there!" the security guard yelled. Richard didn't even turn to look, his eyes on Lois as she nearly stumbled and then broke into a tired run toward the ambulance, never even noticing the continuing shower.

A familiar blonde head was getting out of one of the cruisers, and Lieutenant Sawyer did a double-take to see Lois coming toward her. "What the..." she began, and then took in Richard, Lana, the car, and the security guard. "They're fine!" she called, thoroughly confusing the guard, and then focused her attention on Lois. "Dammit, Lane, how do you always manage to show up at a moment like this? You've got more lives than a sack full of cats."

The reporter could barely summon up a rusty chuckle, her mind fixed on the gurney the paramedics were unloading. Even though uniformed officers surrounded it, she could see a flash of blue and red. "Maggie, is he...?" she started to ask as she got closer.

Lieutenant Sawyer got a better look at Lois, and her expression of surprise became one of concern. "He's unconscious. Lois, you come with me. They might need you." She caught the reporter's elbow in a firm grip, and then looked at Richard as she added, "The twins are okay. They're in the waiting room with Perry and Ella..."

Before she finished the sentence, Richard was gone, rushing through the doors to the waiting room. Lana followed him, and Maggie propelled Lois through the paramedic's entrance. At least she tried to; Lois halted and craned her head around, her heart torn between her children and their father. She caught one glimpse of her mother in the waiting room, flanked by Jason and Kala. They seemed all right...

"**DADDY!**" both twins shrieked in surprise and delight, leaping off the bench. Richard fell to his knees, his arms flung wide, and Kala and Jason dove into his embrace. Lois savored one last look at them, Richard kissing them both and the twins hugging his neck, before she let Sawyer pull her into the emergency room.

"You look like hell," Maggie muttered, flashing her badge to get them past the nurses' station.

Lois' fragile control broke yet again, and she snarled, "Yes, well, I've been kidnapped, punched, tied up, beaten, almost raped, beat up the guy who tried, got smacked in the head fighting Luthor, *he* strangled me unconscious and then held *my own goddamn gun* to my head - and just to make my day complete, I jumped into the freezing fucking ocean to save Superman! *So excuse me if I don't look like fucking Miss America!*"

Doctors, nurses, other patients, and police officers all looked up interestedly as the raving reporter hustled past them, Maggie setting a swift pace through the warren of treatment rooms. Sawyer chuckled and replied to the tirade, "Miss America's blonde this year, isn't she?"

Lois stumbled again, and swore loudly at Maggie, herself, and fate. The lieutenant caught her arm again to steady her. "Nice to see your life is back to normal, Lane. Causing trouble, kicking ass, and swearing like a sailor." Pale blue eyes caught hazel, and a wry grin curved Maggie's mouth. "I missed the *real* you."

"Bite me, Sawyer," Lois growled. "Where the *hell* is he?"

"All the way back," Maggie replied. Watching her friend a moment longer, her keen policewoman's observation noted how played out Lois was. Under the expensive coat, she was also soaking wet, and her complexion was pale except for dark smudges of exhaustion. Yet she still forced herself to keep up the bruising pace. Wonderingly, Maggie said, "You're scared, aren't you?"

A blazing look from hazel eyes, and Lois hissed, "No, Sawyer. I'm *terrified*."

Then they arrived at a large glass window that gave them a view into the treatment room

where Kal-El lay, a nurse rhythmically pumping air into his lungs. Doctors and nurses swarmed over him, milling incomprehensibly at first glance, but there was method to their swift actions. Lois' gaze locked onto his still form, feeling once again as if her heart had frozen.

She approached the glass warily, her hands coming up to meet those of her ghostly reflection. Two strong male nurses grabbed Superman's suit at the neck and *ripped* it open, baring the chest Lois knew so well even from so long ago. The reporter flinched a little, disturbed by the violence of the motion. One nurse started attaching EKG leads to Kal-El's chest while another clipped a pulse oximeter to his ring finger.

The doctors quickly found the gunshot wound and flushed it, removing a couple of tiny fragments of crystal. They also discovered an injury Lois hadn't seen, what looked like a stab wound in his side. She shivered as she saw them extract another small shard of crystal. *Pierced twice, and he still managed to lift an island*, she thought.

A number of hospital staff and police officers had gathered, keeping vigil over the Man of Steel while the doctors worked frantically to save him. Someone murmured, "Is that Lois Lane?" But Lois herself never even glanced around. Even with the crystal out, he was so very still...

Don't die on me, she began to say, but remembered Kala's hearing. They were so far away from the waiting room, it seemed impossible that she could catch the words, but Lois took no chances. "Don't quit on me," she whispered, staring as if she could burn a hole through the glass.

The doctors were still moving at a frenzied pace, one of them staring at the heart monitor and scowling. Lois' breath froze as she saw the green line on the monitor go flat...

One doctor attempted to get a needle into Kal-El's vein, but the metal bent without piercing his skin. Another gave an order, and a nurse rolled a cart over to the bedside. Lois' eyes widened as she recognized the defibrillator. "Don't quit on me, Kal-El," she murmured, her voice rising in pitch and volume as the machine charged. "You can fight this. Don't quit now, this is nothing..."

Everyone in the room stepped back as the physician in charge pressed the defibrillator paddles against Kal-El's chest. The shock intended to jump-start his heart rebounded through the machinery, causing it to explode. The watchers and the hospital staff leaped back as the lights flickered.

Even the catastrophic failure of a defibrillator wasn't enough to completely short-circuit the hospital's electrical systems. They'd been designed with multiple backups, and soon the lights and monitors came back on. What they showed was depressing: Kal-El still lying there so very motionless, and the heart monitor still tracing a flat line. The doctors looked down at their patient, then at each other, with devastated expressions. There was nothing they could do for him.

Lois lost it then, pounding on the glass in front of her and shouting, "No! No, don't you quit on me! I know you can hear me, dammit! Don't you quit! *Don't make me lose you again!*"

Her outburst shocked Maggie so badly that the lieutenant didn't even think to restrain her. A large orderly tried to pull Lois away from the window, but the hysterical reporter shoved him away with strength born of desperation. Maggie realized that the glass might not be shatterproof; the way Lois was pounding on it, she was in very real danger of breaking it and cutting herself. The policewoman grabbed her friend's arm and pulled her away, Lois fighting her every inch of the way. Unnoticed, uncontrollable tears poured down her face as she screamed to the unmoving figure on the gurney, "No! *No! I'm not letting you quit on me! I*

*know you can hear me! Fight this! **FIGHT IT!** You've managed to save the whole human race, don't tell me you can't save yourself!"*

Her voice had grown hoarser as she shouted, her throat afire. The further Maggie and the orderly managed to pull her away from the glass partition, the harder it was to watch the heart monitor. Several of the fluorescent bulbs had gone black during the power surge, and the room had no windows to the outside...

Lois' eyes shot wide open with realization. No windows - *no sunlight*. She found a last reserve of strength and dug in her heels, refusing to be moved. "Sunlamps! Someone get a sunlamp in there!"

At first the hospital staff outside the room looked at her dubiously, but Lois fixed her gaze on the most senior of the spectators and snarled, "He gets his power from the sun! Don't just stand there, you white-clad idiot! If you want to save him, *he needs sunlight!* Don't you think *I'd* know?!"

The doctor stared at her, brow furrowed, and then understanding dawned. This was Lois Lane - if anyone would know how to save Superman, it would be his chronicler. A renewed burst of activity met her words, and the orderly rushed off along with several others. Maggie relaxed her grip, watching Lois warily. Her posture seemed calm, almost resigned, but her eyes were still wild with fear.

Warily, Lois walked back up to the observation window. Her breath fogged the image before her, her throat thick with tears. Her voice was so rough now that she could no longer scream - she could only hope.

Pressing one palm against the cool glass, Lois whispered, "I don't know if you can hear me, but you fight. I need you ... *we* need you. Please, Kal-El... *Fight...*"

In the waiting room, there had been a few moments of confused babbling while Richard cuddled the twins protectively and Ella and Perry fired questions at him. Jason and Kala needed him more, though, and he let Lana answer for him.

"Lois is going to be okay," the redhead said. "She just went in back with one of the police officers to see Superman..."

"She's *here*?" Ella interrupted. The fire that blazed in her hazel eyes was very familiar to those who knew Lois well. "I'm going to see my daughter."

Before she could march up to the admitting nurse and demand to be allowed into the treatment area, Kala stiffened in Richard's arms. "Something's wrong," the little girl whispered, her eyes huge and seemingly hollow with fear. In the next instant, she tried to bolt for the nearest door.

The adults and Jason found themselves trying to calm and restrain Kala as she struggled, tears rolling down her face as she screamed, "We gotta get to Mommy! Please, somethin' bad's happenin'! Hurry, we gotta get to Mommy!"

When Your Angels Can't Sing

"I'm not sure about that new boy I hired," Ben said, idly rumpling his Beagle's ears. Barkley sighed and rested his head on his master's knee, listening to the familiar female voice coming from the telephone.

"Oh, really?" Martha replied. Ben could hear water running in the background; she was probably washing dishes. "What's bothering you about him?"

"I don't know," Ben sighed. Barkley pawed his leg, reminding him to keep up with the petting, and the older man chuckled. "He just seems a little... spacey sometimes. Like his mind's miles away."

"Mm-hmm," Martha said. The running water cut off, and then Ben heard the television in the background. "A lot of kids these days are like that. Scatterbrained. Most of them can't keep their minds on one thing more than a minute... and almost all of them have driver's licenses."

Ben chuckled. "Now that's a scary thought." He turned on his own television set, asking, "What are we watching tonight, Martha?"

"Oh, I'm waiting for *Jeopardy* to come on," she said. "Still the best game show on television."

"I'll agree to that," Ben said, flipping through channels until he reached the network.

Comfortable silence reigned between them as they waited for the show to start. It wasn't always possible for them to be together - they each had their own farm to take care of, and Ben rarely stayed later than seven for propriety's sake. So Martha and Ben had arrived at this solution for their all-too-quiet evenings.

Just as the theme music began to play, the show cut off, replaced by a news broadcast. "Aw, darn," Ben groused, and then went silent.

Scenes of devastation filled the television. The city of Metropolis was a shambles, struck by fire and earthquake. But that was not the worst of it. "Live video of Superman's fall..." the announcer began, and then the images on the screen blotted out everything but Martha's sudden gasp of horror.

In silence they watched the Man of Steel falling from the sky, and then the video switched to another. A shaky hand-held camera panned around the crowds milling in the street outside Centennial Park, then jerked upward to catch the blue and red blur rocketing toward the trees.

The impact shook the cameraman's hands, shook every tree in the park. A cloud of dust and debris rose, blowing outward, and Ben heard Martha groan as if in mortal agony.

"Martha?" he said quickly. "Martha, are you all right?"

"My God," she whispered. "Oh my dear Lord... Ben, I think you'd better get over here-"

"On my way," he said, prying Barkley's head off his knee and grabbing his car keys. Could even a hero like Superman survive a fall like that?

"-and take me to the airport," Martha finished, stopping Ben in his tracks. "I'm going to Metropolis."

"Martha?" Ben asked incredulously.

"Ben, my son lives in Metropolis," she said, her voice dreadfully calm. "And with... with its defender hurt... Clark might need me. There's... there's no one to watch over the city now..."

"Martha, you might not even be able to *get* to Metropolis," Ben argued. "The city... you saw it. The airport might not even be open."

"I'll get there," she replied. "Don't you worry about *that*, Mr. Hubbard. Now are you going to help me or not?"

In the midst of the frenetic activity surrounding Kal-El, a nurse picked up the steel tray holding the crystal fragments and walked out of the room with it, intending to hand the strange green shards over to the lab. Moments after she left, she turned a corner around the x-ray department, and the lead shielding in the walls cut off the kryptonite's deadly radiation.

Beep. Such an unassuming little sound, but it meant so much. The doctors in the room turned to look at the heart monitor, where a spike appeared on the flat line. *Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Lois felt hope swell in her heart, and strangely it brought fresh tears. She drew in a shaky breath, watching as the slow beat scrolled across the monitor screen. Kal-El's pulse was weak, but steady, and it seemed to hypnotize Lois.

No one questioned her presence now, the hospital staff moving around her as she kept her vigil. For several minutes she watched the monitors, watched his still face, as sunlamps were brought in and set up beside him. In the bright light, Kal-El looked almost exalted, his features seeming to glow. *You have to live, Lois thought. You have to recover. Not just for me - for Jason and Kala.*

She was barely aware of a nurse approaching Lieutenant Sawyer, hearing her own name in their murmured conversation. Then Maggie was gently tugging her sleeve. "C'mon, Lois," the policewoman said. "Your kids are in the waiting room - they need you, too."

Jimmy Olsen sat down very slowly, staring at his camera. His stomach felt fluttery, his head so light it seemed as if it might just float away any second.

The photographs he'd taken were good. Pulitzer-good. But the best of them all - the most iconic, the most original, the shot he *knew* no one else had - was the one that made his throat tighten. Superman, lying unconscious in the dirt at the bottom of the crater his fall had created.

That photo seemed to stare up at Jimmy from his digital camera's screen. Superman looked so... There wasn't a word for it. Broken, weak, vulnerable - those kinds of adjectives weren't meant to apply to the Man of Steel. Jimmy swallowed around the lump in his throat.

"The Chief would never run it," he murmured to himself. True, but he could have shopped it to other papers. Even magazines. That photo was worth a lot of money. Buy-a-new-car money. Hell, buy-a-new-house money. The Olsens could use it.

Superman's face in sharp focus, his skin so pale, smudged with dirt from his impact. The way he lay sprawled, one leg twisted under him. Shattered tree trunks at the edge of the shot, and the steep wall of the crater. Worst of all, Superman looking so... lifeless.

Even in black and white shots, he always seemed to explode with color, a personality so vibrant that it made itself felt even in images. But this shot, though it was in color, looked drained. Washed-out. And the hero himself looked almost...

Jimmy shook his head. He wouldn't even think it. Sighing a little - it could've won a Pulitzer, or it could've made his bank balance a lot bigger - Jimmy pressed the delete button.

The four adults had just managed to get Kala calmed down a little when she suddenly tensed again. Richard caught her shoulders as her tear-stained eyes lit up, looking toward the door. "Mommy?" she said, a trifle uncertain.

One side of the double doors swung open, and Lois appeared, the hand pressed against her forehead nearly covering her face. She looked weary, almost at the limit of her endurance, but at the sight of the twins, the hand fell away and a smile slowly formed. Kala and Jason, of course, ran to her, and Lois had to kneel down quickly to keep from being knocked over.

For one long moment, Lois merely hugged the twins, fresh tears flowing as she held Jason and Kala tight. *They're here, they're here. Oh my God, it's really them. My babies, oh my God...* They hugged her back just as tightly, Kala still sniffing. "Is... is Superman gonna be okay?" the little girl asked.

"I hope so. I'm so glad you're okay. Mommy was so worried," Lois murmured brokenly, kissing Kala's forehead, then Jason's. The last time she had seen them, Luthor and his goons were loading them into the helicopter and it had scared her half to death. Now, reunited, she couldn't seem to let go of them, nor could they let go of her. Two days apart seemed like eons, and Lois kept stroking their hair and kissing them. Just holding them tightly didn't seem enough. *Finally I have them back. My poor babies - I will never, never let that happen again. I'll kill Luthor if he touches you ever again... And I won't miss next time*

At last, though, mother and twins were satisfied that this reunion was real, that nothing would separate them again. As soon as Lois stood up, Ella caught her shoulders and pulled her into a hug. "I was *worried* about you."

Lois leaned against her mother, letting out a shuddery little sigh of relief. "I'm okay, Momma. Really, I am."

Ella pulled back and held her by the arms to look at her, love and vexation mingled in her expression. "Lois Joanne Lane, you turned my hair white before I was fifty. I'd be a fool if I thought you'd slow down anytime soon." She sighed, and smiled as she kissed Lois' cheek. "I'm just glad you're all right, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Momma," Lois replied. She glanced over Ella's shoulder at Perry, and gave him a tired grin.

"Glad you're back, Lane," he said gruffly. "Hate to have to run your department for you much longer."

"Love you too, old man," the reporter shot back. Quickly scanning the group, she asked, "Where's Jimmy?"

"We didn't have room for him in Sawyer's car when we brought the twins here," Ella told her. "He stayed at Centennial Park."

"He'll meet us back at the *Planet*," Perry said confidently. "Olsen got some good photos today, I bet. Boy's head is gonna swell."

Richard and Lana exchanged a glance, and then he added smoothly, "As for Clark, he sent me a text message. The earthquake left him trapped, but he said he was okay. He even gave Superman his cell phone - that's how we were able to tell him where we were, and how Jason called you, Elinore."

Lois blinked. "You're sure he's okay?" It hurt her to say it, knowing that Kal-El was still lying unconscious in the treatment room behind her, but she had to protect him. Even if it hard to even keep her mind straight right about now.

"We think we know where he is," Lana said. "There's no way to reach him now, but the rescue crews ought to get him free soon, I hope."

Lois was still nodding, trying to figure out what to say next, when Maggie came through the doors. "Lois, S.T.A.R. Labs finally got here. They're transferring Superman to their facility - they want you to go, too."

For a moment, the reporter could only stare at her. *Why?* The question immediately answered itself. *No one knows more about him than I do.* Perry pushed her shoulder gently. "Go on, Lane. I guess I can hold down the fort a little longer; you follow the story."

"Lieutenant Sawyer, Lois needs to see a doctor, too," Richard said.

"She's an Army brat, she'll get seen faster at a military facility," Maggie replied.

The twins suddenly clutched Lois' hands. "We're going, too," Jason said, doing his best to sound stern. Kala nodded, staring up at her mother. The looks on their little faces were so determined.

All of the adults looked down. Lois didn't want her children out of her sight, not after *finally* getting them back. She looked up at Maggie, the question unspoken in her eyes, and the lieutenant nodded. "Bring the kids, too. I know better than to ask you to leave them now, and the guys at S.T.A.R. should know it too."

"All right," Lois said with a sigh, nodding. For a moment she looked down at the twins, her heart aching just to be able to look at them up close again. *They have a right to see him, especially if there's a small possibility he might...* The reporter cut that thought off cold. *We're just going to have to be very careful what they say and do. He saved them, so their behavior shouldn't be too suspicious. I'll just have to warn them at some point.* Her decision made, she turned back to her mother and Richard and Perry, shrugging helplessly.

"He needs you," Ella said, and the secret shared between mother and daughter lay under those words. "I'll tag along for the twins' sakes. I believe Joffrey is in command at S.T.A.R. You remember him, Lois - General Unsworth."

There was no arguing with Ella in full Army-wife mode, so Lois didn't even bother to say anything. Besides, only her mother knew why the twins would have to be closely watched inside a top-secret military facility - or so Lois thought.

Richard came forward then, hugging her briefly. "Take care," he said, kissing Lois' cheek. "If you need me, for anything, you know how to find me."

She kissed him back, feeling the new distance between them and finding herself unable to say or do anything about it. Or the rush of guilt that accompanied it. She owed him so much for all of this. And Lana, who had had no reason at all to risk her life... "Richard, I..." *Later*, she thought. "I know," she replied, giving him a sad smile. "You take care, too. I ... I'll be in touch."

No more time for goodbyes. Lois took a deep breath and turned to Maggie, the twins on either side of her holding her hands and Ella right behind them. "Let's go."

Ben had been right; getting into Metropolis wasn't easy. She had refused to listen to reason, stubbornly insistent on getting into the city if she had to *walk*. Martha had to make a fast exchange to catch the right plane, and then they were delayed getting off the tarmac. Flights all across the eastern seaboard were delayed by the earthquakes.

Unfortunately, the airline had chosen to keep the passengers occupied by playing the news on the big screen at the front of the plane. Superman's fall and his desperate ambulance ride to Metropolis General Hospital were shown again and again. Martha closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the seat. *Son... I hope you're okay. I love you so much.*

Her mind traveled back to that fateful afternoon, she and Jonathan riding alongside their own fields just minding their own business. Suddenly, fire rained from the sky; Jonathan had swerved the truck in surprise, blowing out a tire.

Martha remembered the deep sense of disquiet that swept over her at the sight of the scar burned into her cornfield. While Jonathan examined the truck and muttered a few choice words, she had been drawn toward the destruction.

Even now, more than thirty years later, Martha could still feel the sharp sense of wonder and surprise that had swept over her when a *child* walked out of the smoking wreckage. A

little boy, her heart's desire, the only thing Jonathan had never been able to give her in their marriage. Every other dream she'd had, he had made come true, but that one seemed impossible.

Until the day a miracle fell from the stars and landed beside her. *My son, my only son. And what a miracle you turned out to be.* Always a sweet child, affectionate and kind - mischievous as all boys were, but never mean-spirited, not for an instant. All of his powers, his noble mission - and the virtues he'd learned from her and Jonathan. She had always been proud of him, every second of his extraordinary life.

His most recent mission flitted across her mind. *Lois Lane and her twins ... maybe my grandchildren. What's become of them? Did he find the kids and save them from Luthor? There's no way to know, yet. I saw him lifting an island into the sky on television before Ben came over. I would've never guessed Clark could do something so... impossible.*

But the impossible seems to be his specialty. Impossible, for a child who looked so human to have such powers. Impossible, for him to grow to manhood with those powers and never lose his sweet nature, never be corrupted by arrogance or greed. Impossible for him to go on such a long journey, and then return home...

Oh, dear Lord, I only just got him back. Please don't take him away again so soon. I lost Jonathan; please don't make me mourn for my son, too. A mother should never see the death of her child. Please... Tears began to slip silently from her closed eyes.

A stranger's hand covered hers. "Ma'am?" Martha blinked, seeing the young man who'd taken the seat beside her. "Ma'am, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said quietly, wiping away the tears. "It's just ... my son lives in Metropolis."

"My sister, too," he replied. "I don't know... Would you like to pray with me?"

Martha smiled. "I would. Thank you." *This is why my son keeps doing what he's doing - people who care about each other, who offer whatever comfort they can. Clark believes that people are innately good, and folks like this prove him right.*

With Lois and Ella and the twins gone, Lana, Richard, and Perry were left feeling a bit awkward, the secret hovering in the air between them. Fortunately, Perry solved the problem. "Well, boy, are you a newsman or not? Let's get back to the *Planet* and see if any of the presses are still working. We can't really roll the whole story without Lois, but we ought to be able to put out a small evening edition..."

Richard looked at Lana and shrugged. "Sure, Uncle Perry," he said. "You want to stop by Centennial Park and pick up Jimmy first?"

"Sure," Perry said, but his eyes had already taken on the glaze that meant he was framing up the front page. He muttered potential headlines all the way to the car, and then absently hung on to the door frame whenever Richard had to weave around stalled cars. "Dammit, what're we gonna lead?" he said at last, exasperated.

Richard had managed to circle Centennial Park. Crowds were already gathering there - the police were keeping them back from the impact crater, but Richard could see a mound of flowers and cards piling up around the gates to the park. As Jimmy jumped off the low stone wall and jogged toward the familiar car, the perfect front-page headline occurred to Richard, and he grinned at his uncle.

"Call it 'Lois Lane Rescues Superman,'" he said as he unlocked the doors for Jimmy. "I'll write up the eyewitness account."

"Wow," Jimmy said, having heard the title. "Did she really? I knew Ms. Lane'd turn the

tables on Luthor!"

Before the three newspapermen could really get started discussing the technical details of the next issue - presuming the printing presses were even functional - Lana cleared her throat. "Actually, Richard, I think I'll get out here."

"Lana..." He turned around to look at her worriedly.

Her eyes met his steadily. The knowledge they shared would be too much of a temptation to discuss, but both of them knew how very important the secret was. It was better that she stay away for a while. "Besides, I can keep an eye out for Clark," Lana said softly, and Richard nodded, understanding what she meant.

The car pulled away into the horrendous traffic, and Lana headed into the park, keeping away from the yellow police tape that marked off the actual impact site. She didn't particularly want to see that, anyway. Lana's mind was made up: he *would* recover. She wouldn't allow herself to think of any other outcome, would keep her mind determinedly focused on the positive.

All she really wanted at the moment was someplace she could lose herself in a crowd and think. *Clark is Superman*. The idea tolled through Lana's mind, and it made a weird kind of sense. The boy she'd known was one of the few people on earth who could have such immense power, and never once use it for personal gain. *Even I would be tempted, now and then. They say absolute power corrupts absolutely. I guess that's why everyone loves him so much. He's incorruptible*. Lana smiled absently. *That's Smallville for you*.

General Unsworth met Lois, Ella, and the twins at the entrance to S.T.A.R. Labs. He didn't even seem surprised by the children's presence when they got out of Sawyer's patrol car. "Evening, Elinore, it's a pleasure to see you again," he said, then turned to shake Lois' hand. "Glad to see you made it, Laney."

Lois remembered him vaguely as a friend and colleague of her father's, a man who smoked a pipe when he visited and tended to pat her and Lucy on the head. She hadn't seen him in eight years or so... and *no one* called her Laney anymore. But there was a family reputation to maintain and Kal-El's health to secure. Even if her father had been a horse's-ass. "Thanks, General. Glad to be here, sir," she replied. Her eyes scanned the unassuming concrete garage, looking for the ambulance that had transported Kal-El.

General Unsworth squeezed her hand lightly. "Superman's already here. They tell me he's stable. You and your children should see a medic."

"I'm fine, sir, at least for now," Lois said, seeing the twins both watch the older man in his dress uniform. All the medals still seemed terribly impressive when you were that age. "Listen, Superman..."

"We've got sunlamps on him," General Unsworth told her. "*You* have one heck of a set of bruises on your throat, young lady."

Now Lois began to frown. She recognized that patronizing tone, one her father took with her quite often. If she didn't get control of this quickly, they would start to pay more attention to her than what was really important: concentrating all their efforts on *him*. "I'm fine, sir. And just the sunlamps might not be enough..."

"Lois might be concussed, sir," Maggie cut in at the same moment that Ella elbowed her lightly. Lois shot them both a poisonous look, which the policewoman and the general's widow both ignored.

"We'll take care of her and the kids, Lieutenant," the general told Maggie. "Thanks for

bringing them in. Now, come along, Miss Lane."

Oh, that's right. He's another one of those 'I'm a four-star general, even civilians should obey me' types like my father. Now I remember why I never kept in touch with any of his friends... Trying not to grit her teeth in irritation at having been overridden *twice*, she and Ella followed him to an unmarked door while Maggie got into her cruiser. The twins never relinquished their grips on Lois' hands.

Elinore added, "My daughter and granddaughter have also been in the water, Joffrey. With the temperatures at sea, I'm concerned about them both." Lois glared at her as General Unsworth scanned his thumbprint to open the door.

"I'll let the medics know," he replied. "You're not going to give them any trouble, are you, Laney? I remember hearing you were a terror about doctors when you were younger." That comment raised Lois' blood pressure several points as they entered a white antechamber, two on-duty soldiers saluting the general. It didn't help that his remark reminded Lois of her never-fully-exorcised fear of hospitals, which this trip wasn't helping.

"Mommy," Kala whispered curiously, "how come he keeps calling you Laney?"

General Unsworth chuckled as they passed through a second set of doors to a long hallway. "Because, princess, when she was about your age, she acted just like a miniature version of your grandfather. Everyone on base called her Little Laney."

Ella caught Lois' elbow, seeing the pulse start to throb in her neck. "Yes, well, Little Laney isn't so little anymore, and she much prefers to be called by her given name."

"Sorry about that," General Unsworth said sincerely. He met Lois' hazel eyes, saw the steel behind them, and lowered his voice a trifle. "You know, he never would've said it to you - Sam wasn't that kind of man - but your father was very proud of you, Lois. Every front-page article you ever published hung in his office."

Ella winced a little; she had never told Lois. Her husband and her eldest had become so estranged that any mention of the other's name provoked a fight. She didn't know now how Lois would take the news.

Lois blinked in surprise. Even all these years after his death, it seemed she hadn't entirely shaken off his ghost. "Thank you for telling me," she said at last. "I'm glad to know that, at least."

General Unsworth nodded, having heard enough of Sam's griping about his headstrong daughter to understand why she was so guarded. From then on he led them quietly down a seemingly endless maze of all-white corridors, past several security checkpoints.

The twins were staring around them in utter fascination, amazed by the uniforms and the guns. Fortunately that kept their minds off the long walk and their empty stomachs. At last General Unsworth stopped at the open door to an exam room very similar to the one in their pediatrician's office. "Well, children, this is Doctor Patterson," he told them as the female medic smiled at them both. In spite of the white coat that the twins always associated with shots, Doctor Patterson looked normal and friendly, the first truly welcoming face in this expanse of somber uniforms. "Be kind to them, Shelby. Seems these two have had quite the past few days."

"Thank you, Joffrey," Ella said, taking the twins' hands. "We'll be all right. Lois..."

"I want to see him first," she said sharply, giving her mother a defiant glare as she knelt down to hug Jason and Kala. Lois hated leaving them, but she saw the dark circles of exhaustion under their eyes. "You two, be good for Nana, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jason and Kala chorused, hugging her extra tight. With a long last look

back at her, both of them nodded to her as they went into the room and Doctor Patterson closed the door behind them.

Lois heart lurched, her eyes tearing up slightly. Just the thought of letting them leave her side for a moment... *Get over yourself, Lane, it's just a doctor's visit. They understand what you're doing and why. And Mom's with them. No one else is going to take them away. You'll get them back.* Standing back up brought on a wave of dizziness that she fought off, pinching the bridge of her nose.

General Unsworth cleared his throat. "Let's get you to that medic."

She turned slowly, her hazel eyes flat with aggravation. *Oh, for crying out loud!* "For the last time, *I'm fine.* I want to see Superman. *Now.*" Mentally, she dug her heels in, the same she had several times in the last few days.

"You're as far from fine as you can be without a broken bone," General Unsworth replied. "And as far as I know, you might have one of those. You look like hell, Lois."

"Either take me to Superman or I'll find him," she said stubbornly. This argument was starting to get on her nerves; exhaustion dragged at her, but Lois fought it with the last vestiges of her anger. She would not be barred from seeing him. "I won't take 'no' for an answer. I owe him."

He nodded slowly. "I see why you never joined the military," he commented. "You'd have made a good commander, but following orders to get to that point would've been a problem. All right, follow me." The pace he set was brisk, but Lois followed doggedly. She had to keep moving, couldn't stop now.

After several minutes and two more armed checkpoints, Lois found herself standing in front of another glass observation window. Even more equipment was hooked up to Kal-El, and high-intensity lamps shone down on him. At least she was seeing him, seeing the heart monitor still tracing that steady beat.

Lois stood there watching him carefully, palpable relief washing through her. *Maybe, just maybe, it will be enough,* she thought, feeling her weariness double now without the anxiety of not knowing where he was. "Sunlamps might not be enough," she began, and General Unsworth saw her head fighting to sag forward. "He gets his power... from the actual *sun*..."

"We're having him moved to a suite with a skylight." The general's voice seemed to come from the other end of a long tunnel, and Lois' vision began to gray. This was the limit of her endurance; she had hung on through terror and panic, but the pure relief of seeing him alive and even slightly stable, after seeing the twins sound, undid her.

"That's... a good... id-" Lois' eyes slid closed. Just resting them sounded so good right now. Just for a moment...

General Unsworth caught her as she fainted, collapsing right outside Superman's hospital room. "Doctor Donner! Got another patient for you!"

Shattered trees lay at odd angles, and the crowds staring past the police line were unusually somber. Dark thoughts troubled Lana for a few seconds - he'd looked so pale, and Lois had been so frantic. Could this momentous day really be the hero's last? Lana shook her head sharply, warding off that train of thought. She refused to dwell on it, keeping a prayer for him in the back of her mind and the confidence that he would recover firmly in the front.

By avoiding the thick trees where Superman had fallen, Lana had wandered onto familiar ground. Only a few days ago, the grassy meadow before her had been the stage of Metropolis' fall fashion show, and she had been rubbing elbows with big-name designers. *With other*

big-name designers, she thought. I'm one of them now ... last week, I would've said that nothing else in my life could be as important as getting that recognition.

*The redhead chuckled softly. Now look at me. I'm carrying the biggest, most explosive secret I could ever have imagined, Superman's secret identity. And it turns out the hero and the boy who had such a crush on me are the **same person**.*

A sudden memory from high school came back, startling laughter from her. Brad had been a jerk to Clark after football practice, like he always was, and had left him at school while Lana and the others drove home. Surprisingly, he'd been leaning against the Kent truck, grinning secretively at them when they drove by. Brad had asked, "How'd you get here so fast?" and Clark had shrugged and replied casually, "I ran."

*He **did** run! The sneaky devil! I wondered how the heck he managed to pull that off - I would've wondered even longer, if it hadn't been for Mr. Kent's dying that same day. It wasn't long after that before Clark left town, and I barely saw him again until this last week.*

*I never **really** saw him until I saw him with the love of his life. I just saw a sweet guy I'd been friends with since we were kids. Only when I saw him with Lois did I recognize the man that boy had grown into ... and regret having been so short-sighted all those years ago.*

But then, I'd already met Richard. She wasn't proud of the smile that curved her lips at the thought of him; he was still engaged to another woman, even if Lois had 'Clark's Soul Mate' engraved on her heart. That relationship was over - that moment on the seaplane had proven it - but Lana didn't want to be a thief.

She forced her mind away from the memory of seeing him here, his easy smile, the unexpected attraction between them. She had almost forgotten how that felt, the sudden spark that seemed to brighten the entire world...

Standing on the edge of the meadow, Lana was exposed to the cold breeze that came up as the day ended. The rain had stopped earlier, but the ground was wet, and the designer abruptly realized that Lois still had her coat. *She needs it more than I do*, she thought, and headed back toward the park entrance, shivering.

Evidently she'd been lost in reminiscence for longer than she'd thought - the sky was rapidly darkening, and the crowds around the impact crater were even thicker. Lana saw that the mound of flowers beside the police tape had risen to several feet high. She briefly wished she had brought something, some offering to make her own prayer part of the collective hope being displayed here.

A sudden gust of wind whipped her hair into her eyes, and Lana hunched her shoulders against it, turning her back. As she did so, she caught sight of a very familiar silver-haired head in the crowd. "It can't be," she murmured, weaving through the throng to get closer.

Lana could only see her from the back as the older woman knelt down, gently placing a work-worn hand atop the profusion of flowers. Her shoulders trembled ... and Lana touched her arm. "Mrs. Kent?" she asked.

Martha turned quickly, her eyes startled and tear-stained. "Lana," she said a trifle nervously. "I... I didn't expect to see you here."

Sympathy welled up, so strong that it nearly brought tears to Lana's eyes. "Mrs. Kent... Martha. I know where Clark is. Come on." The older woman's eyes widened almost comically, and Lana nodded. "I was with him," she whispered. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

In the small hours of the morning, Lois' heavy lids slipped open slowly, finding herself in a strange bed. And she wasn't alone. She turned her throbbing head slightly to see Kala

nestled against her right shoulder, Jason curled against her left with his arm around her. Seeing them there, so close she could hear their breathing, reassured her - if anything had been wrong, they would've been in hospital beds of their own, not sharing hers. She simply lay there for a moment as she tried to get her wits about her, kissing Jason's hair as she drew his small arm away and slipped out from under Kala's head.

Sitting up in bed without disturbing either of the twins was a challenge, especially as Lois discovered that she was wearing a hospital gown and had an IV in the back of her right hand. *Dammit. How long have I been asleep?*

She scanned her surroundings, still a little groggy and confused about exactly where she was. Ella was asleep in a reclining chair at the foot of her bed. *Okay, that's the twins and Mom. Where's Richard ... wait. The last time I saw Richard he was at the hospital...*

Memory returned sharply. She was in S.T.A.R. Labs, she'd gone there with Jason and Kala and Ella, and ... Kal-El... *If we're all here, then who's with Kal-El?* Lois punched the button at her bedside that called for a nurse, thought better of it, and then started trying to maneuver her way out of bed without waking the twins.

It was Ella who woke up, though. "Lois, you need to rest," she said immediately, getting out of the chair and going to her child.

"Forget that," Lois whispered fiercely. She was only too aware of where she was and that they might be heard. "Help me up. Where is he? Who's keeping watch over him? My God, how long have I been out?"

"A few hours," Ella replied, helping her to her feet. Jason and Kala started to move in their sleep, and Lois and her mother both froze silently while they waited to see if the kids would wake up. The twins just cuddled against each other, and Lois sighed with relief.

"Make sure this damned thing is tied shut, Momma, please," she whispered. Her own clothes were probably gone - soaked in seawater, they'd be unwearable anyway. Ditto for the boots; she was stuck with thick beige hospital socks that had rubberized soles. *What a great fashion statement*, Lois thought to herself as Ella secured her hospital gown.

"Just where do you think you're going, Lois?" Ella asked, one silver brow raised.

Ah, but they'd left Lana's coat. *Thank God.* "Boy, is that a rhetorical question. Where do you think I'm going, Momma? Hand me that coat."

Ella just crossed her arms and stared. An expression Lois had been familiar with her whole life, only this time it didn't deter her.

"I'll do it myself if I have to," Lois growled under her breath as she rolled her eyes. Her back was stiff from lying down flat in the hospital bed. "I had some rest, and obviously I'm not dying. I'm going to see him."

Sighing in defeat, Ella brought her the long coat. "Just how do you think you're going to find his room, anyway?"

"Oh, I'll find him, even if I have to check the whole building," Lois muttered. She saw immediately that she wouldn't be able to get the coat on properly with the IV in. The bag of fluid was almost empty anyway, and the coat was a necessity for coverage and warmth. *Why do they keep hospitals so damned cold, anyway?* Lois let the thought distract her while she peeled back the tape on her hand, grimacing. "Look in that cabinet, Momma, and find me a bandage, please?"

"Lois, what are you-" Ella began, then winced in sympathy as Lois gritted her teeth and pulled the needle out of her vein. She applied pressure quickly, her lips moving angrily with words she wouldn't say out loud in front of her mother or her children.

Knowing how much her daughter had hated needles, ever since she was a child, with that act Ella realized that Lois couldn't be swayed. Since there was no stopping her, she might as well help. Lois' hand was soon bandaged, and the warm coat secured over the flimsy hospital gown.

Making her way back over to the bed again briefly, Lois watched Jason and Kala curled close in the deep restorative sleep only a child knows. The helpless ache in her chest made her smile. *Will you two ever understand just how much I love you, just how much you mean to me? What it felt like to know I might lose you, too? My brave little munchkins.* Tenderly, she ran her knuckles over her little boy's warm cheek before stroking back yet another of Kala's errant curls. *If he has my heart, you two are my soul. My strength. Mommy loves you both so much.* Softly, she leaned down and kissed the twins again lightly, her gaze lingering on their faces. Then she turned to Ella and whispered with emotion clear in her voice, "You stay with them, Momma."

"I've never left their side," Ella reassured her. "I never would." As much as she loved and trusted the Army, Jason and Kala's parentage was *definitely* on a need-to-know basis, and the military didn't need to know.

Lois went to her mother now, hugging her tightly. Quietly, comforted now by the scent of her mother's perfume as she always had been as a little girl, she murmured softly, "I know that, Momma, I never doubted it for a moment. But you know why I have to do this. I need to know what's happening with him. For me and the twins both."

"I know," Ella said as they pulled away, touching her daughter's face. "As well as I know that you won't rest until you do it. Just come back before they wake up so they don't worry over *you*. We both know that they won't sleep past seven."

"Agreed," Lois whispered, turning toward the door. "I love you, Momma. I'll be back."

She had almost reached the door when the summoned nurse arrived, doing a quick double take. "Miss Lane, you need to get back in bed," she began, and Lois walked out the door, herding the woman ahead of her.

"No, I *need* to make sure you're taking the best care possible of Superman," Lois said once she was outside. *How the hell did I forget hitting that damn button? Idiot.* Now that her voice probably wouldn't wake the twins, she let her tone become sharp. "I made it clear to General Unsworth, so don't make me repeat myself. I know more about Superman than anyone else on this planet, so I'll stay with him."

"But Miss Lane--"

"No buts," Lois growled. "If Superman dies, do you *really* want to see the public reaction to this Pulitzer-winning reporter's story about how *you* refused to let the *one* person who could save him in to see him?"

The blonde nurse gulped, then her face hardened. "Fine, Miss Lane, but I'm telling Doctor Donner where you went."

"Fine by me," Lois replied archly. "And you can also tell him to leave that room alone for a little while. My twins need their rest after all they've been through. I'll get back there after while"

The woman huffed, leading the way with her back stiff. Lois just barely managed to hear her muttered comment, "If they need their rest so much, maybe they should be at *home* with their father..."

Lois thought about that a few seconds, then planted her feet, grabbed the taller woman by the shoulder, and spun her around abruptly. *Okay, that's enough of that, sister.* She leaned in

close to the nurse's shocked face and spoke before the younger woman could gather her wits enough to react. "Alright, listen, you arrogant *brat*. If *your* children had been kidnapped, held captive by a *maniac*, possibly drugged and God knows what else, then rescued from certain death by a superhero who happened to be your *ex*, would you *really* want them far from your sight? As for myself, I've been beaten, almost raped, and had to fight said maniac just for the chance to almost *drown* saving the man in that room! The man who almost *killed himself* trying to protect you and every other good-for-nothing ingrate on the East Coast!"

She had to take a breath, and her next words were a snarl. "So do I have to knock you over the head with a wheelchair and stuff your sarcastic ass into a supply closet, or are you going to *shut up* and lead me to Superman?"

The nurse blinked. She'd been warned, by Mrs. Lane and General Unsworth, that this uppity reporter had an attitude and the determination to carry it through. Not to mention that fact that her father had once been a high-ranking general. She just hadn't expected *this*. Military training took over, and she simply said, "Yes, ma'am," and turned to silently lead the way.

Very soon, Lois came to a door guarded by two uniformed soldiers. They let her pass on General Unsworth's prior orders. The room beyond was flooded with light from several sunlamps, making it almost as bright as day. Kal-El was still unconscious, but as Lois approached his bedside she noted that his complexion looked better. It might've been her imagination, but his pulse on the heart monitor seemed stronger, too.

Sighing, Lois sank down into the chair by his bedside and slipped her hand into his just outside the halo of light. "I'm here, Kal-El," she whispered softly. "And I'm not leaving you. I meant what I said. I *won't* lose you again. And I don't plan to let you walk out on me again, you got me?"

His skin was warm, and his breathing was deep and regular. His pulse was a little slow, but Lois could feel it in his fingers, and the steady beat reassured her. Her eyes began to slip closed again as sleep stole over her.

He once told me he's like a solar battery, she thought, twisting around in the chair until she could rest her cheek on his hand. *If they can recharge him enough... Not if, Lois, when. When. Come back to me, love. Come back to all of us.*

Belief

*Tonight, you arrested my mind.
When you came to my defense.
With a knife, in the shape of your mouth,
In the form of your body,
With the wrath of a God.
Oh, you stood by me.
And I'll stand by my
Belief.*

~Gavin Degraw, *Belief*

A gentle hand touched Lois' wrist, taking her pulse. It was enough to bring her out of her fitful doze, and her hazel eyes looked up to meet dark brown ones. "Good morning, Ms. Lane," the new nurse said.

"What time is it?" Lois groaned as she sat up slightly. It seemed like she was asking that question a lot lately. She tried to let go of Kal-El's hand unobtrusively, not wanting anyone to realize that she had been holding his hand - sleeping with her cheek on it - since she arrived.

"One o'clock in the morning," the nurse told her. She was of Indian descent, and her smile was warm and genuine. "You're doing well - but I expected that. Anyone strong enough to threaten Gwen with a wheelchair is going to be fine. I'm Tage, by the way. Any change in our star patient?"

Several hours had passed, then, since Lois had come into the room, and solemn silence had reigned, broken only by the steady beep of the heart monitor and the hum of the sunlamps encircling Kal-El's prone form. It had been almost nine hours since the Man of Steel had plummeted from the sky - and still no change. Lois shook her head mutely, watching as Nurse Tage checked Kal-El's vitals. She wrote everything down on his chart, then turned kind, wise eyes on Lois again. "Can I get you anything, Ms. Lane?"

"No, I'm fine," Lois whispered.

"I'll be back in a few hours," came the reply. "Press the call button if you notice any change, or if you need me." She patted Lois' shoulder and left the room quietly.

Lois lay sideways in the bedside chair now, fingers entangled with his cool ones again as she watched that handsome, still face. She'd never noticed just how rosy with health his skin had been until now, his pallor stark. Never had she seen his expression so blank, even in sleep. With every beep of the monitor with no physical change, a little piece of Lois died, the chance of him waking up seeming less and less likely. He was in there, the monitor proved it, but for how much longer? No one had any knowledge of Kryptonian physiology beyond Kal-El's own, and he was obviously in no shape to enlighten anyone else. All they could do was wait and hope.

She longed to reach out and touch his face, be closer to him, but it was impossible with the intensity of the lamps' beams. If it had been summer, the warmth put off by them would have made the room unbearable. As it was, it was almost comfortable. Leaning forward to kiss the back of his hand, Lois laughed a little bitterly. *What, Princess Charming, do you think a kiss would bring him back to life? How old are you, twelve?* But even as the thought crossed her mind, she was tempted to try it. Anything. Anything to bring him back to her. She'd even willingly walk back into Luthor's clutches just to see him open those beautiful eyes again. Eyes she was privately terrified would never open again.

Stop it, Lois. Just stop it. You know him, you know he'll do the impossible. Especially

when you were involved somehow. Have faith in him, Lois. You believed instantaneously in a flying man who saved your life all those years ago, a man from another galaxy. And you never stopped believing in him, even when you tried. Believe now, because he needs you now. He needs you.

That brought fresh tears to her eyes. She felt so helpless now, unable to bully, fast-talk, or even force things to work. She couldn't beg or manipulate anyone to make this stop. She couldn't make anything do anything - she was powerless. All she could do was be here and hold his hand, watching him sleep in a way that made it seem as if he were already mostly gone from her. As if he were already...

Even now, she could remember another time she had seen him at rest, a faint smile teasing his lips as she had lain there next to him all those years ago. Could remember how enchanted by it she had been, knowing it was because of her but also knowing that it suited her image of him perfectly.

That made her pause. Did he know? Really know? How much she had loved him all along, the fact that she had noticed or been reminded of so many details about him over the years?

Wonderingly, she stared at his still form for a long moment before she spoke aloud suddenly, "You *don't* know, do you? Any more than I did about your thoughts on me." She was silent for a moment after the revelation; thinking about what she was going to do, feeling like a fool. But if it worked...

"I'm not even sure if you can hear me, but they say that sometimes when people are..." Lois stopped herself again, feeling self-conscious for another moment, then pushed on, "I don't know if you can hear me, Kal-El, but I think you have a right to know now. I'm not sure how much of it you've already guessed. Other than all of that schoolgirl fawning I did in front of you at work. Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is to think back on that? Especially back when I first met you? Both of you?" She had to chuckle, shaking her head.

"Do you have any idea how long it took me to get my mind around that? When I first met you as Clark, I thought, 'Poor guy. He's so old-fashioned and *nice* that he's going to get eaten alive. He's going to last about twenty seconds with these cutthroats. What the hell was Perry thinking hiring this guy?' Especially once you mentioned your mother. Dear God, Kal-El." Just thinking back on his expression when he had taken her bait, replying utterly deadpan, *Actually, she's silver-haired*, she bit back a snicker. "And the best part was realizing later that your mother really *was* silver-haired. And the fact that somehow, through sheer likability and well-bred manners, Clark Kent managed to survive."

"And the alleyway, that afternoon when we were mugged?" One eyebrow arched, Lois grinned at the memory. "Very subtle. It took me a little while to figure that one out. I must have reacted the exact way you expected, because I really did think 'Clark' was an utter lightweight when you 'fainted'. You caught that bullet, didn't you? It didn't misfire. You saved my life in that alley and never even said a word about it. And then you slipped up about the x-ray vision when you looked at my purse. How I missed that the first time around, I'll never know. Must have dismissed it as one of those strange Midwestern farm boy things. But you know, despite his complete case of fish-out-of-water, I really liked Clark by then. He was a bit quirky, but... endearingly so. As long as he didn't get in the way of my headlines. Which hadn't started *yet*." She paused to snort.

"Funnily enough, I felt bad about the way I had just brushed you off the night 'Superman' debuted. We'd gotten to be friends by then. I knew I could trust you more than any of the

other guys in the office other than Jimmy, who was just a kid at the time. I don't think I've met anyone in my life more sincere than Clark. I remember that the President was going to be in town and I had been more dismissive than I should have been, trying to plan my questions. You know how I am when I'm on a big story, and poor Clark just got left in the dust. Ten million thoughts in my head and no control over my mouth. What made me smile a little about it once I knew the truth was the fact that you didn't even *own* a car as Clark; how was he even going to be able to give me a lift to the airport? Then again, if I had taken Clark up on that little transport, I might have had to wait longer to meet the rest of you. Which was like nothing I had ever dreamed of. I don't think anything in my life was the same after that moment. Then again, how often do you meet a flying man?"

The newsroom was a shambles. Luckily, three presses were functional, so Perry, Richard, and a few loyal staffers managed to scramble together a brief evening issue. Richard typed up his eyewitness account of the confrontation with Luthor, unable to maintain strict journalistic objectivity. This was *Lois* he was writing about, her determination and her ultimate heroism. He doubted they would have a relationship left after everything that happened, but that didn't mean he'd stopped loving her. To have seen her in peril, and to have seen her courage pull through against all odds, only increased his admiration for her.

And Superman... *He's Clark, for the love of God. I was buddies with Superman. Oh, my God - I'm Superman's boss.* Richard sat bolt upright, staring blankly across the room as the realization struck him again. *This is gonna screw with my head for weeks. And if it's surreal for me, what must it have been like for Lois? She has to know - it explains the way she's acted since he came back...*

He shook himself slightly. *Get your mind on the job, White.* Richard quickly reread the article, deciding to let its hero-worshipping tone go uncorrected. *If anyone in the history of the world deserves bias, it's him.* He emailed it to the print room, thankful that some of the computers were still working. If they'd all been broken, Perry would've had his staff using the few manual typewriters scattered around the office.

That task complete, Richard headed for Perry's office. The Chief was looking at two mock-ups of a paper, but it wasn't the evening issue. Richard saw that as he walked in, coming to an abrupt halt at the sight of the forbidding headline 'Superman Dies' in huge black letters. "Jesus, Perry," he said. "It's a little morbid, don't you think? I mean, he's in stable condition by the last report..."

The old newshound looked up at him somberly. Now Richard could see the haunted look in his eyes, the lack of sleep combined with the burden of reporting such news. "Always be prepared." Perry slid the other cover across his desk. It had the same article, the same photo of Superman catching the *Daily Planet* globe, but the headline on this issue was 'Superman Lives'.

Richard breathed a sigh of relief. Having both covers before him seemed less of an evil omen. "Any word on Lois and the kids?" Perry asked.

His nephew shook his head. "Ella called a couple of hours ago and let me know they were all okay, but nothing since then. Apparently Lois passed out from exhaustion, and the doctors want her overnight for observation."

Perry chuckled. "That oughta be fun," he commented. "Lucky for them, she'll want to stay near Superman. She's going to get the first interview when he regains consciousness, you just watch."

Richard smiled. *He* knew it was more than the story, and he was fairly certain Perry knew as well. His uncle wasn't in possession of all the facts, though, and was trying to spare Richard's feelings. "I'm sure she will, Uncle Perry," he replied. "Lois has never let go of a story. Especially not a Superman exclusive..." *Particularly those two exclusives that call me Daddy.*

His cell phone chirped, but the number was unlisted. He answered it anyway, and the veneer of weariness dropped from his features when he heard the voice on the other end of the line. "Ella? How is everyone?"

In the suite at S.T.A.R. Labs, Lois' voice softened the hiss of the oxygen line, filled the quiet between the beeps of the heart monitor. "It wasn't as if it was my first, tenth, or even twentieth flight in one of those whirring buckets of bolts. I was really only concerned about getting to the airport before the Big Cheese touched down in Air Force One. Nothing that day even began to prepare me for what happened. One minute I'm on my way to nail President Salkind to the tarmac, the next thing I know I'm dangling sixty-five stories over the sidewalk from a seatbelt. I've had some pretty crazy things happen to me in my life, before you showed up, but that? Nothing that had happened to me *back then* could top that. Not even sneaking off-base in Italy during lockdown."

She was quiet for a long moment, eyes running over his face as it rose to life in her memory, "And then the 'copter started to tip. I can still hear the screech of the metal. I couldn't breathe." Lois closed her eyes for a long minute. "That was it. I knew it. Only twenty-five, just finally making my way through the 'old boy' network and beating the glass ceiling, and it was over. I was going to die like this, hanging out of a helicopter like some brainless twit in an action movie. I had about sixty seconds to hate fate. And then the belt broke." Her voice was choked, reliving the moment.

"One minute was all the difference in the world. Thirty seconds while I was just in free-fall, heart in my eyes, bracing myself for the pavement. I can't remember what I was thinking. I don't think I was thinking, actually, too terrified. Stunned that it was over this soon. Just when I was starting to make it, after nine years... Thirty more seconds when I suddenly jolted to a stop. An utterly impossible stop in mid-air. I was so shocked, I jerked my head up and there you were. I just ... I..." She had to laugh then, the old awe still in her tone as she shook her head. "After all this time, I'm not even sure I can describe that moment for me. Other than, I had never heard of an angel in spandex before. You just... And then when the 'copter fell... And you just *caught it*, like it was only a toy. It didn't seem possible, it was so surreal. The world just shifted. And as I started to get my bearings, had the roof beneath my feet, you turned to me and smiled." A little smile of her own crept across Lois' features then, the memory of her stammered questions in light of later events amusing. "You were so careful with your answers, but so polite, as if this was just something you did everyday and you just happened to be in the area, which of course, you had been, *Clark*." Another snort of laughter. "*A friend*. Oh, Kal-El..."

"Somehow I managed to get my head together enough to make it to the airport before Perry could get me checked out by more than one medic. I was in the back of a taxi on my way there when the bulletin about the air trouble the President was having, but that disaster had been averted. And then there you were again, setting down Air Force One when I got out of the cab. I don't think I've ever felt so much wonder in my life. You didn't even stay long enough for Salkind to thank you, but just before you flew away, I managed to get your

attention again and when those eyes of yours looked back at me, I just felt my heart seize. Somehow I managed to tell you who I was. And you smiled and waved before you flew off, which I think is all too funny now."

"What you missed was the amount of reporters that hadn't heard about the save and went wild to know I'd met you. I guess it was my fault the whole *Superman's Girlfriend* thing got started since I seem to remember implying that we knew each other a little better than we did, but you might just have heard that. I seem to remember a cute little snark during our interview that made it seem like you had. Something about me being the first to know if you had a girlfriend."

"Of course, the next morning Clark was so solicitous over me, I should have known something was up. Especially after he handed my ball cap back. Somehow he had managed to be Johnny-on-the-spot. Wonder why," she commented ruefully, squeezing his hand. "You wouldn't let me out of your sight for more than a few minutes at a time. You and Jimmy both. Me, I was fine, but you two... You were just so adorable about it. So much so, I was about to shake you both. And let's not even go into the damn argument over as to whether your 'first appearance' was a hoax or not. Looking back on it now, the whole 'on-wires-Peter-Pan' debate, I don't know how on earth you kept a straight face. And Lord knows I gave you both barrels for it. I don't know how you thought you were going to convince with the 'done with mirrors' thing. You can't catch and hold someone with mirrors, no matter what you do."

"And then, in Perry's office at the Massacre, the reason you had hovered became clear. Not that I had a clue it was you at the time, but don't think I didn't smirk over that later. That little note card was nearly enough to stop my heart. Of course, the Chief was having a field-day. My God, he was absolutely over the moon. And the first time we see this 'Caped Wonder', where is he? On *our* roof. Do you remember how much that man grinned that day? Loueen made comments more than once that she half expected him to start *giving out* cigars. Then again, with that little note in hand, my mind was a million miles away. Other than Perry's little smartass 'girlfriend' comment, and he knew full-well about the rumor that had started, nothing completely penetrated the fog in my brain after that."

"And then, sly devil that you are, you had to throw me even further off the scent by having Clark remind me for a dinner date I had forgotten about. Actually, I'm not even a hundred percent sure that you *had* brought it up before that moment. It was incredibly cute, but I remember getting your number on that one." Even now, she could see the look on his face when she tossed off the 'and if I'm not a good girl, let's let Jimmy take the pictures' comment over her shoulder as she walked away. She'd been so proud of herself for zinging him on that at the time, not even knowing that his pained look was two-fold. "It also seems that I made a hero blush, which was probably the reason I got paid back for it that night. I doubt you even remember that..."

She was quiet for a moment, her mood mellowing as she came to this part in her tale. If there was any memory that had so many emotions tangled up in it, it was this. At the time, it had been exciting and awkward and funny. But now, knowing where they went from here and how often she had thought back on it, it was so much more to her. "I didn't know if you'd really come. Part of me wondered if it was a little prank Bill Freizon and Gil planted to make me look like an idiot. It wouldn't have been the first time. But a part of me... You said it awhile back and it's true. I'm a cynic; sometimes I think I was born one. A sucker born every minute and all. But the night you showed up... I'd always had a fairly open mind, having been a rebel since the womb, but..."

Lois stopped then, groping for the words. Even now, all these years later, she knew she still sounded like the enamored twit she saw herself as then. She looked away for a moment, out into the darkness of the room beyond them. "It... it was like the world had suddenly opened up wider than I had ever seen it before. It all felt new. So many things felt possible then. I *wanted* to believe in you, something Perry would have been amused to know. Amused, hell - he would've been *thrilled*. Lois the Disparager acting like the wide-eyed teen she never was. That would have been a gas for the boys at work."

"And my traitor emotions were up to things I didn't even want to acknowledge. Standing up there on the roof of my apartment in a damn evening gown, on pins and needles, with a bucket of ice and champagne on my patio table, trying to act casual. God, who was I kidding?" She rolled her eyes, sighing disgustedly at her younger self. "In an evening gown. Like I was just going to hang around the house and do my nails or something. Exactly how credible did I think I was being?" Shaking her head, she went on. "But then, just as I was getting ready to give it all up as lost and drink the champagne anyway, talking bravado to myself to feel better, there you were. Again."

In her memory, that moment was so crystal-clear. Her heart had just stuttered for an instant when he had called out his greeting, startling her so badly she had literally jumped to her feet, barely able to make a response in kind. Until then, she hadn't been aware of just how nervous she had been. But when he had offered to come back later, her panic had known no bounds. "I felt just like an idiotic sheltered sixteen-year-old on her first date, not able to function at all. We both know that that isn't the case at all and I've never felt out-of-sorts with a man before in my life, but you..." She had to put her head in her hands, shaking her head for what seemed like the millionth time. "That entire *interview* was a disaster. I can't even remember having a coherent thought in my head for longer than ten seconds. This was it, the interview of my life. A sure-fire Pulitzer and I was so tongue-tied and flustered that it all came out was... God, I was such a dope. I mean, at least I got a little bit of useful information in there someplace, in between my stumbling and your teasing. Some of the questions were deliberate, meant to surprise an answer out of you, but none of it came out the way I meant it." Lois paused then to look over at him, remembering that night. "And from the moment we sat down at that table, I just... I couldn't take my eyes off you. I was just overwhelmed ... and more than a little intrigued. Oh, intrigued, hell. Who am I kidding? I was so attracted to you I couldn't stand it, but I'd always told myself that I never got involved in my stories, never got mixed up emotionally with anything except the job itself. And then, feeling myself start to slip but trying to fight it off with serious questions, you offered to take me flying."

She closed her eyes then, sighing out a deep breath, then smiled. "You know it started then, don't you? When we first took off, I was terrified. I trusted you, I don't know why, but I trusted you immediately. Even though you had told me no more than ten minutes before that you were from another planet, it never even crossed my mind to be afraid in the slightest. Somehow I knew that I could trust you. But then, once I figured out what to do, I can't even describe for you the way that flight felt. Even after all these years. It was... God, this sounds so stupid, but it felt like what I thought falling in love must feel like. It was amazing and I couldn't believe I was sharing it with you. And then, like every idiot taking chances, I pressed my luck while trying to hold your hand and went too far. Only to fall again, metaphorically instead of literally, the moment I was caught."

Lana and Martha made it through the crowd around Centennial Park and to Lana's hotel,

which fortunately wasn't far. Her room was largely intact, except for the windows, and safe to stay in that night. All Martha wanted was an explanation - a *complete* explanation. So Lana set up the in-room coffeemaker and began telling the story from the twins' kidnapping all the way to that moment on the plane, when Clark - Superman - flew away to deal with the island.

"That was when everything started to make sense," Lana said, hours after she'd begun. It was now later than both women were accustomed to being awake, but neither could sleep. "Seeing them together at that moment, that's when Richard and I both realized who he was. We would've never guessed if we didn't know Clark well."

Martha sipped her coffee, wincing a little because it had grown cold and bitter during the tale. Her mind was a whirl. She'd known Lana Lang since the tall, poised redhead before her was just a leggy girl. If anyone outside of family could be trusted with the secret, it was Lana. But every mother's instinct to protect her child rebelled against this. *Will he come to harm from her knowing? And what about this Richard White she's trying so hard not to speak of with affection?*

Lana couldn't imagine what was going through Martha's mind, the older woman's eyes purposefully shuttered. What would it be like, to guard a secret like this for so long - alone? She shivered at the thought of such loneliness. And when Clark had been gone for so long, his mother must've been heartbroken... "Mrs. Kent, I'm his friend. All I want is to protect him and the children."

A sudden flare of emotion in Martha's expression. "You mean Lois Lane's children? Are they...?"

It wasn't her place to tell this, but it had to be told, and she was the one in the right time and place and circumstance to tell it. "Yes, they're Clark's," Lana said. "I'm pretty sure he knows it for a fact, now. If not, she'll tell him when he wakes up. Lois has been by his side from the beginning."

Martha smiled crookedly. *When, not if.* That was Lana - stubborn optimist. She'd stuck with Donald a lot longer than she really needed to, hoping things would take a turn for the better. *Unlike her marriage, Clark's recovery isn't a lost cause,* Martha told herself. *Her hope is better placed.* "Well. Things are going to get very interesting in the near future, then."

Lana nodded, thinking of Richard and Lois. "I wish we could get in to see Clark," she said quietly. "I just... I've been praying for him."

"Me, too," Martha replied, placing a hand over Lana's. "You said Lois Lane was with him?"

"She was with him when he was shot," Lana said quietly. "Martha, she's the one who saved him that time. Lois kept him from drowning, and she pulled the bullet out. He left us to take the island up - an island made of kryptonite - and we brought her back to the city. It just happened that we got her to the hospital around the same time he arrived, and one of the cops took her back to see him."

"No one knows that you and I know him as well as we do," Martha mused, "but the woman who got herself engaged to another man is by his side now. In a *military* facility. God does have a sense of humor."

"She'll take care of him," Lana said. "You didn't see her when he was hurt. Lois won't let anything else happen to him. She'd do permanent damage to anyone who tried to harm him. That I can promise you."

Martha swirled the coffee idly. Then she looked up, piercing blue eyes meeting Lana's green. "Tell me about her," she said. "I've heard a great deal about Lois from Clark, but he's

biased. What do you think?"

Lana leaned back and sighed. "She'd never fit in around Smallville," she said frankly. "Lois ... Lois is complicated."

"Oh? And women from your old hometown are simple, Ms. Internationally-Known Designer - who learned embroidery from me?"

"That's not what I said," Lana replied with a little smile. "Lois isn't that easy to describe. She's... She's very strong. Physically, for her size, she's strong, but emotionally she's Atlas. Beautiful. And stubborn. She'll fight for what she wants, and she fights like a man - very direct, take-no-prisoners."

"Oh dear," Martha said quietly.

"Lois' father was an Army general," Lana continued. "She's moved around a lot, lived in several cities. Several countries, actually. Very modern, very cosmopolitan. Not too concerned with tradition - not religious, either. She's a good person, Martha, but an ethical one instead of a moral one. Lois will always stand by the people she cares about, and she cares about Clark. A lot. And your son loves her very much."

"He told me she had a fiancé."

Lana glanced down at her own coffee then, and Martha didn't miss the gesture. "Ah, yes - Clark was gone for more than six years. Besides, I don't think Lois and Richard will be together very much longer..."

Martha knew perfectly well that there was nothing she could do for Clark now. But this conversation was at least keeping her from going out of her head with fruitless worrying, so she pursued the point. "Mm-hmm. Richard White. Anything you'd like to tell me about that, Lana Elizabeth Lang?"

With Lana's pale skin, her blush was even more evident. "Um... no, actually. He's a good man, but Lois isn't in love with him. Not anymore. They fought like cats and dogs pretty much the entire time we were trying to find the twins." It was an exaggeration, and Lana knew it, but that one apocalyptic argument outside IHOP made it mostly true. "Anyway, the only reason Richard and Lois haven't officially broken up is that they were too busy trying to rescue Jason and Kala. He knows, too - I don't think he'd feel right about marrying Lois even if things weren't so rocky, because he knows who the kids' real father is."

Martha gave her a look, but Lana had learned to deal with maternal chiding during her divorce and just met her gaze levelly. After a moment, the redhead added, "Speaking of the twins, you haven't asked about your grandchildren."

Sipping the coffee again, Martha sighed. "Yes, well, I'm still getting used to the idea. Clark has suspected for a while that they might be his. So have I - the timing seemed too coincidental. But to actually hear it confirmed is kind of... It's big news. It'll take a while to process the idea."

"They're adorable. Bright, outgoing, well-behaved - mostly." Lana chuckled. "Around your son, they get a bit excitable. I think they've known for a while, although they must've figured it out themselves. Richard and Lois dote on them, but not too much; they're not spoiled or anything. Good kids."

Martha saw the wistful look on Lana's face, and sympathized. She had once felt that same expression on her own features every time she saw a woman with a child. And then God had seen fit to trust her with raising a hero... Martha smiled at the thought, and the smile turned unexpectedly into a yawn.

Lana was trying to stifle a yawn of her own, and the two women chuckled at each other.

"I suppose we should try to get some sleep," Martha ventured.

"We're not going to be able to rest very well, but it's worth a try," Lana replied. "I'll have to get hold of Richard tomorrow and see if he can get us to S.T.A.R. Labs. I don't even know where it is."

"I'm sure it'll be common knowledge by tomorrow," Martha mused.

"It's a top-secret military facility," Lana told her.

The older woman just laughed tiredly. "This is *Superman* we're talking about, Lana. Word about him has a way of getting around."

Nurse Tage came back into the room while Lois was reminiscing over that romantic flight, and the reporter quickly wiped the dreamy look off her face. "No change," she said sadly.

The Indian woman smiled at her anyway and handed her a covered tray. "You haven't had anything to eat, so here's an early breakfast. As for him, Doctor Donner doesn't expect to see a change until sometime after sunrise, if there is one today. His vital signs are stable; his pulse is steady, and he's breathing on his own. Those are good signs for now, Ms. Lane." She continued to look over the machinery surrounding the hero, writing down notes. Lois took the lid off her tray, releasing the aroma of oatmeal, toast, and bacon - even the hospital coffee smelled delicious at that point. Tage continued, "The EEG does show brain activity; that's an even better sign. This may not even be a coma as we understand the term, Ms. Lane. It might be a trance state peculiar to his people, something to accelerate healing."

Lois nodded, grateful for the optimism. Tage opened Superman's eyes gently, checking the contraction of his pupils with a pen light, then added, "I'm done for now - someone will be back for the tray. Keep talking to him. He may be able to hear you, even if he doesn't remember it later. Your voice will give him somewhere to come back to."

"Thank you," Lois said, smiling back as the nurse left. Having not eaten since breakfast at IHOP yesterday morning, she set about devouring her breakfast. The little container of orange juice next to her coffee made her chuckle, though.

"Freaking *orange juice*," Lois sighed when she'd finished the food. "You know, I can't even stand the smell of it now? Even before Christmas rolled around that last year, I must have had something like three colds in a row. Started right after my birthday and just never let up, remember? I got lucky right before the Christmas party and then by the time New Years' rolled around, I was sick again. Although I really think I caught a bug in Paris while I was there on that..." She stopped then, her voice winding down to nothing. It seemed like she had found her way to the next part of her story without even meaning to. Setting the tray on a bedside table, she sat back in the chair again, trying to think where to pick her narrative back up. "I guess I should start the story up again around the holidays that year. We'd been working together for quite some time then, Perry throwing us at the same stories. I never wanted a partner; I liked working alone. I guess Perry thought I needed someone to keep me out of trouble once in a while."

For a long moment, she just watched his face. Lois took his hand again, holding it between both of hers and briefly kissing his knuckles. "Kal-El... What was it, about a year between our first meeting and that trip to Niagara? Around that. I started to have my suspicions during all those stories we did together. I was spending so much time with Clark, but I kept seeing Superman as well. Weird that he always showed up where I was ... and when Clark was locked in the bathroom, or had gotten lost, or had stepped out for a moment. You'd mastered both guises - there was nothing about your mannerisms that suggested Clark Kent

could *possibly* be Superman. And those glasses - do you even know they make your eyes look *gray*? I noticed the resemblance, but half a dozen tall, blue-eyed, black-haired men had publicly claimed to be Superman by then. You put a stop to it, but it made me a little more curious."

"It didn't help that we'd gotten closer by that time. Clark was my best friend - we'd gone on a couple of dates, but I kept you at a distance. I... I knew how you felt about me." Lois chuckled softly. "God, I feel like such a bitch saying this, but you might not remember it, right? Anyway. I was used to guys falling in love with me. Clark made it obvious, and there was something really sweet about it, though. Not like Lombard - equally obvious, but in his case it wasn't love. Come to think of it, most of them were probably more lust than love. Clark, though... You know why I never let things between us get past a certain point? Not because you weren't good enough for me - I know some of the jerks around the office thought that was why."

Strange, how this could be so hard to say. Lois looked down at his hand, his skin so warm against hers. "A guy like Clark... I would've hurt you. I would've used you - I *did* use you, a little bit. You remember those trips we went on, chasing down political scandals or busting up financial scams? Always a suite at the hotel, you wanted to be close enough to keep an eye on me, and I thought I'd be protecting *you* if anything happened. You'd take the couch and I'd have the bedroom to myself. I would've *never* agreed to that with any of the other guys, but I trusted you."

"Remember how, when we'd had a really rough day, pounding pavement for sixteen hours or poring through public records until our eyes watered? I used to find some reason to go walking through the front room of the suite in just a long slip... You were always so scandalized, and I was always so blasé." The memory of those times, strolling past him casually and snickering to herself when he dropped whatever he was reading, his voice rising shrilly as he scolded her. "I really was that relaxed about it, by the way. But sometimes, I'd do it just to jerk your chain, just to hear you tell me I should be more careful, anybody might walk in. Knowing I could shake you out of your tree like that always made me feel better about having had an awful day. It's ... it's vain of me, but knowing I had that kind of affect on you made the most frustrating days end well, at least."

"Yeah, I knew how Clark felt about me. Superman was something else. I never knew how *he* really felt. You were always so solicitous, always so delighted to see me, but there was that little bit of reserve. We'd almost kissed back in California - I could've strangled Jimmy with my bare hands for walking up just then! Once or twice since, you and I had locked eyes, and I thought we were about to kiss, but you always held back. God, I felt so *stupid* when I figured it out! As Superman, you were treating me the way I treated Clark. Only with more affection and less sarcasm. And I think you never deliberately teased me the way I'd bait Clark."

A faint blush rose to Lois' cheeks as she remembered the Christmas party. She'd begun to suspect by then, but it was just the faintest glimmer in the back of her mind, easily dismissed by the patent absurdity of the notion. "Christmas ... that last Christmas before you left. I was starting to wonder by then, but it just seemed so impossible. And that night, I guess I made a bit of a fool of myself. *Never* drink at the company party, Lane. God." Lois shook her head, picturing the dress she'd worn and the attention it had drawn. "Every man there was trying to get me to stand under the mistletoe. Everyone but Perry, Jimmy, and Clark. That was why I was so affectionate with you when I left; you were a complete gentleman, and I wanted everyone to know I appreciated it. That's why I hugged you and kissed your cheek, and you

didn't have to drag me under some parasitic bit of greenery to get it, either. I bet you were laughing at me when you saw me on the balcony later, 'just flying by'. I was just as delighted to see you then as Clark was to get that kiss at the party. No wonder I started to figure you out."

There was a long pause while Lois gathered her thoughts again. "By the time Perry sent us out to Niagara, I was almost certain. That fiasco with the fruit cart - I think I know how you did that, now. It only put me off for a little while, though. Especially when you saved that little boy at the falls. Kal-El, you couldn't have hid it from me forever. You were smiling even when I was trying to confront you in Perry's office - you *wanted* me to know. You'd never tell me yourself, but you wanted me to be smart enough to figure it out. Although I think I surprised the heck out of you with the *way* I finally busted you."

Another soft laugh. "That whole episode was staged, you realize? I was *waiting* for you to open the door so I could stroll out of the shower in just a towel. Clark had always completely lost his head whenever I flashed some leg. If your reaction was genuine, not part of your naïve farm-boy disguise, showing *that* much skin would keep you off-balance for what I wanted to do. It was so cute, watching you try to scold me about my fixation with Superman, when you couldn't make your eyes behave. You tried valiantly, but these legs are my secret weapon against men." This time the laugh was less stifled, Lois shaking her head slightly. "Everyone has one best feature, and that's mine. Guaranteed to make any male I'm investigating focus more on them than on what I'm asking. It worked on you..."

But that brought her to the final proof. Superman and Clark Kent *were* the same person, a person she soon learned was called Kal-El. Over the last six years, Lois had come to terms with the revelation, learned to think of the man she'd known briefly in the Fortress as the real person. Clark and Superman were both facets of his personality, but neither was truly the man she'd fallen in love with. Clark's kindness and honesty - and yes, his naiveté - were part of the real Kal-El, but the clumsiness and absolute social awkwardness were the disguise. And Superman's courage and integrity were real, but his confidence wasn't always as unshakable as he made it seem. Kal-El was the source from which both public personas were drawn. Kal-El was Lois' lover, the twins' father...

"I think we both remember what happened after that," Lois said quietly then, her voice heavy with meaning.

Written In The Stars

Is it written in the stars?
Are we paying for some crime?
Is that all that we are good for
Just a stretch of mortal time?
Or some God's experiment
In which we have no say
In which we're given paradise
But only for a day...?

~Aida, Written in the Stars.

"I don't buy it," Maggie Sawyer said flatly.

Officer Smith glared, and slapped the folder down on the table in front of her. Someone should've told him the Special Crimes Unit Lieutenant had been awake for almost thirty hours at that point, but no one did. Even cops like a fireworks show. "Look. It's all there. The ballistics match, the prints match - even the partials off the ligatures match the index prints. The motive was openly stated in Davis' hearing. You're denying the obvious, Sawyer."

One blonde eyebrow raised slowly, Maggie glaring at the younger man silently until he cleared his throat and added, "Lieutenant Sawyer, I mean."

"If you forgot that I outrank you just now, how can you be certain you didn't forget something in this investigation?" The question was perfectly polite, but the arctic-blue gaze boring into him was coldly furious. Maggie continued without waiting for an answer, "There's a whole history here, and Luthor has hoodwinked justice before. I won't have it happen again, not on my watch. You go back to the Coast Guard boys and double-check everything. *Everything*, Smith."

"What about *her*?" Smith said, his voice suddenly contemptuous.

"*I'll* cross that bridge when we come to it," Maggie replied. "We couldn't get to her now if we wanted to."

"And you don't want to," Smith accused. "You're a little too close to the press."

Silence reigned in the precinct. Sawyer had a stellar record, but also the reputation for not suffering fools gladly. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him, and officers nearby silently counted to ten. They began to exchange nervous glances when Maggie kept her lips sealed for another ten count; that meant she was thoroughly ticked off.

When she finally spoke, her voice came out very smooth, even and controlled. "Smith, *if* you gather sufficient evidence, *I* will bring her in for questioning. In the meantime, *do your job*."

"Yes, ma'am," Smith said stiffly.

Maggie waited for him to get several strides away before calling out, "Oh, Officer Smith?" The man turned to look at her, anger still clouding his expression, but he kept himself mostly under control. The lieutenant smiled - almost friendly, that smile, if you didn't look at the eyes - and said, "Don't ever question my integrity again, Smith. If she's guilty, I'll nail her for it, no matter how long we've been friends. But I know her well enough to know she wouldn't do this." *Not and leave evidence for me to find*, she added silently.

Lois was still swamped by memories. "I knew... But I didn't really *know* until I pulled the trigger, and you gave me that incredibly affronted look. My God, it was amazing how fast you went from Clark's anxiety to that peevd glare. It took me a few seconds to get that through

my mind. Clark Kent is Superman. My best friend is the man I fell head over heels for. Makes your head hurt if you think about it long enough..."

"And then you were so serious, frowning at me, telling me that Clark would've been killed if I was wrong." Lois laughed then, much as she had years ago in that awful honeymoon suite in Niagara. "Oh, Kal-El, the look on your *face* when I told you it was a blank! 'Gotcha!' Did you really think I would've shot Clark? I mean, *Clark*. Come on..."

Falling silent as she tried to see from his point of view, Lois mused softly, "You know, I don't think you ever realized how much I cared about Clark. That you could think for a second I'd shoot him... Kal-El. I *loved* Clark. Just not ... like that. The way I picked at you all the time? Ever notice how the only people I teased like that were you, Jimmy, and the Chief? Lombard, jeez, I tore Lombard's head off once a week. Usually for trying to jerk *your* chain. But I only ever picked on the people I cared about, you know? Like Perry and his rants. He never yelled at the ones he hated; he pink-slipped them and went on with life. I was never vicious to you, or I never *meant* to be, just a bit of harassment."

She paused, rubbing his hand slowly between hers, and then chuckled at the memories that thought provoked. "Except the clothes. Dear God, the clothes were absolutely the worst back then. And the glasses. I know *why* now, but dear Lord in heaven, those god-awful suits. I tried to help on that front; God knows I tried. And I only once got to see how you'd dress when you weren't being the hero or the nerd."

It was inevitable that she would come to this point at last. It was like a cavity you know you have to get filled, but you avoid because you know it will cause you pain. Lois sighed, bracing herself for the emotional stress she knew this would put her under. But he needed to know, regardless of what it did to her to revisit these thoughts. "After we left that god-awful hotel room in Niagara, and had that dinner at the Fortress... I remember walking up on that discussion you were having with Jor-El, the one I don't think you intended for me to hear... No wonder I'm no fan of his. Talk about making a girl feel unworthy, especially in light of what you were being expected to do. It amazed me that you were willing to stand up to him for me. It amazed me even more that you gave up your powers to be with me... *Me*, of all people. Ticked Jor-El off pretty well, too. He cut me a look that could've killed me, while you were exposing yourself to the red sun's rays. I'll never forget watching you walk out of that chamber and come up to me... or what happened after..."

Lois' laugh sounded a bit forced as she placed his hand gently down on the blanket. Dear God, did she have another memory that was more bittersweet than that one? Even now, his words echoed back through her mind and broke her heart. Standing up gingerly, she stretched her back and started to pace. "Actually, for a while, I *did* forget it. But you know all about that. And I finally know why you did it. It didn't help me very much, you know. People around the office acted like I'd lost my mind. I'd come in to work exhausted and weepy, utterly not myself and without informing anyone but Perry that I was even still alive before that moment, then after you dropped by I had a fainting spell that left me feeling basically okay, except that I'd lost three days. Three Kryptonian criminals try taking over the planet, I'm smack in the middle of it, and I can't remember a thing! I can't even remember coming back to Metropolis or losing track of Clark. I even forgot most of being in Niagara! Even Jimmy thought I'd lost it."

Slowly walking around the room, feeling cramped muscles in her legs and back begin to loosen, Lois' dark brow furrowed as she continued to reminisce, "Amazing how losing three days can be like losing a lifetime. It took me a little while to work out how much I'd forgotten.

I started seeing a psychiatrist for the amnesia - *that* helped a lot; he told me I was extremely defensive. I told him my ex was a shrink, too. I saw him write 'hostile' in my chart... Well, you remember some of that." For the first time, Lois considered those two months from his point of view. She turned to look at him, lying so very still.

"Clark was incredibly nervous around me for a while. Almost as tongue-tied as the first few weeks we knew each other. I chalked it up to him thinking I was nuts for seeing the headshrinker. And Superman ... it's funny. I'd always been a little anxious around Superman, a little flighty. After those three missing days, I was much more comfortable around you. It was as if my heart knew what my mind forgot."

"But all of a sudden, Superman was reserved around me. You never flirted anymore, and that had been a staple of our relationship from the first interview. I just kept wondering what was wrong and if it were somehow my fault. I just wanted to fix whatever had you off-balance," Lois' voice was softer than ever, caught up in her own tale as she came back to his bedside. Sliding back into the chair, she found herself watching his face again, considering what he might have felt. "It must have been so hard for you. There I was, smiling and making sly double entendres and asking you if you were okay, and you knew all along what had happened."

"And then Clark was gone, without a word to me. You disappeared while I was out of town on a story. It was supposed to just be a short leave, and we had to call your mother to find out you were gone indefinitely! You were surprised I was mad at Clark when you came back? Best friends don't do that, Kal-El. They don't just walk out of each other's lives without a goodbye." Unable to help herself, Lois felt tears prick her eyes, remembering the suddenly emptiness she had felt when Perry had told her. "*Clark* wouldn't have done that. Whether you realized it or not, that hurt me more than Superman abandoning me did. At the time, I had no memory of why the hero's absence should've hurt so much. Other than my silly crush, which is all I thought we had. But Clark ... you and I were so close. I don't think you ever realized how much I cared about you." She bit her lip, concentrating on the pressure to get herself together. She didn't need to be breaking down so soon, not with so much to tell. Taking a deep breath, she continued.

"And then, just as I got my mind around Clark being gone, Superman disappears. *That* should've been a big hint to the secret right there. You saved that woman in Paris, and that was it, nothing more heard from you until the Genesis launch six years later. God, Kal-El, the things that went through my mind... And then when Richard told me Clark was in Paris, when you confirmed it... I could've missed you by days. By *hours*. I wonder sometimes how things would be different if we'd met up in Paris while I was chasing your alter ego."

At that moment, the door opened after a short knock, and Nurse Tague came in with a pitcher of ice water and some cups. Thankfully, Lois had been speaking softly enough that no one could've heard her outside. Her throat still hurt from screaming at Luthor, and on the seaplane, and in the hospital, so she had to keep her hoarse voice low in the first place. "Here, Ms. Lane. I should've brought you this earlier, but we've had to update the general every hour. High-profile patient, you know."

"Thanks," Lois said. Her throat *was* dry, and she quickly poured herself a glass and sat down to drink. For a while, she drank silently, and Tague checked up on Superman again before leaving.

For a moment, they both just lay there in the stillness, Lois bracing herself for the most difficult part of the tale and the part he'd wanted to hear most. The only question was how to

tell it.

All over the city, people were trying to get back into their normal rhythms. For some, however, that meant taking advantage of the unsettled state of affairs. The press had pounced on the story, and every paper, from the smallest weekly local to the two biggest dailies, was trying to get the scoop on Superman.

Of course, some reporters had better connections than others. Toby Raines dialed a very familiar number, and couldn't help smiling at the gruff voice that answered, "Sawyer."

"Maggie, it's me," the *Daily Star* reporter said. "Listen, you got any inside info on Superman? The bullpen's going nuts over here."

An aggravated sigh whistled into the phone. "For the love of... Toby. No. We are *not* having this conversation. Again."

"C'mon, Mags, help me out here," Toby coaxed. She leaned back in her chair and stared out the shattered window. She could just see the *Daily Planet* building from here ... well, she would've seen it if the globe had still been on the roof. It didn't matter; she knew exactly where it was. And what they were doing, damn them. "Word on the street is the *Planet* has an eyewitness account. *And* that Olsen kid was *in* Centennial Park when Superman landed. I know you know something. You're not giving me an unfair advantage; you're just leveling the playing field..."

"Forget it," Sawyer replied sharply. Toby just grinned; so she *did* have something. "Listen, I know it's your job. I know you're the voice of the people; I know this is the first amendment; I know people have a right to know. But I've already been razzed about my connection to the press once today-"

"That little twit Smith got his knickers in a twist again over that nonsense at the firing range last week?" Toby interjected, but Maggie kept right on speaking.

"-and he's got a point, Toby. *No*. This is *my* job."

"Keeping people in the dark?"

"*Protecting* people. Especially Superman."

Silence on the line. No arguing with that statement. Toby watched the handful of staffers who had made it back into the building after the earthquakes. They were all doing exactly what she was doing: trying to wring information out of their sources. The only problem was, when it came to Superman, it didn't matter how well-connected you were. The *Planet* had the advantage every single time. They had the connection no one else did. Speaking of whom...

"Hey, Mags. Heard anything about Lois and the twins?"

"Dammit, Toby, you are *not* running a front-page story about the woman right after her kids got snatched!"

"Whoa there, Lieutenant," Toby retorted. "Remember, I was helping her! I'm asking for *me*, not the paper."

Another silence. "Promise me you'll leave the kids out of it, Toby."

"As long as I can," Toby said. "If everyone else jumps on it, I'll have to do damage control."

"Oh, like you did damage control over that press conference where she bit his head off?" Maggie asked. "The *Planet's* story of the day was the fire; *yours* was the woman scorned."

"Yes, well, I *had* to," Toby hissed. "I'm not in management like *she* is; I still have to take orders. Notice I never said anything about him kidnapping her for a little heart-to-heart, though, did I?"

"Yeah, gotta give you that," Maggie replied. "You only stab our friends in the back once per day."

"I let the exclusive slide, Mags! That's like ... that'd be like Lois telling the truth that time Superman helped land Air Force One! 'We've been out a couple of times' my foot, she'd just *met* him."

"*Fine*," Maggie said at last. "The kids are okay - a little quiet, but okay. Lois, last time I saw her, was pretty banged up... Actually, she looked like hell, but she was back to her old self."

That was enough to make Toby sit up. "Her old self? Pre- or post-engagement to the flyboy?"

"Circa the early Superman stories," Maggie said, and Toby could hear her smile.

"Holy... Well, *that's* good news, anyway. I was starting to worry about Stepford Lane. Not that I don't like what's-his-name..."

"Richard White."

"Yeah, him. Bloody nepotism in the newsroom. He's a decent guy, but... I'll have to see if I can run Lois down and yank her chain a bit, just for old times' sake."

"You won't reach her, she's in S.T.A.R. with him - oh, *shit*..."

"Thanks, hon," Toby said silkily.

"Goddammit, Toby Marie Raines, you tricked me! I swear, if you..."

But Toby was already replacing the receiver gently. "Hey, boys," she called out to the other reporters. "One of you find me some *other* way we figured out that Superman's in S.T.A.R. Labs, would ya? I've got a story to chase."

Her phone was already ringing again, and Toby picked it up as she swept her tape recorder into her purse. "Maggie, you know Lois would've done the exact same thing..."

"End-of-conversation-itis," Cat Grant chuckled. "This is me, Toby. And what exactly are you doing that our favorite fearless *Planet* editor would've done? Besides turn up at Metropolis General soaking wet and raving like a madwoman."

"None of your business, Cat," Toby shot back. "I've got to run."

"I'll be on camera before you go to print, Raines. Dish, and I'll credit you."

"Get your own sources, Grant," Toby told her.

"C'mon, gal reporters have to stick together," Cat wheedled.

"You're not a reporter, you're a *news anchor*," Toby hissed at her, grinning at the old argument. "Heavy, dull, and sinkin' to the bottom."

"Ouch, Raines. Almost sounds like you know how much of an anachronism print media is these days. Then again, I don't mind sinking considering what floats around here..."

"Say what you want, Lane and I have scooped you so much you may as well change your last name to Litter," Toby replied. "If it wasn't for the illiteracy rates in the inner city, you wouldn't have a job."

"Fine, Raines. Then I won't share info with you. I know where Lois and the kids are."

Toby had been about to hang up, but she paused and sat on the edge of her desk. "How'd you get that?"

"By sinking to the bottom of the story, Raines," Cat told her. "A source's son works in Metropolis General. Did you know hospitals have electricians on staff? He heard *your* lieutenant say they were taking Superman to S.T.A.R. Labs. Lois, the twins, and her mom went along for the ride. I'll bet Maggie's too principled to give you the lead, isn't she?"

"Thanks, Cat, I owe you," Toby said. "I guess you heard Lois is fine, then?"

"Cussing like a sailor and picking fights with hospital orderlies," Cat said. "Looks like we have our old competition back. But what do you have for me? Share and share alike, remember?"

"Nothing you didn't already know, but you saved me from having to hear another lecture from Maggie. See you at S.T.A.R.," Toby replied, and hung up. To rest of the newsroom she said, "Nevermind, got it covered. Mank, come with me," and headed out.

The electrician wasn't the only person at Metropolis General who had overheard the news about Superman, nor was he the only one who passed that information on. Within a few hours, word began to circulate around the city. Not just among journalists; people began turning up at the front entrance to S.T.A.R. Labs, the institution's public face. While police tried to keep them moving along, the citizens of Metropolis milled in the street. Waiting. Hoping. Praying. The news media, meanwhile, covered the crowd forming out front, and kept their own vigil.

The hours wore on and the sky above lightened. Lois' eyelids felt heavy, and weariness seemed to pulse through her bloodstream. At least now she'd gotten through the rollercoaster their relationship had been - from flirtatious friends to lovers to exes, and back again to friends with no memory of the rest on her part, in less than three days. Lois pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to stave off the headache that always came after tears. She'd shed a few of those so far, but not nearly as many as she would by the time the full story was told.

"I really do hope you can hear me," Lois said rustily. She took a sip of water and continued, "I'm going to feel like the world's biggest fool if I pour out my heart to you, tell you everything I've been afraid to say all this time, and you don't remember a word of it." She laughed in bittersweet amusement. "Kind of like old times, hmm? You told me everything back then, and for a long time I couldn't remember a bit of it. And when I did..."

On the verge of that melancholy memory, standing on the balcony and looking skyward with tears streaming down her face and the twins kicking lustily in her womb, Lois was given a reprieve from having to relive it all by a polite knock at the door. She looked up sharply, her fingers tightening on his, bracing herself for another interruption, this time maybe even Donner coming to return her to her own room. But somehow, she didn't think so. "Who is it?" she called out, her voice still strained.

The door burst open in answer, the twins scrambling toward her, crying her name in almost a panic. Ella was right behind them, muttering, "Kala! Jason! *Behave! This is a hospital!*"

Lois tried to sit up then, only then realizing how she must've looked resting her elbows on his bed, his hand entwined in hers. But the twins didn't care; their only concession to Ella's strict admonition so far had been to keep their voices down, whispering fervently as they hurried across the expanse of the room, "*Mommy!*"

Jason slowed down as he neared Superman's bedside, and his sister did the same. "We were scared," Jason said as they came to stop beside Lois' chair, very softly, eyeing all the creepy hospital equipment around Superman.

"You weren't there when we woke up," Kala added, then clambered into her mother's lap for a hug. Jason followed her example, making Lois suddenly thankful that the twins were a little small for their age as she shifted in the chair to allow for the three of them.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Lois murmured, pressing her lips to their hair, arms curling around them protectively. "I didn't want to leave Superman all by himself. At least you two had your Nana with you. After all he's been through, it didn't seem fair to do that."

Both twins turned to look somberly at him. "He's still sleepin'?" Kala asked, looking up at her mother, her brow furrowed.

"He's got to rest, baby," Lois told her gently. "What happened took a lot out of him. We need to use the lamps because that's how he gets his strength: from sunlight. You know, like the solar lights we have along the dock? They soak up the sun during the day so they can burn all night?" Both twins nodded, with a better understanding than she suspected. "Only he's never really needed to do this. But he used up all the strength he had to save us," she said softly, her worry bleeding into her expression for a moment. "Once his strength is back, he'll wake up." Lois made her voice sound certain.

"He's gonna get better, right?" Jason asked worriedly, perhaps hearing some trace of doubt in her tone. "I want him to." He and his sister both searched Superman's face, their frowns of concentration identical. "I like him," Jason whispered.

"Me, too," Kala added softly, her eyes never leaving Superman's face. "He's nice to us."

"It's going to be okay, you guys. He's been through worse. Your Daddy's going to be just fine," Lois soothed, holding them tighter to her even as she heard her mother's startled gasp from beside her chair. Looking up to Ella, she smiled reassuringly, "They know, Momma. The secret's out. Luthor told them who their father was."

"Nuh-uh," Jason replied, shaking his head. "Kala knew before that."

"Cuz girls are smarter," she said haughtily. Amazed, both Lois and Ella exchanged looks before Lois caught her chin and turned Kala to face her, a questioning look in her eyes. The raven-haired little girl merely blinked and said, "I heard you and Nana talking."

Ella sucked in her breath. The only time she and Lois had discussed that with the children anywhere nearby was that day they'd gone to the planetarium, right before the Pulitzer ceremony... "Honey, you heard us then and you didn't say anything to anyone for *three months?*"

"She told me," Jason piped up importantly.

"Yesterday," Kala shot back. "I mean, day-before-yesterday."

"Yeah, well, I-" Jason never finished his sentence, because Kala shot him an evil glare. He quickly changed gears and said instead, "I woulda known too if I could hear *everything*. Too bad I got stuck with bein' strong."

"Boys," Kala hissed contemptuously.

Lois and Ella just stared at the children and then at each other. They both knew Kala liked to be a know-it-all. That she had kept a secret of this magnitude for this long was nothing short of a miracle. *My God, if she had decided to end any of the schoolyard arguments over whose Dad was the best... But she didn't. Even if I did confirm it without knowing. And she didn't tell anyone.* Lois looked down into hazel eyes that were the mirror of her own, shaking her head slightly, the affection and wonder there clear from her tone. Unable to help herself, she gave a small smile of disbelief. "Kala, how...?"

Kala beamed up at her and shrugged, trying to look innocent and succeeding only in looking toothy. Lois chuckled, thinking, *I guess keeping secrets runs in this family.*

Ella cleared her throat. "Lois ... it's getting late. Well, it's getting *early*. I just spoke to Richard a few minutes ago, and he said the news of where Superman is being kept has already been leaked to the press. There's going to be a media circus around here before long."

Lois bit her lip on a curse, and the twins, sensing boring grown-up talk, slithered down out of her lap and peered over the edge of the hospital bed. "What are we going to do?" the raven-haired woman fretted to her mother. "The last thing we need is for..."

"We need to get them out of here," Ella said. Jason was watching Superman's face intently, while Kala slipped her small hand into his. Their grandmother continued, "The sooner the better. It's not safe for them, especially since they know. Richard can meet me outside with them, but it has to be soon or we won't be able to sneak them past the reporters."

Lois watched her children a moment, the respectful way they moved around Kal-El's bed. She knew the ways of reporters on a hot story and it really didn't come much hotter than this. They would be out and in force for this one, respectful or not. And she would know. The twins didn't need to be at the center of a press mob, didn't need flashbulbs going off and microphones thrust into their faces. She'd been trying to hide them from that their entire lives...

"You're right, Momma," Lois said softly, and pressed the call button. "Call Richard. I need to talk to General Unsworth and see what we can do about keeping the press under control. They'll be on this like vultures."

Ella could only smile sadly and rumple her daughter's hair.

Nurse Tage arrived within a few seconds of the call. Her gaze went first to her patient, but there was no discernable change. "Yes, Ms. Lane?"

"I need to speak with a commanding officer," Lois told her. "The media has gotten wind of where Superman is, and my children should get out of here before the press swamps us." She looked down at herself, and chuckled dryly. "I'd also like to get my clothes back, if I can. Or *some* clothes. This hospital gown isn't very comfortable."

"We can manage that," Tage said confidently. She left the room, and Lois stood up, wincing a little. The chair was making her back stiff...

For a moment, her attention was off the twins. Jason and Kala stood beside their father's bed, watching him seriously. Jason's mind was still spinning with all the recent revelations, and now he was also worried about Superman. Why hadn't he woken up yet? He'd been asleep for a long time...

Kala scowled. She had grown accustomed to the notion of Superman as Daddy, so worry was stronger in her. It felt like *forever* since Superman had taken them both up into the sky. He'd been strong and awake then, and now he stayed asleep. It scared Mommy ... and that scared Kala. She tried to distract herself by looking at Mommy. "Are we goin' home?"

"Yes, sweetheart," Lois told her.

"Can Superman come home with us?"

Lois had to stifle a chuckle. "No, Kala, he has to stay here until he's better. I'm sure he'll come visit us when he gets out of the hospital."

"Promise?" Jason asked.

"Of course he will," Lois replied. Nurse Tage returning with her clothes saved Lois from having to promise on the uncertain future, or explain to the twins that she would be staying with Superman while they went home. She wasn't looking forward to *that*. Thanking Tage, Lois went into the bathroom to change.

Both twins looked up at the nurse curiously as she tucked the blankets around Superman and adjusted his oxygen line. They had to step back to let her work, and Jason noticed Superman's suit neatly folded on a chair in the corner. He wandered over to touch it, reverently running his fingers over the S-shield. Kala stayed by her father, moving only as much as Tage needed her to.

While Lois got dressed, General Unsworth knocked at the door. Ella went outside to speak with him, and a few minutes later Lois came out of the bathroom to see Kala looking at the wall with a curious scowl. Her questions were forestalled by Ella coming back in and

telling her, "Joffrey says the media is already here. I'm going to call Richard back - he said he could get here anytime - and Joffrey's going to get his men and the police to distract the reporters. We'll go out the front."

"Momma?" Lois said questioningly.

"They've had police out front for crowd control for an hour," Ella said. "Once they start cordoning off the garage we came in, all the reporters will head over there. We can get down the front steps relatively unbothered."

"They won't all leave," Lois said direly. "I know I wouldn't have - I'd have someone on both exits from the moment I realized he was here."

"No, but most of them will. And the ones that are left will have to deal with civilians and cops. Nurse Tage, may I use the phone at the nurses' station again?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Lane," Tage said. They left together, Lois hanging back a moment.

"Kala, Jason," she called softly, her heart contracting at the sight of them. She went to get Jason, who scampered back to Superman's bedside and hopped up long enough to kiss his father's brow.

Not to be outdone, Kala scrambled onto the bed and hugged him, whispering in his ear, "Get better, Daddy," and kissing his cheek. Only then would they follow Lois out into the hallway.

Another impromptu shrine of flowers, cards, and letters had grown up on the sidewalk across from the front doors of S.T.A.R. Labs, twice the size of the one at Centennial Park. It was just dawn, but the street was filled with people, many of them carrying hand-lettered signs.

The weather was cold and damp, and most people huddled inside their jackets and coats. Several people had brought thermoses of coffee, and the hot beverage was being shared around equally. The attitude of the crowd was somber and reverent, and they all moved along for a little distance when the police asked them to.

Reporters were another story. The media was hot on the trail of a story, and representatives of the fourth estate paced tensely, eyeing the doors. Some young buck from the tabloids looked at his fellows, and his brow wrinkled. "Hey, who's here from the *Planet*? Biggest story in town and they didn't send anybody?"

"Twit," Toby Raines growled as she walked by, keeping her collar turned up so that none of the police officers would recognize her. "This's *Superman*. Of course they have someone."

Another reporter added, "Rumor is Lane's inside with him." Neither of them heard Raines swear under her breath - not even *that* was an exclusive anymore.

On the other side of the street, Martha Kent and Lana Lang stood in the lee of a bus shelter, sipping coffee and listening to the crowd murmur about Superman's bravery. In spite of having dozens - hundreds - of people around them, they both felt acutely alone in their knowledge. Only they were keeping vigil for more than a hero.

"Oh, no," Lois muttered, staring out the mirrored-glass front doors. The crowd outside was bigger than she would've thought - but fortunately, there weren't many reporters in it. She was waiting for Richard's car, the twins each holding one of her hands. Ella and General Unsworth were surveying the crowd as well, the general looking distinctly displeased.

"You're staying, Ms. Lane?" he asked, turning to look at her.

"Yes," Lois said, and the twins turned to look at her. She tried to smile brightly at them as she said, "I'll walk you to the car, sweethearts, but Mommy has to stay with Superman and

make sure he's okay. All right?" The mere thought of them not being nearby where she could see them tore at her, but it had to be done. The sooner they were away from here, the better. She didn't want the military to get a hint of their heritage, and their fondness for Superman could only be explained as gratitude for so long. "As soon as he wakes up, I'll come home. It won't be long."

"But Mommy..." Kala started to whimper. "We miss you. I don't wanna go home without you!" Jason simply tightened his hand in hers, those blue eyes troubled.

Lois stroked Kala's hair and squeezed Jason's hand reassuringly. "Baby, I'll be home soon. You two need to go with Nana and Daddy and get your rest, okay? I don't want you getting sick too."

Mommy-logic was mostly infallible, but the twins tried for outright denial. "We won't," they said in unison, giving her their saddest looks.

"C'mon, Jason, Kala," Ella said gently. "Don't make this any harder on Mommy. Daddy and Uncle Perry and I will be there, and it will just be until Superman wakes up." The pouting scowls she received told her that twins would accept it, but they didn't have to *like* it.

A few moments passed in silence before Lois saw Richard's Saab nose its way along the crowded street and come to a halt directly opposite the doors. It almost seemed accidental, as if he was merely pausing in traffic and the cops simply hadn't chased him away yet. The soldiers in uniform standing at parade-rest on the steps didn't appear to notice Richard, either. *Finally*, Lois thought. Taking a deep breath, she squeezed the twins' hands. "Okay, let's go."

Ella saw the look in Lois' eyes, and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Joffrey, I'll see you later, when all of this has died down. Thank you so much for all you've done."

He shook her hand gravely and replied, "It's a pleasure, Elinore. Be safe."

Jason craned his head back to look up at the general in his dress uniform, and said quietly, "Bye."

"Take care, son," Joffrey said. Then he nodded to the two soldiers standing by the doors, and they opened them for the Lanes.

"I'll be right back," Lois said to General Unsworth, and then headed out, bracing herself.

At first it seemed all right. The crowd looked at her, but no one recognized her right away, and the steps had been kept clear for the exit. Richard had gotten out and opened the doors, and for one moment Lois was looking up, startled by the size of the crowd and trying to catch Richard's gaze. An enterprising photographer could've gotten a clear shot of her then, but only one was in place to do it.

The *Daily Star's* photographer Mankiewicz recognized Lois Lane immediately. He was only around the front of the building because Toby Raines was hiding from Lieutenant Sawyer, who was one of the officers cordoning off the rear entrance to the facility. Mank started to raise his camera, framing that shot in his mind...

...and Toby grabbed his arm. "Not the kids," she hissed.

"But Toby, the shot," he began, and she shook her head sharply.

"Not the kids, Mank. *Leave them out of it.* We're not the *Inquirer.*" A second later, it was too late; Lois dropped her gaze, letting her hair obscure her face.

The twins, of course, were amazed by the crowd. They'd hesitated only a moment as they started down the steps, but with Mommy and Nana beside them they had the courage to look all around them curiously. Jason spotted a flash of red hair across the street, and elbowed his sister. Both children grinned to see Miss Lana, especially when she raised her hand in a slight wave. Kala and Jason both copied the gesture, wondering who the older lady beside Lana was,

and why she was watching them so intently.

They made it to the car without incident, Richard hugging the twins as he helped them into the back seat. There had been a few flashbulbs going off as they descended, mostly from camera phones in the crowd, but the reporters were only just beginning to realize what was going on. More cameras captured Ella getting into the front seat, and Lois kissing both twins and hugging Richard quickly. She ignored the swarming press long enough to kiss his cheek and whisper into his ear, "I'm staying - get out as fast as you can. They'll mob the car if you don't."

"I know," he whispered back. "Is he...?"

"Stable, but still asleep," she said. "Lana?"

"Somewhere out there," Richard said. "With... with Clark's mom."

Lois took a startled step backward. *Clark's mother? The silver-haired little old lady from Kansas? How on earth...?* But Lois quickly gathered her wits; as far as she knew, she had to maintain the fiction. "Any news on Clark?"

Richard blinked at her for a second. This wasn't the place or time to explain, reporters shouldering their way through the crowd toward them. "Not yet. I'm sure he'll turn up. Go, before they swamp you."

Lois nodded, and by the time Richard got back to the driver's side she had already turned her back. Now her fellow reporters had found her, and flashbulbs popped constantly, microphones thrust in her direction. Uniformed soldiers on the steps kept the press far enough away that Lois was able to walk back up to the doors freely, but everyone was firing questions at her.

"Lois Lane, any news on Superman?"

"Miss Lane, is Superman awake yet?"

"When is he expected to recover?"

"This way, Miss Lane!" a photographer called, but Lois kept her head stubbornly down. Lana's coat and her own long hair obscured her enough that the photos they were taking would barely be printable.

"Miss Lane, are you still in love with him?" someone yelled, and Lois' back stiffened, but she kept walking. *Only a few more steps.*

"Is he still in love with you?" someone else called, and Lois was glad that her expression was hidden. She marched stoically to the doors, never turning toward any of them.

"Lois! Hey, Lois!" Toby and Mank were near the top of the steps, and the *Daily Star* reporter knew she had to try for a decent shot of Lois to make up for passing on the photo of the twins. Hating herself for it, she whistled piercingly, and then yelled, "*Lois Joanne Lane!*"

Almost at the doors, Lois froze, and she started to turn. But she recognized the voice, and instead of whipping around for a perfect shot, she merely called back, "I'm not turning around, Raines! Get over it!"

Toby bit her lip and called back, "You'd have done it to me!" as Lois disappeared inside. She could just barely see Lois turn and glare furiously at her through the crack in the closing door.

Martha let out a sigh, and Lana turned to smile at her. "Well, that's Jason and Kala," she said quietly. "And the black-haired woman in my coat was Lois. The other woman with them was Lois' mother, Elinore Lane."

The older woman's eyes were distant and thoughtful. Her grandchildren... her son's lover.

She'd never seen Lois in person before today, and never seen the twins at all. Amazing, how much of Clark she could see in both children, even at this distance. That amazingly black hair on the little girl, so like Clark's. And the boy's quick smile, his expression so sunny even in the midst of all of this strangeness. *They're definitely his. I don't need Clark to confirm it, there's no way they could be anyone else's. They even move like him...*

It was almost like seeing Clark as a little boy again, bringing back a flood of memories. She had worried over him so much when he was little, always terrified that someone from the government would find out about him and take him from her. Apparently Lois had the same fear. Martha read it in the way she'd kissed the twins as they got into the car, the way she'd tried to hide them coming down the steps. Her love for them, and her maternal protectiveness, was very clear. Though Martha couldn't completely relax until she saw her son healthy and whole again, seeing his children eased her heart.

"And Jason does have Clark's blue eyes," Lana murmured. That finally brought a smile to Martha's lips.

Somebody Else's Life

Lois fought to control her temper, pausing just inside the doors to take several deep breaths. Toby had a point; this was the job, and if Raines was caught up in something newsworthy, Lois would've been angling for an interview. It just ... irritated her to no end. Among other things.

Shaking her shoulders lightly, as if brushing off all of the questions from the crowd, Lois headed back down the hallway to the elevators. No one challenged her; apparently General Unsworth had given her clearance before he'd left again. That was just as well, since the reporter was in no mood to cope with bureaucratic red tape at the moment.

The two soldiers on duty outside Kal-El's door nodded to Lois as she went inside. She'd been hoping to find him awake, even though that would mean she missed his return to consciousness. But no such luck. However, Nurse Tage was in the room. She'd folded down the blankets covering him and was checking his wounds, changing the bandages, and examining her patient thoroughly.

The first thing that struck Lois was the sight of his bare chest, the planes of his muscles achingly familiar. That triggered a flashback, to one of the first memories she'd gotten back. Lying cuddled against his side, her hand resting possessively on his chest, his arm around her shoulders. Opening one eye long enough to make sure it was real, and to see the sleepy and *very* satisfied smile on his lips. For so long Lois had thought that moment was a dream, a fantasy, in spite of its sharp details.

She must have sighed, because Tage looked up and gave her a slight sheepish grin. "He's healing very quickly, Miss Lane," she said, and started to cover him again.

"Wait," Lois said, and the nurse's eyebrows rose slightly. Lois looked up at the skylight, seeing the dawn streaming in. "Let the sun hit his skin. He can't get sunburned, and the blanket might be interfering."

"Good call," Tage said. "I suppose with the sun coming in, we can turn off these lamps. They're putting out more heat than I really feel comfortable with."

Lois nodded agreement, and waited as Tage called Dr. Donner. They briefly consulted, and Lois grinned a bit when Tage replied to one of his questions with, "Miss Lane agrees." It was nice to be consulted, to have her knowledge valued.

In a few minutes, the sunlamps were moved away, and the brightening daylight poured down on Kal-El's chest. His heart rhythm was definitely stronger, though he showed no signs of waking. Tage left to bring Dr. Donner the encouraging news, and once she was gone, Lois sat down on the edge of the bed.

"If I'm going to talk about this part," she murmured softly, looking down at his handsome face, "I want to be close to you, as stupid as it's going to make me feel to do this." For a long moment Lois just watched him, and then cautiously placed her palm against his chest. The rhythm of his breathing didn't change at her touch; it was Lois who inhaled sharply, and then let that breath out with a sigh.

"The memories. As far as I knew when you left, we hadn't even kissed. I started having dreams..." She trailed off with a chuckle. "Well, maybe you won't remember this, so I'll say it even though it's stupid and romantic and embarrassing. Ever since that interview, I *always* dreamed about you. About what it might be like, between us, if we... Yeah. That's supposed to be the *guy's* line. 'I dreamed of you.' Sounds so corny... or maybe a little bit shallow. Obsessive, too. But it's true; I did have those kinds of dreams. The reality was far beyond them, though..."

Lois got a little lost in her memories, her hazel eyes looking into the past. He had been the only man she pursued, the only one who completely undid her façade of sophisticated cynicism. The only one to turn her into a blushing, stuttering romantic the way he did at that first interview. And those three momentous days, which had been lost to her for so long...

"I can't believe I'm discussing this," Lois said, bringing herself back to the present. "Anyway. Let's start over again. When everybody at the *Planet* figured out I had amnesia, Perry sent me to that psychiatrist who said I was hostile. He wound up tentatively diagnosing me with post-traumatic stress disorder. I can't blame him - I was pretty anxious about losing three whole days, I had the insomnia, and after a while I started showing depression, too. Textbook symptoms. The only thing I lacked was the fear, and I guess that got chalked up to disassociation.

"He figured that something terrible must've happened to me during those three days to make me forget, and he wasn't the only one - Perry had his suspicions, too. What no one would say to me was what they thought could've happened to traumatize me that badly. The shrink wanted me to figure it out on my own, without pressuring me into a breakthrough. Perry ... Perry must've guessed, but I don't think he could admit to himself.

"You never heard about this part, Kal-El. In either guise. When my amnesia went on for so long, pretty much everyone involved in the case looked at the facts and drew a conclusion. I'd been kidnapped by three men, all of whom it turned out had just been in prison. Sure, they had Ursa with them. But she was one of them, and I was the outsider, the captive. I was also *yours*, and they all hated you. It's very logical."

Her voice dropped again. "No one would say it to me, but they thought I'd been raped. Possibly by all three of them. I couldn't remember anything - I could only remember arriving in Niagara. The rest was gone. Zod was questioned in prison, and he denied it. Loudly - Jor-El wasn't the only one who thought of us humans as lesser creatures. Non, well, he just looked confused at them. But Luthor, that son of a bitch... Luthor never denied raping me. Never confirmed it, either, just smiled and insisted he have a lawyer present for *all* questioning. Bastard. I should've put a bullet into him at the damn trial..."

Lois forced herself off of that train of thought. "Anyway, I found all that out later. I'd started getting flashes of memory back, little things. Almost falling while Non was carrying me, that was one of them. Trying to come to Perry's defense and nearly breaking my hand on Ursa's jaw. I knew all three of them on sight, knew their names, recognized their voices - I just couldn't remember how I knew.

"I didn't let being in therapy stop me from chasing the story when you left, though. And I never told the shrink about the *other* memories that were coming back, the ones I thought we just silly little fantasies. Daydreams. I'd heard enough from Elliot the last time he and I broke up, when he read that headline of Perry's. I didn't need another lecture on why women fantasize about Superman, or what flying symbolizes according to Freud. So I hid that, too, even though those daydreams were so *real*. Flying over a snowy landscape; watching you pour champagne; kissing your hand. Even the gunshot, but I couldn't remember when or why. No details in any of it, no context. Just the images.

"It got worse once I found out I was pregnant. *Then* the headshrinkers, the one back in Metropolis and the guy I was seeing in France, decided to tell me about their suspicions. From the first, I didn't believe them. Even though the idea that I'd been raped made a lot of sense, I knew it hadn't happened. I was going crazy, trying to figure out how I'd ended up pregnant when... Well, this is embarrassing, too, but I hadn't been sleeping with anyone since I met you.

There was one more time with Elliot, right after the interview. After that ... there was no one else.

"Well, luckily, the doctors soon decided I wasn't far enough along for the twins to have been conceived during the missing three days. I wasn't even showing yet; blood tests revealed the pregnancy. Just so you know - this might be useful to you at some point - the gestation for Kryptonian-human hybrid twins is about eleven months. Give or take. Anyway, I started spinning the cover story about the one-weekend stand then, to explain how I'd gotten pregnant. I was lying to my therapist and wracking my own brain all the time, trying to remember. I *knew* I had to protect my child - didn't find out they were twins until later - I knew this pregnancy was special. That feeling kept me from doing anything drastic, even though I hated being pregnant, hated the idea of becoming a mother.

"It never even entered my head that you were the father." Lois paused, her eyes going unfocused. "As far as I knew, we were just flirty friends. *I* wanted more, but I didn't know *you* did. And the flashes of memory I was getting just seemed like fantasies. Until that one time I woke up, remembering how you woke me up that morning in the Fortress..." Lois' voice trailed off, shivering at the memory.

"I had never dreamed *that* before. It was so clear - every sense perfect. That started to give me the idea that something might have happened between us. It was just too surreal." Lois' expression clouded over, her eyes gone dark. "That was the worst time. Doctors trying to push me for information, my belly starting to show, random little flashes of memory coming back. Including a few things about Clark. You bringing me that bouquet in Niagara. Bloody pansies... And flashing my legs at you, which was a little racier than I usually was with Clark. Holding the *gun* on you, now *that* was weird as hell. I thought I was going crazy."

Looking around guiltily, Lois gave in to her desire to get closer than she currently was. She needed his nearness painfully at this point in the tale, a constant reminder that he was next to her. Carefully, she maneuvered her way into the bed until she could lay back beside him, holding his hand. "Kal-El... It was driving me up a wall, all the things I knew without knowing why or how. I spent a lot of time crying in the bathroom at the *Quotidienne*. Which was also just wonderful - I heard enough whispers in Paris about how Superman had only been gone a couple months, and his girlfriend was pregnant with someone else's kid. I couldn't go home - Metropolis would've crucified me in print for that. People *still* speculate about just what happened back then. I couldn't face that, not knowing myself what had happened, so I was stuck in Paris."

Lois sighed. "My therapist taught me this trick for dealing with repressed memories. It has to do with moving your eyes side to side while trying to think about the thing you've forgotten. I was using that, on my own, to try and get at enough memories to finally make some kind of sense. One night I was in the tub, soaking, trying not to look at my belly, and I started doing the eye movements. I was half-mad from frustration and pregnancy hormones... God, I was a terror then, my mood swings had half of the *Quotidienne* staff fleeing in terror. And I'd just been on another crying jag. Anything that might stop it would help, even if it brought on a nervous breakdown.

"I decided to focus in on the memories of Clark, since that was the most realistic and the least threatening. I remembered you coming into my office after everything was over; I remembered feeling tears on my face. That was strange enough, me crying at work. Then the pain, the emotional agony. And then seeing you take the glasses off... I realized then who you were. *All* of who you were.

"The shock - Clark and Superman, the same person. It made so damn much sense, and the déjà vu, feeling *exactly* the same way as the moment when I'd first found out, knocked me into total recall. I felt that kiss in my office all over again, and then my mind warped back to that first reveal in the hotel room. I heard the gunshot, and saw you straightening up, staring at me. I sat up in shock and awe, experiencing that moment all over again right there in the bathtub.

"The water got cold while I relived those three days. Every moment, complete sensory recall, Kal-El. The flight to the Fortress, the taste of the champagne, the spike of terror when the hologram of your father turned that savage glare on me. And after ... oh, God, after. That night was like nothing in my experience, like nothing I'd ever dreamed of having. Every idiotic romantic fantasy I'd mocked myself for having came true; the unstoppable Mad Dog Lane had fallen in love and couldn't deny it any longer.

"And then the next day, the diner, attacking that greasy trucker who beat you up. Seeing the news. The way you refused to talk to me in the hotel room that night, lying in bed with my back to you and trying not to cry. I felt so *guilty*, Kal-El. I felt like Jor-El was right, I'd ruined you. And you wouldn't even let me *help*."

Her voice caught on a sob, remembering. He had even shied away from her touch then, refusing what comfort she could give, closing himself off from her. The years had given Lois the perspective to realize that Kal-El had been ashamed of himself, and felt undeserving of comfort. Undeserving of *her*. He just hadn't realized how badly he'd hurt her then.

Lois turned to snuggle up against his side, her hand on his bare chest, feeling the slow rhythm of his heart. Déjà vu of the sweetest kind. Her tears came freely as she whispered, "Then you were gone the next morning, no note, nothing. You had no powers, it was freezing, we were in the middle of nowhere... I thought I'd lost you. I thought you were going to die out there in the snow. Kal-El, after all we'd had, I didn't want it to end like that..."

"And seeing you again, with your powers, fighting Zod and his little gang. I was so grateful, so glad to see you alive, and scared to death all at the same time. They had *your* powers, and there were three of them... In the Fortress again, that bitch Ursa hanging onto my throat, thinking it was all over. Thinking they were going to kill me anyway as soon as they got done humiliating you. Nothing in my life hurt so much as watching you kneel in front of that sick bastard Zod - and knowing it was *all my fault*."

Lois mastered herself, rubbing her eyes. "All of that came back to me, as real and immediate as if it were happening again. I got the wonder, the love, the pain, and the terror. And then the astonishment when you trounced Zod. I loved that moment, Kal-El. Seeing you triumphant again, God, my heart just *leaped*. I was so delighted I had to knock Ursa out just to express my happiness." Lois chuckled for a moment, but it quickly turned to sniffing again.

"Of course, it couldn't last. Outside the Fortress, and on my balcony. We tried to be so reasonable. I couldn't fight to stay with you, I couldn't argue with the conclusion you'd come to, because I believed Jor-El, too. I believed it was *my* selfishness that almost doomed the whole world. And then the memories brought me right back to my office, to you telling me you liked worrying about me, and me breaking down like a fool. And the last thing I remembered was you telling me 'One day you'll...' One day I'd meet someone. Oh, Kal-El, I could never meet anyone who'd replace you."

Hugging him impulsively, Lois bit her lip. In a husky whisper, she told him, "I really did have a nervous breakdown when I remembered it all. I cried like a hysterical little girl, cried for everything I'd lost - lost twice over, since I'd lost the memories, too. Cried for your child who would never know you. I didn't think you'd come back; I'd heard about Krypton by then. I

thought you would find your own people, and I'd be left behind. Forever."

For long moments, Lois just lay beside him, cuddled close while the sun bathed Kal-El's body. If anything, her life had gotten *more* unbearable once she discovered the truth. Not knowing had driven her crazy with frustration, but knowing what she'd lost - *exactly* what she'd lost - had been worse. Lois didn't tell him that, however. When she spoke again, her voice was still low, but she'd finished with tears for the moment.

"All I could do was pick up the pieces and try to keep moving along. I never wanted to be a mother; I was terrified of the prospect. But they were *your* children. What else could I do? I couldn't give them up, no matter how scared I was. They were all I had left of you... Not to mention, it wouldn't be fair to adopt the super-babies out to some poor unsuspecting couple.

"I was six months pregnant before I told anyone back home. Calling Mom was the hardest. Bless her, she immediately wanted to come to Paris to be with me. Well, no - she wanted me to come home, and I wouldn't do it. The next best thing was for her to come to France. And Lucy was ready to come right along with her, too. If it hadn't been for Little Sam and Nora, I think my baby sister would've been here the whole time.

"Lucy had some choice words for me, though, about slipping up and getting myself pregnant so soon after you'd left. We only argued about it once; she called me out about cheating on you, in very unflattering terms, and she asked me rather abruptly what I was going to say to you when you came back. That was enough to break me down crying, which Lucy had *never* done to me before. She never said another word about it...

"By the end of my term, I was *huge*. Lucy and Mom had both come to Paris, and Perry was calling practically every day to make sure I was all right. Jimmy was always in the background, too. I must've drunk my weight in orange juice, trying to balance out the Belgian chocolate I craved... Speaking of cravings, I'll have you know I quit smoking - cold turkey - the moment I found out I was expecting. Good God, that was *awful*. Morning sickness and nicotine withdrawal do *not* cancel each other out. That's two things I can never completely enjoy again, courtesy of you: cigarettes and orange juice. I always feel guilty about the one, and the other makes me nauseous just thinking about it. I craved something in the juice while I was pregnant, but since then ... bleah."

Lois shivered a little, just thinking of it. Ella had pressed it on her, wanting her to take her vitamins and drink juice and God knows what else she had managed to swallow down. Especially when the doctors had deemed that the twins were underweight. Only now she understood that they hadn't been. Just two months behind an ordinary human child's development. "I refused to go to Lamaze classes," she continued, "because I had Mom and Lucy. So when I went into false labor in a board meeting at the *Quotidienne*, I panicked. The doctors put me on bed rest, which I *loathed*. Two weeks of nothing but going out of my mind with boredom and anxiety. Mom and Lucy kept trying to get me excited about it; they wanted to buy baby clothes and talk about my ultrasound, which I refused to even hear the results of. Mom knew that the twins were a boy and a girl; I didn't want to know. Serious ostrich-syndrome; if I kept my head in the sand long enough, maybe the problem would go away by itself and I wouldn't have to deal with it.

"I kept thinking like that right up until I went into labor. If I'd panicked at false labor, I was *hysterical* when I realized it was the real thing. Not only was it painful - by the time I got to the hospital it was too late for an epidural - but I had no idea what the twins would look like, if they'd be born with powers ... or even if I'd survive giving birth to them. And no one else knew what I was going through. I kept it all a secret, but I left enough hints in my will for Mom

to figure it out if something happened to me. I think I stayed just calm enough for neither of them to realize that was actually happening." The tears had come again, her thoughts of that day so extreme. She could see the moment so clearly; the first time she had seen their children.

Picking up his hand, Lois kissed the back of his knuckles, imagining for a moment that she felt some slight response, some minute tension in his fingers that hadn't been there before. After a few moments, she decided it was just that: imagination. Her voice was thick with emotion when she murmured, "Everything changed once they were born, Kal-El. My God, they were beautiful. Well," she paused to laugh, "They were once they got them cleaned up. Jason was first; Kala came only a minute and half after him. Before I knew it, he was in my arms, peering up at me with those big blue eyes so much like yours. Except for the one cry to prove he was breathing, he was absolutely quiet, watching me intently, looking around curiously. I fell in love at first sight. Even harder than I fell for you. Still didn't know a damn thing about being a mom, but right then I knew I'd kill or die for him, that he was *mine* in a way nothing else had even been, and that was enough."

"And then Kala. As soon as they got her out, she wailed like a fire engine. Screamed the whole time they cleaned her off, but as soon as they got her wrapped up she quit just long enough for them to hand her to me, too. I had just gotten slightly used to the one looking up at me and then there was another. And then I felt it again. I loved her from the first look, your black hair and back then, your blue eyes. I had one twin in each arm, and Kala started to hitch like she was going to start howling again, but then she decided to nap first." Smiling fondly, the pain of grief lost in the delight of remembering how quickly she'd grown to love the twins, Lois began to tell him about their childhood.

"Hmm," Dr. Donner said, his eyes going distant. He rubbed at his silver-streaked beard as he often did when deep in thought, and Tage waited patiently. They were standing by the nurses' station, looking over their most illustrious patient's chart.

"It won't be easy to convince General Unsworth," the doctor said at last. "But I think you're right. We're seeing a steady increase in his EEG waves since dawn. Opening the skylight might do the trick."

"That glass is designed to keep out UV rays," Tage observed. "I think the general will agree to open it if *you* ask him. There's nothing he wants more than to see Superman healed, right?"

"Oh, absolutely," Donner agreed. "He's been willing to pull out all the stops on this case, reassigning personnel, the works. He even ordered the surveillance equipment turned off when Ms. Lane woke up and went into the room."

"That's ... kind of him," Tage said.

The doctor chuckled. "She's a reporter *and* Sam Lane's daughter. If we'd left a bug or a camera in that room, she'd find it. General Unsworth doesn't want her disturbed." Donner shrugged and tucked the files under his arm. "I'll go ask him about opening the skylight. He'll want to station soldiers on the roof and make this a no-fly zone first, so it might take a while, but I'm pretty certain we can do this. Thank you, Tage."

"You're welcome, Dr. Donner," Tage replied. "It was Ms. Lane who gave me the idea. When she mentioned that the blanket might be blocking the sun's rays, I thought of the glass, too."

Lois' reminiscence was cut off several hours later by a knock at the door. She scrambled

upright to again sit on the side of his bed, smoothed her blouse, and called, "Come in," expecting Tage or Dr. Donner.

Much to her surprise, Lieutenant Sawyer walked in, followed by a uniformed soldier who took up a stance at the door. Maggie didn't say anything at first; her eyes went to Superman, and Lois saw the exhaustion and worry etched there. "Is he any better?" Sawyer asked.

"A little," Lois replied quietly. "We just don't know too much." Something was off, she could sense it. Maggie confirmed that impression by walking around the room slowly before speaking again.

"Lois ... we need you to give a statement about what happened on the yacht." Her voice was unusually low, and she didn't meet Lois' eyes when she spoke.

The black-haired woman frowned a little; Sawyer was tense and standoffish, like she had never been around Lois. Well, not since the beginning of their friendship, when the cop hadn't known if she could trust the reporter. "Maggie, I'd be more than willing to tell you what happened," Lois said.

Sawyer shook her head slightly. "I can't take your statement here, Lois. I can't take it at all... Anyway, I need you to come to the precinct."

"What? Maggie..." Lois let the sentence trail off, aware of their company. The anonymous soldier might appear to be gazing off into the middle distance, but he was certainly listening to every word.

Maggie was even less inclined to elaborate. Her gaze flicked from the soldier, to Lois, to Superman, and back to Lois. "It's important, Lois, trust me. I just... Come down to the precinct."

Even if Lois hadn't been a reporter, with finely-honed journalistic instincts to tell her when someone was hiding something, she would've known Maggie was holding out. Being less than forthright wasn't in the lieutenant's nature, and she was clearly uncomfortable with whatever she was concealing. Lois' nerves were frayed to the breaking point by everything she'd endured, Kal-El's condition, and her own recent examination of the most tumultuous period of her life. One of her closest friends keeping a secret from her - and keeping it badly - was more than she could take.

"Goddammit, Maggie, I will *not* take one step from here until you tell me what the hell is going on," she hissed furiously, rising from Kal-El's bedside and stalking toward Maggie. "I have dealt with enough bullshit the past few days; I don't need any more from you! My kids have been kidnapped, I've almost been killed, and *he's* in a coma. Don't you realize I just *can't* anymore? I've had enough! And I *will not leave him*, do you hear me? I won't!"

Strong hands grabbed hers, and eyes as blue as arctic ice bored into her own, finally silencing Lois' tirade. Meeting that look, Lois finally realized what was wrong with Sawyer: she was terrified.

Saying Goodbye

"Lois," Maggie said softly, still holding both her hands and her gaze. "Come with me. Please."

It was the 'please' that worked. Lois and Maggie weren't in the habit of asking much from each other. Sawyer was sworn to uphold the law, and Lois was inclined to break it on occasion in pursuit of truth; it was better if they didn't ask for favors. They had volunteered plenty for each other in the past, but the unspoken rule of their friendship was 'ask nothing'. Whatever Sawyer's reason for asking her to leave, it was both important enough to break that rule and frightening enough to have spooked Maggie. *Maggie*, one of the bravest women Lois knew, the only person who had ever ridden shotgun in Lois' car without clutching the doorframe in panic.

"All right," Lois said softly. The decision tore her heart out, and she turned to look at Kal-El. He still slumbered, unaware of their arguing, perhaps unaware of everything she'd told him. Lois didn't know whether to hope he'd heard her or not.

Maggie released her, and Lois turned away, walking to Kal-El's bedside. "I have to go," she murmured. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Hold on, Kal-El. Don't leave us again." She cut a defiant look at the soldier and at Maggie, hating the fact that this parting would have witnesses. Then Lois thought, *The hell with it*. She bent and kissed his cheek, whispering into his ear, "I love you, I've always loved you, I always will love you. Your twins need you. *I need you*. You have to come back, Kal-El."

It wasn't enough. Mere words couldn't express her feelings, the love and fear that twined together in her chest until her very heart felt muffled. Lois closed her eyes and kissed his mouth, softly, letting the press of her lips and the tear trickling down onto his face speak for her.

She pulled back, and glanced at the heart monitor hopefully. No change, and Lois felt like an idiot. *This isn't Sleeping Beauty, you moron; it's a damn coma*. Sighing, she said quietly, "It's not 'goodbye'. It's 'see you later'." With those words and a final squeeze of his hand, she turned from Kal-El and followed Maggie out of the room.

The soldier, still unnamed, escorted them silently to the rear entrance of the building. Lois felt her stomach get queasy at the idea of facing that pack of rabid reporters again, but at least she'd gotten the twins out with a minimum of fuss. She was already squaring her shoulders for the inevitable confrontation with her fellow journalists when Maggie asked, apropos of nothing, "You armed, Lois?"

It seemed an odd thing to ask as they approached the doors. Lois looked at her askance and replied, "No. Luthor took my damn gun, the sonofabitch."

Maggie turned sharply to look at her, a brief burst of triumphant elation on her face, and then she cut the expression off with difficulty. "Ah. Well. That's... that's a shame." They were at the door, and there was no time to elaborate. The soldier opened it for them both, and Lois saw to her relief that Sawyer's patrol car was parked right outside, only feet away.

Unfortunately, every reporter in Metropolis was packed into the tight space, trying to edge past the soldiers standing guard around the car. Flashbulbs instantly blinded Lois, and she had to rely on Maggie's hand on her elbow to guide her to the car. The noise was deafening in the enclosed garage, everyone trying to get Lois' attention, bellowing questions. *For the love of God, it's more peaceful at the zoo during alligator-feeding time!*

Maggie helped Lois into the front seat and closed the door, cutting off the worst of the noise. She went around to the driver's side and raised her hands for silence, getting it after a

moment. A forest of microphones turned toward her as she said, loudly and clearly, "Superman remains unconscious but in stable condition. Ms. Lane has graciously volunteered to assist us with our investigation of the incidents aboard the *Gertrude*." With that, she got into the car and quickly shut her door.

Not quickly enough to escape Toby Raines' incredulous shout of "Two sentences? *Two sentences?! You call that an update, Sawyer?*"

Maggie growled a few choice words under her breath as she carefully maneuvered the patrol car out of the garage. Photographers kept trying to get in front of it for a clearer shot, and the lieutenant murmured, "I hate it when they do that."

"So do I," Lois retorted. "Stupid. Dangerous. Inconsiderate..."

"Sometimes you just wanna run 'em over, don't you?" Maggie said, the corner of her mouth quirking up in a grin.

"Road pizza, with extra paparazzi," Lois said. The two women chuckled, finally feeling at ease with each other again. Of course, Lois still didn't know what the hell was going on, but the traffic situation in the city still hadn't been completely resolved, so they'd have plenty of time to talk about it.

"So, tell me what happened," Maggie said before Lois could figure out how to phrase her own question.

"I thought you couldn't take my statement," Lois countered.

Those pale blue eyes cut her a quick look before focusing on traffic again. "Lois. This isn't Lieutenant Margaret Sawyer of the Metropolis S.C.U. asking you for a statement. This is your friend Maggie wondering what happened yesterday, purely out of concern for your well-being. Are we clear on the difference?"

Her tone had an edge, and Lois sat back in the seat, staring. After a moment in which Sawyer refused to elaborate, the reporter finally said, "Well, in a nutshell, I got a voicemail from Luthor telling me exactly where he was. Clark was gone, Superman was gone, so I ditched my car and went after Luthor myself. Once I found the yacht, I snuck onboard and started looking for my kids. Ran into Luthor, and he threatened Jason to get me to give up the gun.

"After that, everything went to hell in a handbasket. Luthor locked Jason back up - he never let me *see* Kala - and decided to play a little cat-and-mouse with me. We scuffled, I broke one of his ribs, and he got his pet thug Riley to help him tie my hands and lock me up in the freakin' pantry. I was trying to get out when I saw Luthor and both twins leave on the helicopter."

The horror of that moment, of seeing her daughter's head whip around and locking gazes with Kala's terrified eyes, silenced Lois for several heartbeats. She bit her lip and continued, "Once the boss was gone, Riley wanted to play. He thinks of himself as a filmmaker - *snuff* films. He dragged me down to the gallery and left me on the floor while he got everything ready. By the time he turned back around, I'd used a broken bolt in the floor to cut the cable ties off my hands. I ran, he chased me, and I smacked him upside the head with a rock and tied him up so he couldn't bother me.

"Then I went after the other guy on board, Grant. He was in the wheelhouse. I surprised him, faking him into thinking I had a gun when all I had was Riley's damn police baton. Those frikkin' things *hurt*, by the way, Sawyer. I tied him up and got on the radio, got in touch with Richard. He'd just talked me into letting him rescue me when Lex came back."

Lois was gazing out the window, but seeing that room, seeing Luthor burst in and attack

her without a word. "I think Grant might've tried to warn me he was coming. Luthor jumped me, strangled me unconscious. I woke up handcuffed, in the helicopter. He used me for bait to get Superman closer, Maggie. He held my own gun to my head and practically pushed me out the door to get Superman close enough for an easy shot. The bastard had put kryptonite in my hollowpoints, and Superman fell into the ocean. I elbowed Lex and jumped after him.

"Richard dived at the helicopter until Lex's chicken pilot got them out of there. Richard and Lana rescued me and Superman, I pulled the bullet out, and Superman recovered enough to go remove the freakin' kryptonite *island* I didn't even know about until I saw him pick it up. Then Richard managed to get me to the hospital at the same time that Superman arrived. The rest you know."

Maggie nodded slowly. "Okay, that all fits... Did you leave anything out?"

Lois gave an exasperated sigh. "Well, yeah, I left out the part where Riley felt me up while he was searching me for weapons. And I left out Lex in the helicopter, telling me exactly how he planned to rape me and make me like it. Yeah, I left out a couple things, Maggie, mostly to keep you from having a coronary."

The lieutenant had winced, and then her lip curled in a snarl that didn't bode well for Luthor when he was finally captured. When she'd mastered her anger, she asked, "So you never fired your gun?"

Lois opened her mouth, and then remembered the mirror. The damned mirror. "Well, yeah. I shot into a mirror, actually. It had Luthor's reflection in it at the time, I thought it was him. Wound up giving myself away."

"So you fired a warning shot into a mirror?" Maggie asked.

"Warning shot my ass, I was trying to kill the sonofabitch," Lois retorted. "It was a full-length mirror, I couldn't tell, I thought it was Lex-"

Maggie reached over and gripped Lois' knee lightly, giving her another of those I-know-you're-smarter-than-this looks. "You fired a warning shot, Lois. Into a mirror, to let Luthor know you were serious. A *warning shot*." Her hand tightened, her eyes deadly serious.

"Okay, yeah, a warning shot," Lois muttered. "Whatever..."

Maggie's grip started to get painful, but Lois had the idea that this was tension, not for emphasis. "And that was the *only* time you fired your weapon on board the *Gertrude*?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Mags, you're hurting me here."

"Sorry." Sawyer relaxed and concentrated on her driving. "We didn't have this conversation."

"Fine," Lois sighed. "Maggie, what the *hell* is going on? You've been acting schizo since you walked into his hospital room. I want an explanation."

"Lois..."

"*Now*, Maggie." Lois leaned against the door and glared. All of a sudden she was exhausted again.

"You're a damn good actress, aren't you?"

"What the *hell*...? Okay, yes, I should've won an Oscar, not a Pulitzer. Maggie, *what the fuck*?"

"You need to be," Sawyer said, and her voice was still low and serious. "You'll need to look surprised when you hear this from Smith, or my integrity's as screwed as your chances in court. Lois, we found two men on that ship, both of them tied up. Both of them shot in the face

at point-blank range."

That was enough to whip her head around to face Maggie, absolutely thunderstruck. The utter incredulousness of her expression only doubled the lieutenant's confidence. For a full minute, Lois stayed silent as she digested what was said. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and shaky with anger as her eyes narrowed. "Let me guess, Luthor killed them with my gun. And I had motive, right?"

"The bullets match your Ladysmith," Maggie said quietly. "Smith found that wild shot you fired at the range last week for comparison. And yes, you and I practically joked about it the night of the Pulitzers. We also found partials of your fingerprints on the cable ties and the police baton. Smith's been building a case against you. Two counts of murder one."

"Great. Just fabulous," Lois snarled, wishing once again that she'd shot Luthor instead of his reflection. All their problems would've been solved... "So even though Luthor didn't get to fuck me, he *still* managed to fuck me over." She swore angrily, kicking the inside of the car door in frustration.

"Lois, it's going to be all right," Maggie said. "You didn't do it, and you don't have the weapon. All you have to do is tell the truth. The evidence is circumstantial. I'm sure you'll be cleared."

"*Now* you're sure," Lois said bitterly. "No wonder you were acting so weird in the room. You thought I'd done it, didn't you? You actually thought I'd kill two unarmed men when they were tied up and helpless."

Maggie glanced at her again. "No, Lois. You know me; you know I wouldn't let our friendship stand in the way of justice. If I believed you shot them, you'd be in the back seat, cuffed." She sighed. "But I have to admit I'm damned glad to *know* you didn't."

The twins hadn't wanted to go home and stay with Ella, so Richard brought them back to the office. A few more staff members had trickled in to work, and Perry was getting everything organized, barking orders and shepherding reporters around. Ella made herself and the twins reasonably comfortable in Lois' office, keeping out from underfoot while Richard swung back into the business of producing a major daily newspaper... with about half the staff and less than half the equipment they normally had available.

Kala and Jason both felt closer to their mother in her office, so they settled down and eventually fell asleep on her couch. Richard finally relaxed when he saw that, but his peace of mind couldn't last. "Thank God," Ron sighed as he walked into the bullpen. "Jason and Kala, they're okay?"

"Pretty much," Richard told him. "Lois, too."

"That's perfect," Ron replied. "I suppose I can tell my wife what's going on now?"

"What do you...?" Richard trailed off, then remembered that they'd kept Lucy in the dark because of her pregnancy. "Huh. That's going to be fun."

"Yeah, you know the Lane women," Ron said with a wry smile. "I think I'm going to see if I can talk Ella into telling her for me - Lucy's been absolutely livid since Ella had to leave the birthday party."

"You do that," Richard said. He watched Ron walk into Lois' office, and saw Ella's sympathetic look as he began explaining his situation. The twins didn't even blink, and that told Richard better than anything else how tired they really were.

Another voice demanded his attention. "Hey, Richard, did you hear the news?" Gil called to him.

"No. Good God, what *now*?" In spite of having caught only a few hours' sleep, Richard roused himself to deal with whatever else was happening.

"I just heard that Lois left S.T.A.R. Labs," Gil told him. "In a police car."

"*What?!*" Richard looked at him blankly for a long moment. "Gil, why...?"

"Something about the police investigation," Gil said.

"*What* police investigation? I've been a little busy the last few days, and city isn't exactly my beat, Gil!"

"Easy, man," the older reporter replied. "The Coast Guard brought in that yacht, the *Gertrude*, yesterday. There were two dead men on board, suspicion of homicide. Police are keeping mum, but rumor says they were shot to death."

Richard swallowed. "Really. I suppose the police want to ask Lois, since she was on board. She might know who killed them."

Gil nodded, seemingly satisfied, and muttered, "Lane gets *all* the damn exclusives," as he walked back to his desk. Richard just leaned back in his chair, his heart beating faster. Lois had a gun, and she'd threatened to kill Luthor more than once. If his thugs had threatened the kids, he didn't know what she was capable of. And the only way Richard could think of for Lois to leave Superman's side would be if she absolutely had to. If she'd been compelled... *You'd think she would call me ... if she can.*

Maggie paced outside the one-way mirror, staring into the interrogation room. Smith had gone about the interview all wrong - alienating Lois from his first words, making her hostile and uncooperative. He made her go over her story again and again, picking at the details, making it very clear not only that he suspected her of cold-blooded murder but also that he would enjoy charging her with the crime.

Fortunately, Lois had kept her cool. Exhausted and furious, she'd snapped at Smith a few times, but she hadn't completely lost her temper. Maggie worried that wouldn't last if he tried leaving Lois alone for an hour one more time, and then asked the exact same questions again. "He's totally screwing this up," she muttered under her breath.

The police commissioner, Bill Henderson, sighed. "You want a try, Sawyer?"

Maggie turned around and looked at him. "Sir?"

"Lieutenant, I know she's your friend," he said. "But I also know you're too good a cop to let her get away with this. If it was a little breaking and entering, or shooting someone in self-defense, you'd go to bat for her. But this is premeditated murder. If she did it, you wouldn't let her walk away from it."

"No, I wouldn't," Maggie replied. "But I also don't believe she did it, Commissioner."

Henderson nodded slightly without replying, looking into the interrogation room where Smith had started over again with his questions. The young officer looked down at his notes and said, "So this Riley brought you down to the gallery. And your hands were tied at that point?"

"Yes," Lois replied. "You can still see the marks on my wrists."

"He pushed you to the floor, and then what happened?"

Lois gritted her teeth, inhaling slowly before she answered. Her voice now had the flat, declamatory tone of someone about to lose patience completely. "I cut my arm on some kind of sheered-off bolt in the floor. Every time he turned his back on me, I started sawing the cable ties around my wrists against that bolt."

"What was he doing when he turned his back on you?" Smith asked.

Lois snorted contemptuously. "Checking on his cameras and laying out the 'tools of his trade', as he called them. He wasn't content to rape me, he wanted to torture me too - and film the whole thing. Sick bastard. Anyway, I finally broke the cable ties as he was checking on the fourth camera, and after that I was just waiting for a chance to get away..."

"What is it, Sawyer?" Henderson said.

Maggie had suddenly gone tense, her eyes widening. She grabbed the copy of the case file sitting on the table and started flipping through it rapidly. "How many cameras did she say there were?" the lieutenant asked urgently.

"Four," came the reply. "Sawyer?"

"There's only three mentioned in the report," Maggie said. "Three *broken* cameras. If Lois is right, if there's a fourth one that crime scene missed..."

"We might have our answer once and for all," the police commissioner said, grinning. He leaned forward and pressed the intercom button for the interrogation room. "Pardon me a moment, Smith. Ms. Lane, do you remember where the four cameras were located?"

For a moment, Lois seemed to draw a blank, looking toward the mirror in surprise. "Umm ... one was on the back of one of the couches. One was on the table with his stuff. He had one on the floor, too. The last one was up in Vanderworth's study..." Lois' brow knitted, frowning as she tried to remember. "It was on one of those shelves, stuck down in some kind of box. It was in view of the other cameras so he had to hide it. Production values." Lois couldn't help shuddering. Smith scowled, waiting for Henderson to say something else.

"Want me to go for it?" Maggie said to the commissioner.

He grinned a little at the eagerness of her tone. "Go, Sawyer. It's not your jurisdiction, but I know why you're on this case. If there's video, I want it yesterday." Pressing the intercom button again, Henderson added, "Smith, come out here for a moment."

The lieutenant had to rein in her delight as she hurried out of the room to call Crime Scene. Nothing felt as good as being able to prove Lois' innocence ... except for the dressing-down Smith would get from Henderson for his sloppy investigative work.

Within the hour, Maggie had tracked down the final camera. The three the crime scene department found earlier had been badly damaged, and it would take time to recover any of the data on their internal disks. But this camera had never been broken like the others, and it was a simple matter to pull the memory card and plug it into one of the precinct's computers.

Commissioner Henderson, Detective Smith, and Lieutenant Sawyer all watched the screen intently. The view was excellent, though the sound was very scratchy, and the scene played out exactly as Lois had said it did. Smith began to frown. Maggie clenched her fists as she saw Riley laying out his tools while Lois lay apparently helpless on the floor. She'd read the inventory of items recovered, but actually seeing this smiling man look at Lois while holding a pair of pruning shears... *It's a good thing the bastard is dead*, Maggie's mind growled, but she choked off the thought before it could cross the line ethically.

A few moments of conversation that they couldn't catch, and then Riley was stalking Lois with a knife. She suddenly leaped to her feet and went running, right toward the camera. He chased her, snarling, "Don't you run from me!" The scuffle happened close enough for them to hear Lois yelp when Riley's fist connected, to see him pause as he drew back for another blow. Lois' arm swung around and met his skull with a dull thud, and Riley dropped to the ground.

Lois' harsh panting was loud enough to be easily heard, but she didn't stop. Holding her side where Riley had hit her, she knelt beside him and reached into his pocket, pulling something out that she used to bind his wrists and ankles. They both were in perfect view of

the camera, and Maggie started to smile at Lois' swearing. *As long as she's cursing, she's okay*, the lieutenant thought.

On the screen, Lois walked over to Riley's duffel bag and came back with a police baton. Smith started rifling through the report, muttering something about contusions. Maggie and Henderson just watched the screen, trying to hear what was being said. The box the camera had been in had muffled all but the loudest sounds, but even without the words it was clear that Lois had threatened Riley while he tried to talk his way out of it. At last he'd said something desperate about a man named Grant, and then he was talking too fast about Luthor and an island. But the camera clearly showed Lois dropping the baton and walking away, leaving Riley tied up but alive.

"Told you she didn't do it," Maggie said triumphantly.

"Bullshit," Smith said, "it doesn't prove anything. She could've doubled back and capped him after she was sure he didn't lie to her."

Henderson ignored them and watched the rest of the video. Riley rolled around on the floor for a while, struggling against his plastic bonds. The police commissioner clicked on the fast-forward button, which made Riley's struggles look even more like a dying snake.

"She stood there cold as ice threatening the man!" Smith snapped.

"He just tried to torture and rape her!" Sawyer shot back. "Plus his boss has her kids! That shows a helluva lot of self-control, not kicking him in the groin a couple times!"

"Shut up," Henderson said, rewinding the film slowly. Detective and Lieutenant turned to look at the screen as a very familiar man entered the picture.

"Lex Luthor," Maggie said softly. She'd know that profile, that gait, anywhere. Although the side of his face was bloody - from fighting with Lois, she knew. That brought a smile to the lieutenant's face, even as she recognized the gun he was carrying. "That's Lois' Ladysmith."

Smith had finally shut up, scowling. Luthor found and destroyed the other three cameras before advancing on his erstwhile employee. Riley said something, Lex replied, and the next thing the police officers heard clearly was Riley crying out in pain as Lex kicked him. They exchanged a few more words before Lex started yelling about following orders and kicked Riley in the stomach. "There's the contusions," Maggie said.

The bound man rolled onto his side, coughing blood, and Lex smiled down at him. Even though they knew how Riley had died, it still shocked all three cops to see Lex aim the gun and fire from less than two feet away. The expression on his face never changed, and he simply turned and walked away while Riley's body spasmed.

After a long silence, Maggie said, "Well, she's cleared."

"Of *one* charge," Smith said bitterly.

Before they could start arguing again, Henderson cut in. "Hush. It's not logical to assume she killed the other guy. Yes, she *might've* shot him after she left this one, but that would mean her whole story's a lie, and Luthor got her gun back from her again. Her version makes sense. Let her go, Sawyer, but tell her to stay in town until forensics wraps up the case. We'll find enough evidence to corroborate her story once all the facts have been analyzed."

"Yes, sir," Maggie said, leaving Smith to brood.

Dr. Donner and Nurse Tage stood at Superman's bedside, looking up at the open skylight. The bright sunlight streaming down forced them to squint. "His pulse is definitely stronger," Tage observed.

"Mm-hmm," Donner replied. "A little faster than I'd like, but it has been ever since Ms.

Lane left. The EEG is showing bursts of increased activity, too. Oxygen levels are still good, though."

Tage considered, and finally said tentatively, "If he was conscious, I'd say he was agitated by her absence."

Donner nodded. "I was thinking the same. I'm actually very glad that she came, good to put a face with the name. I remember when she was covering all the stories on him..." He trailed off, thinking about the past.

After a few minutes, Tage sighed. "Dr. Donner, I don't think his condition will change anytime soon. But we might very well get sunburned if we stand here any longer."

"Right," the doctor said, focusing on the present again. "Let's go. We can monitor his vitals just as easily from the nurses' station." But before he left, he clasped his patient's shoulder kindly and murmured, "C'mon, kid. Wake up. Soon. We're all rooting for you."

Lois had just finished counting acoustical tiles in the ceiling for the twentieth time - and plotting her revenge on this jerk Smith - when Maggie walked in. The reporter glared, muttering, "What is this, good cop/bad cop? Everybody who's seen more than one episode of *N.Y.P.D. Blue* knows that trick."

"No, you're being released," Sawyer said, grinning. "We found that last camera. You're cleared in Riley's death."

"Thank *God*," Lois sighed, getting up. "Now I can get back to the hospital."

"Whoa, Lane," Maggie said sternly. "You're exhausted, you need to go home and get some rest."

"Screw that," Lois spat. "I'm tired of hearing that crap from everybody. I'm a big girl; I know when I need a nap and when I don't."

"Lois, you won't do him any good like this," the lieutenant argued, immediately striking at Lois' weakness: her vanity. "You look like a drowned rat, and you smell like seawater. When *was* the last time you had a shower, anyway? Not to mention the lovely matching Louis Vuitton you've got under each eye..."

"Stuff it, Sawyer," Lois growled. "You think you're the first one to tell me I look like hell? I've told my fiancé, my mother, and a four-star general to piss off for saying it, what makes you think I'll listen to *you*?"

"Because I can *make* you do something about it," Maggie shot back. "You've been cleared of Riley's murder, but not the other guy. Right now, you just have to stay in town while we investigate. Tick me off, and I'll put you under house arrest."

"That is such bullshit!" Lois snarled. "Dammit, Mags..."

"I'm driving you home, and you're going to get a shower, have something to eat, and go to sleep," Maggie said firmly. "Hell, *I'm* going home. I've been awake for two days straight. Quit arguing, you know I'm right."

Under other circumstances, Lois would've kept arguing. But she really was tired, and she realized she'd left her car unlocked at the docks. It had probably been stolen, leaving her with no transportation. Sighing angrily, she said, "*Fine*. I'll do it, but first thing tomorrow morning I'm going back to S.T.A.R. Labs, you hear me? Even if I have to get a cab to take me all the way there from Bakerline."

"Yes, ma'am," Sawyer said, chuckling. "Now be a good girl and come with me."

Lois followed her out of the precinct, glaring at Smith as they passed him. The position of the sun in the sky above her came as shock; the interrogation room had no windows or clocks,

and Lois was even more irritated to learn she'd lost most of the day. In spite of that, she didn't remember a thing after getting into the patrol car until Maggie shook her gently awake. "We're here," she said, parking in front of the house. Another patrol car pulled up behind them to keep watch; Luthor was still out there.

Groaning, Lois lifted her head from where she'd slumped against the window. "Thanks, Maggie. I just..."

"You're just so tired you can barely see straight." Maggie smiled at her and patted her shoulder. "Go on, Lois. I'll see you tomorrow."

"If anything happens with him, you damn well better call me," Lois added.

"Will do. I'll even call your fiancé and tell him where you are. Now scam before you pass out again."

Muttering agreement, Lois got out of the car and made her way slowly into the house, stifling a yawn. She managed to stay awake through a shower before collapsing in bed, and fell instantly into dreamless sleep.

The sunlight tracked across Kal-El's room, and his vital signs remained steady. His electroencephalogram showed periodic episodes of increased brain activity, but that was in line with a dream state, nothing indicating consciousness yet. The doctors and nurses gradually stopped taking notice of each brief spike in his brain waves.

Tage happened to be working a long shift, and she was the one standing at the nurses' station when the first troubling sign came through. The pretty nurse had been just about ready to go home when one of the monitors started beeping.

Superman's oxygen levels were falling. Tage frowned, picking up the phone to page Dr. Donner. But then his oxygen fell to zero, and the heart monitor flatlined. Tage gasped in horror as the EEG also went flat, adding its shrill alarm to the other two. She smacked the intercom button and called, "Dr. Donner, code blue in 501! *Code blue!* Crash cart to 501, code blue!" Then she raced down the hallway, almost knocking over another nurse and saying breathlessly, "501's coding!"

The corridor seemed endless, and Tage felt as if she were running in slow motion. At last she found the door, the two soldiers outside looking nervously at the door. The nurse hit it with her shoulder and barged in, skidding to a halt abruptly. Her gaze went immediately to the bed, and Tage gasped in utter shock.