

Little Secrets, Act Five

by **Kala Lane Kent**

© 8-Jul-06

Rating: T

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

In Your Wildest Dreams

*When you come back down,
If you land on your feet
I hope you find a way*

To make it back to me...

~Lifehouse, Come Back Down

Kitty forced herself to keep her breathing even. Lex hadn't let her out of his sight during the brief refuel in Charleston, and it had looked as though she wouldn't have a chance to escape. But luck was on her side; a couple of warning lights came on as they flew over Texas, and Stanford had been forced to take the helicopter down. The rotor swash plate had come slightly loose, probably during the erratic flying they'd done evading Lois Lane's crazy fiancé.

The repair would take most of a day. They'd had to take a hotel room within the airport and just off the concourse, quickly learned that Lex had hit the top of the most-wanted list. That forced him to stay out of sight while he waited for the 'copter to be repaired. Lex was furious, muttering and pacing around the suite that had been checked into by Mr. and Mrs. Menahem Globus. After that worrisome moment at the desk, both she and Stanford absolutely terrified of giving themselves away, Kitty had spent the last few hours trying to keep herself and Tala out of Lex's way, terrified that he would open the locked case and discover her treachery.

But no, the only crystal he wanted to look at was the snapped-off one in his pocket. Creepy, beyond merely obsessive, but lucky for Kitty. She didn't want to hang around much longer, though. Luck had a bad habit of running out if you used it too long. And Kitty knew all too well that she was running on fumes.

It was getting late, and Stanford was out checking on the repair progress in the airport proper. He should've been back an hour ago, and Lex wasn't pleased with the delay. Kitty was getting progressively more and more nervous when Lex finally turned to her and snapped, "Kathryn, go see what's taking Stanford so long."

"Sure, Lex," she squeaked. Didn't have to fake a drop of that anxiety. She snatched her purse up and hurried out of their suite without another word, barely hearing Lex snarl at her to be careful.

Her heart was racing as she got into the elevator. *This is my only chance*, she thought. *He only let me go because he's too pissed at Stanford to think things through. Lex has never been good at seat-of-the-pants plans. If he can't plot all the way through something, he gets cranky and impatient. And he makes mistakes. Like thinking that just because he didn't see me pick up Tala, that he still has my dog as a hostage.* Kitty patted her purse, hearing a low, angry growl from inside it. "Poor baby," she whispered. "It's gonna be okay. Just you wait and see."

The sun was setting, slanting through the gap in the curtains and striking Lois' face. She groaned as sat up, her mind still fuzzy, and raked her fingers through her hair. *My God, I slept like a rock. I guess I really did need the nap. Not that I'll admit it to anyone...*

She still felt tired, but what she wanted most of all was news about Kal-El. Neither the house phone nor her cell had any messages, so he was still in S.T.A.R. Labs. "Damn," Lois muttered. Anxiety twisted in her stomach; should she call a cab and ride back to the hospital? Sawyer wanted her to get a full night's rest, not just a few hours.

The worry coupled with exhaustion woke an old craving in Lois, one she hadn't indulged

for months. At the moment, it sounded like a good idea, so she put on one of her warmer nightgowns and a robe, and walked barefoot out onto the dock.

Lois let the lapping water and the view of the river calm her, releasing a heavy sigh. She'd seen the patrol car parked out front through the window, and felt reasonably safe here. Lois was just absolutely wrung out by everything that had happened over the past few days. Jason and Kala had been kidnapped, her own life had been threatened, and now Kal-El was in a coma. Not to mention, she and Richard had unofficially ended their relationship of the past three years ... and she had no idea where he and the twins were at the moment.

The rest of the world can take care of itself for a little while, she told herself, taking the pack of cigarettes out of her pocket. They were probably stale, but Lois didn't care. *I just need this, I need a chance to relax and think.*

Even though she told herself for the millionth time that she had *mostly* quit for the past six-and-a-half years, her hands remembered all of the old routines without the slightest hesitation, Lois' eyes never leaving the sky. Tap the pack, shake a cigarette out, slip it between her lips, flick the lighter...

Staring at the flame, Lois hesitated. She waited a moment, then a moment longer, and then flicked the lighter off with a short chuckle. *Idiot. Hoping he'll turn up to tell me not to smoke. Hoping **this** would bring him back, if nothing else did. Good Lord.* She brought the lighter close to the tip of the cigarette again, paused again, and gave up with a sigh. "Forget it," Lois muttered. "I don't need a smoke anyway."

Just as she dropped the pack of cigarettes and the lighter back into her pocket with a disgust sigh, Lois felt a sudden breeze stir her hair. *It might be starting to get cold out, but it wasn't this windy a minute ago. Maybe the storm front moving through? Or it could be part of-* She had only a second to turn around as the wind increased quite suddenly before she was swept off her feet and into the twilight sky...

Richard rubbed his eyes, fighting against the yawns that wanted to overwhelm him. He'd heard from Lieutenant Sawyer a couple of hours ago, letting him know that Lois was home. He'd tried calling the house, but no one answered; Lois was probably asleep. She had police protection, so Richard decided to let her sleep and left no message on the answering machine.

The twins were still snoozing as well. They'd woken up briefly when Ella left, hugging their grandmother before she went to Lucy's house to break the news. But the events of the past several days had left them both perfectly content to sleep on the couch in Lois' office.

His cell phone rang, and he answered it automatically. "Richard White," he said into the receiver, his voice betraying his weariness.

"Richard!" It was Lana, breathless and excited. "Richard, he's awake! We just saw him fly out of S.T.A.R. Labs!"

Suddenly, exhaustion didn't matter. "He's all right?"

Clear, delighted laughter met the question. "If you call flying at about the speed of sound all right. Richard, I think everything's going to be okay."

"Thank God," he replied, sighing as the anxiety left him. It was one thing to worry over the fate of a hero, another to fear for a friend. "Lana..."

"You'd better call Lois and tell her," Lana reminded him gently. "I'll ... I'll see you tomorrow sometime, okay?"

"Sure," Richard said, then dropped his voice. "Listen, I told Perry that rescue workers had found Clark, and I'd given him a few days off. So if you see him, let him know he doesn't have

to come in, okay?"

"Will do," Lana replied. "And if *you* see him, let him know his mother's in town, please. She's staying with me at the Centennial Hotel."

"I will," Richard said. "I'll pass that on to Lois, too. Thanks, Lana."

"You're welcome," she said, and he heard her hesitate a moment before hanging up the phone.

Richard wasn't entirely sure how he felt about calling Lois with this news. A part of him still wanted to be jealous, still had proprietary feelings for Lois. But most of him knew that this was how it had to be - Lois had never been his, and he deeply admired the man she truly loved. Not to mention the beautiful redhead who had just called him moments ago...

"Get over yourself," Richard muttered, dialing Lois' cell. The phone rang straight through to voicemail, and Richard belatedly realized that the phone had been crushed. *Knowing what I know now, I'm not surprised*, he thought. Next he tried the house phone, but it just rang for several minutes.

Richard replaced the receiver gently. He should've been worried, but somehow, he wasn't. *If he's been awake more than a few minutes, he may have already found her. And if she's just in the house asleep and can't hear the ringing, well, she's going to get one heck of a surprise.*

When his eyes finally opened, Kal-El's first and only conscious thought was, *I have to find Lois*. He quickly removed all of the equipment attached to him, put his suit on, and flew out of the open skylight, much to the consternation of the soldiers on the roof.

The hero was still a little out of sorts, his mind still fuzzy from his long sleep. His one overriding desire was to reach Lois; Kal-El couldn't remember precisely what she had been saying to him, but he remembered how it had made him feel. Sorrow, regret, awe, anger, love, joy, wonder ... his reactions ran the gamut of emotions. At that moment, he needed her - needed to see Lois alive and unharmed, to hold her in his arms, to be certain that the soft voice whispering in his dreams was real. So much had happened in the past few days... Why had she left him? He could remember her kissing him, telling him she loved him, and then she was gone. Had it all been a dream to comfort him while his exhausted, pain-wracked body healed?

Kal-El rose above the cloud layer, the last gleam of the sun's rays striking him, and he closed his eyes to savor the strength flowing into him. *At last...* For the first time since setting foot on that damned kryptonite island, he felt *whole*.

Eyes still closed, Kal-El searched for the heartbeat he knew best. The steady, strong rhythm he could find no matter what background noise obscured it ... zeroing in on Lois' heart, he turned and dove back down through the clouds toward her.

She was standing on the dock, her back to him, the white satin of her robe gleaming in the gathering darkness, her raven hair ruffled by the breeze from the river. His chest tightened at the sight of her, so full of conflicting emotion that he couldn't speak. Kal-El slowed to a safer speed and Lois turned, those hazel eyes he loved going wide with surprise. In the next instant, he had swept her into his arms and was soaring up into the night.

Lois only gasped before she flung her arms around his neck with a startled, glad cry, hugging him as hard as she could. Kal-El held her tightly, burying his face in her hair. The pair of them spiraled upward, holding on as though they would die if they let go. Lois' breath caught, not quite a sob, and she pulled back from him slightly with tears of relief shining in her eyes.

"Lois," Kal-El said softly, his voice hoarse, his throat tight. Lois touched his cheek in a

way that made it clear that she wasn't quite sure he was truly here, trying to smile, too emotional to speak.

At last she choked out, "I was so scared. Oh, thank God you're all right," and kissed him soundly. Laughing, he kissed her back, tasting the salt of her tears, and slowed his flight until they were revolving in midair. The first stars seemed to sparkle with delight at their reunion.

Running her fingers into his hair, Lois kissed him for everything that had happened all those years ago, for everything he had done in the last few days, and for the future she was still uncertain about. She tilted her head and opened her mouth to him, suddenly glad she hadn't been smoking.

With that kiss, his arms around her waist and her lips on his, Kal-El realized that this wasn't the aloof, conflicted woman he'd dealt with the past three months. This was *his* Lois, her whole heart and mind and body and soul flung into the kiss, nothing held back, nothing kept secret. Not any longer. All he could do was deepen the kiss and hold her tighter; his love for her had never changed, and now he knew that her love for him remained just as strong.

A long, long moment later, Lois drew back gasping for breath, a strange fey light in her eyes. At first she smiled to look at him, and then her brows drew together in a scowl, and Lois punched him in the chest. "Goddammit, why do you have to be such a frikkin' hero?! Fly right the hell up to Lex and make a huge freakin' target of yourself, you big dumb alien! *God!* I thought *you* were supposed to be the one saving *me*, not the other way around! Jesus, Kal-El!" She punctuated every sentence with another punch to his chest, but Lois couldn't hide the tears in her eyes or the traitorous smile lurking on her lips. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you went into that coma just to keep me from *strangling* you!"

Kal-El tipped his head back and laughed the rich, deep laugh Lois had missed for years. *Yup, this is my Lois, all right.* "I love you, Lois," he told her, still chuckling. "My God, how I love you."

She grinned to hear it, but she was still trying to scold. "Why are you laughing? Huh? Only you with your warped-as-hell Kryptonian sense of humor would think this is *funny!* And let's not even *talk* about picking up a whole motherlovin' *island* made of *kryptonite* and pitching it out to bloody *Saturn!* For the *love of God*, Kal-El, *what were you thinking?!*"

Still laughing, he kissed the bridge of her nose, making Lois growl at him. "I was thinking of *you*, beautiful," Kal-El told her with utter sincerity. "Thinking of how I had to keep you and our twins safe. That's why I did it, and that's why it had to be done right then."

Lois tried to glare irritably at him, then sighed, the anger leaving her. "*Our* twins. That's going to take a long time to get used to, Kal-El."

He smiled fondly at her. "We have the rest of our lives."

Hazel eyes met his deep blue ones, Lois' mouth trembling. A shudder ran through her, and her voice broke as she whispered, "You have absolutely no idea what you and the twins mean to me. What you've always meant."

Kal-El just looked at her very seriously as he replied, "Actually, I think I do, now."

"You ... you remember...?"

Her exact words weren't stored in his eidetic memory, but the sense of them was. Kal-El simply nodded, and that was when Lois started to shiver. He had only a moment to realize that this time around, she was the one who thought *he'd* forgotten, Lois was the one who had to confront *him* knowing more than she'd imagined. Then she buried her face into his shoulder and began to sob, holding on to him tightly. All Kal-El could do was hold her, stroke her hair, and whisper, "I love you, Lois, I love you. I'm here now, it's all right..."

Maggie hadn't been able to go home right away. A few more things needed to be dealt with around the city, which inevitably spawned a few more problems for her to solve. By the time she finally gave up, she was so weary she could barely keep her eyes open, and the sky above had turned a deep blue.

All she wanted to do was sleep ... but walking up to her apartment, it looked as though she wasn't going to be that lucky right away. Toby Raines was sitting on the threshold, her back against the front door. The doorknob was right over her head, which pretty much meant that Maggie would have to deal with her before she could get into her own home.

That didn't mean she had to enjoy it, though. "You forget your keys again?" she asked, not bothering to hide her irritation.

"Nope," Toby replied. "I just didn't want you to ignore me."

"You're sitting in front of the damn door, Toby, you have my freakin' attention," Maggie shot back. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm still pissed."

"Yeah, I had guessed," Toby said laconically. She reached under her jacket and pulled out a bottle of Glenmorangie scotch, setting it down beside her.

"Peace offering?" Maggie asked, leaning against the other side of the door and sliding down to sit on the front step. Toby just grinned as she picked up the bottle, and her eyebrows went up. "Hmm, the port-finished one. You *are* apologetic."

"Cat had a different source for the story about S.T.A.R. Labs," Toby said. "A hospital electrician who said he'd heard someone talking about it. If he talked to Cat, you know other people talked to the press, too. So you're not personally responsible for the media circus, Mags."

The lieutenant didn't reply, opening the scotch and taking a deep breath of its potent fumes. "It's almost a crime to drink this out of the bottle," she said, setting it down again.

Grinning, Toby took it from her and knocked back a quick sip. "So arrest me," she joked.

Maggie glared at her, taking the bottle back and raising it for a long draught. The reporter's eyebrows rose, waiting for Maggie to splutter or cough; it was smooth scotch, but even the smoothest still had quite a kick. After a moment, Sawyer put the bottle down, letting the warmth of the liquor ease the tension of the past several days.

"While you're communing with the scotch, I'd like to mention that I forced Mank to pass up a great photo of Lois leaving S.T.A.R. Labs," Toby said. "Nobody else was there. I stopped him because the kids were with her, and then we got screwed out of decent shot of Lois alone. I'll hear about this in the bullpen tomorrow."

"Fine," Maggie sighed. "I forgive you. This time." Before Toby could do more than grin impishly, Maggie's cell phone rang. She answered wearily, "Lieutenant Sawyer... He's *what? When? You're serious?!*"

"What?" Toby whispered. "C'mon, Mags!"

The blonde lieutenant wasn't paying attention to her, listening to the voice on the other end of the phone with an expression of increasing wonder on her face. "Thank God," she finally sighed. "And yes, sir, thank you for telling me. I do appreciate it."

"*Well?*" Toby asked impatiently.

Sawyer grinned at her as she stood up. "Move it, Raines. Let's get inside, get a couple of glasses, and celebrate this properly."

"Celebrate *what?*" Toby asked irritably, holding her hand out. Getting up in heels wasn't exactly easy.

Maggie caught Toby's hand and pulled her to her feet. "Superman's awake. He took off from S.T.A.R. Labs ten minutes ago."

The neighbors three doors down heard Toby's whoop of delight.

Lois got herself under control, rubbing the last of the tears from her eyes. Kal-El held her patiently, still smiling that strange, luminous smile. "And why are you grinning at me after I yelled at you and punched you - my hand still hurts, dammit - and cried all over you?" she demanded testily.

"I love you," he said, and fresh tears blurred her vision.

"Stop it," she muttered, trying not to sniffle as she tucked a few loose waves behind her ear. "Good God, I'm acting like some idiotic little fluff-brained romance-novel heroine."

Kal-El kissed the bridge of her nose. "Lois. After everything we've been through, I think even *you* are allowed some tears."

"Yeah, right," was her murmured reply, and swiftly changed the topic. "So you ... you remember everything I said to you?"

"Not exactly," he replied, and explained as best he could the difference between his usual perfect recall and his memories of the past day. Lois began to blush as the implications dawned on her; he remembered every single word, every inflection, every nuance of that first interview, when she had been such a flighty moron. Perhaps it was best that he didn't remember her long soliloquies in the hospital so well; he had the gist of everything she'd said, but not every little pause, every embarrassing revelation.

"I ... I guess there's only one thing I can say," Lois said softly.

"What's that?"

After a long moment, a small grin started to tease her lips, hazel eyes brightening as a true smile finally broke through. "I'm cashing in that rain check from a few months ago. I do believe you owe me a flight, mister."

Kal-El laughed, kissing her forehead again. God, it meant so much to him just to be able to kiss her - and suddenly Lois grabbed his chin and pulled him down, kissing his mouth, making him almost forget to keep them aloft. "Well," he said when she let him go, "I suppose if you put it that way... I can hardly refuse you a flight, Ms. Lane."

Lois gave him a mischievous look at that so familiar term, her smile only strengthening as he linked her arm through his and straightened them out into level flight. It took the reporter only a moment to remember how to keep her balance beside him. The rushing wind buoyed her up as they soared over Metropolis and westward across the country, Kal-El wisely heading toward the daylight just over the horizon.

The scenery whirling by beneath them was spectacular, but nowhere near as fascinating as the man beside her. Lois turned to look at him, grinning brightly, and slipped her arm out of his, just her hand in the crook of his elbow holding her aloft. Automatically, he brought his free hand over to cover hers, looking worried for a moment. "Are you sure you're okay doing this?" he asked her.

Lois laughed and flung her free arm out, glorying in their speed. "Just don't let go this time," she replied, and the words echoed to more than this flight.

Kal-El smiled warmly and let her hand slip down his arm, just like that first flight so long ago. What could be more perfect than flying through the clouds, holding hands with the one you loved? Although this time around, their hold on each other was more secure. Kal-El caught her wrist, not letting her hand slide through his grip as he had on that fateful flight. One

dizzying fall was enough for a lifetime. This time, they would both hold on a little tighter.

It was very late before the *Daily Planet* staff finished the next edition. Fortunately, the front-page story, *Superman Lives*, only needed a few additional details added. Not much else was known about his whereabouts or condition, other than the fact that he'd been able to fly out of S.T.A.R. Labs. Perry positively beamed as he clapped his nephew on the back and told him to go home. Richard was too worn out for anything more than a weary sense of relief. He was simply too tired to feel the jubilation everyone else was experiencing.

Of course, part of that might be because I have a pretty good idea where Superman is right now: with Lois. And I'm still not sure what to think of that. Richard woke the twins gently and shepherded them to his car. Jimmy had run down to the closest open Mexican restaurant to get them dinner, but they would probably want a snack before bedtime. He needed to get them home, and get *himself* home before he wound up snoozing on his desk.

The International editor didn't know what might be waiting for him there. Clark - Superman - whatever you wanted to call the man, Richard hoped he wouldn't be interrupting him in the midst of a serious conversation with Lois. For that matter, recent hospital stay notwithstanding, Richard really hoped he wouldn't catch the pair in the midst of anything more serious than conversation.

They wouldn't, he thought, stamping down on the jealous thought. She wouldn't, and I know he wouldn't. Not this soon, and not in my house. I'm just letting my imagination run away with me because I know I'm losing her. That thought made him chuckle softly. *Losing her? Wake up, Richard, you never had her. Not all of her.*

The problem had lurked at the back of his mind all day, and Richard had pretty much figured it out. Lois was in love with someone else. She had loved Clark before she ever met Richard, she'd *still* loved him in spite of her denials even while she and Richard were together, and she obviously loved him now. The three years Richard had spent with her weren't wasted time, but that was over now. Lois' true love had returned.

As for Clark, his love for Lois had never changed, never diminished. Richard had seen the way they looked at each other, sensed the deep and complicated connection they shared. He didn't think he had a chance against that. If he fought to keep Lois, he was convinced he'd still lose her. But in the process he would cause everyone involved a lot of grief. Especially Jason and Kala, and they didn't deserve the misery of watching their parents fight.

If, however, he let Lois go - if he ignored the gnawing ache in his heart and gave his blessing to her and Clark - the twins' lives would be easier and Clark wouldn't feel like a homewrecker. Richard himself would also have a chance to be part of the twins' future; he'd miss them as much as Lois. Maybe more, if he were brutally honest with himself.

Not to mention Lana. That situation was hopelessly tangled; one minute she was hinting at a relationship between them, the next she seemed to deliberately mention Lois in an effort to drive Richard away. He didn't know what she wanted or how she really felt about him, but those questions were worth exploring. Lois Lane would always own a piece of his heart - he'd never had a relationship this long or this intense before, in spite of his flings - but there was something about Lana that drew him irresistibly.

Richard waved to the officer in the patrol car, one of the same cops who had guarded their house right after Luthor's threat at the Pulitzer ceremony. The twins didn't wake up until he parked in the driveway, Jason opening bleary eyes to murmur, "We're home?"

"Yes, sleepyhead," Richard told him. "Wake up your sister and let's get inside."

"Is Mommy here?" Kala asked quietly, looking around as she woke.

Richard paused. "I don't know, honey. We'll see." And he left it at that for the moment. Bundling both kids out of the car and up to the door, Richard quickly opened it and called out, "Lois? We're home."

No answer. Of all the things his possessive mind could conjure, an empty house hadn't been on the list. *Huh. Well, that's interesting. I guess she'll turn up here eventually.*

Jason yawned hugely as he pattered into the living room. Kala cocked her head, her hazel eyes intent, and then looked at Richard with a frown. "Mommy's not home."

"Nope," Richard said breezily, not wanting either of them to worry. "She's probably with Superman." He had woken them the moment he got the news, and both twins had been very excited to hear that the hero was okay.

Those eyes, so like her mother's, went wide. "Really, Daddy?" Kala whispered.

Another suppressed twinge from his heart. "Really. I think he'd want to let your mom know he's okay, since she was so worried about him."

"Mommy was real scared," Kala confided. "When we were in the hospital with ... with Superman. I could tell."

"I bet you could," Richard said fondly. "You're so smart, Kala, and you never miss anything. You're your mother's daughter, all right."

The little girl wrinkled her nose at that familiar praise, but she hugged Richard and went to join her brother. Richard poured three tall glasses of milk, took some wheat-free cookies out of the jar, and carried the snack out to the couch. The sweets wouldn't hurt the twins, and he could use some comfort food himself.

The trip around the world was spectacular, like traveling back through time - flying out of the evening into the sunset, and then into bright daylight over the west coast. California passed beneath them, Lois thinking of the kiss that nearly happened, Kal-El thinking of the one that had been so bittersweet, and held her more tightly. Further on, the tiny islands looked like little jewels cast haphazardly onto the blue Pacific Ocean.

The sunlight invigorated Kal-El, and he took her through a series of breathtaking acrobatics, swooping low over the waves, then soaring high through the clouds. Lois yelped with surprise at the first seeming fall, then laughed for the pure freedom of it, the delicious sensation of sweeping through the sky on a whim. No one else had ever flown with Superman the way she had.

Sure, he rescued people and flew them to safety, but on those occasions he was merely using the quickest form of transport available. Only Lois had flown with him simply for fun, holding tight to his hands and laughing in delight. It was a little like the best roller coaster she could imagine, only far better; silent except for the rushing wind and their own voices, and almost as free as if she were the one doing the flying. Only Kal-El's arms around her as he soared and dove and spiraled through the sky, Lois clutching tightly to him and closing her eyes whenever they dropped toward the sea.

After a while, their exuberance settled into simple enjoyment of each other's company. Kal-El held her hand tightly, letting her float along at arm's length as they continued westward. The pair met the dawn over Southeast Asia, and flew on into the night they'd left behind.

Most of the world below them was dark, only a few lights here and there. The moonlight revealed the remote mountains of Nepal and the vast tundra of Russia. Lois gasped in surprise as a snowflake struck her face. All around them, snow began to fall, and Lois hunched her

shoulders with a little shiver. Only then did she realize she was only in her pajamas and robe, and she glanced at Kal-El with a look of shock and amusement on her face.

He chuckled, pulling her close and letting his body warm her as they flew through the brief snowstorm. Lois soon saw stars on the horizon ... which weren't stars, but the lights of Europe. They passed over cities that dazzled the eye with electric brightness after the wild beauty and isolation they'd left. Lois looked down at just the right moment to see the Eiffel Tower, lit up like a glowing reminder of her time in that city. For the first time since her pregnancy, the sight of it didn't send a pang through her heart.

Then they were out over the Atlantic again, Kal-El slowing as they neared the Eastern Seaboard. Europe had been well-lighted, but the cities of the American coast were absolutely profligate with light. Compared to the darkness over the ocean, the brightness was stunning.

Lois felt like she should've had terrible jet-lag, flying through an entire day in just a couple of hours. But unlike plane travel, flying with Kal-El simply felt magical. He had his arm around her waist as they neared Metropolis, soaring past the *Planet* building. Lois had to do a double-take to recognize it, finally speaking for the first time in over an hour only to murmur in startled tones, "Where's the freakin' globe? What the *hell* did they do to my building?!"

Kal-El looked at her in surprise, remembering that she had been at sea while all of that happened. "Um, Lois ... the globe fell. Earthquake, remember? Don't worry, I caught it."

"Holy... Whoa." She stared down, now seeing the sections of the city without power, the destruction Luthor had wrought, falling silent again. In spite of that sobering realization, a little part of her mind insisted on noting that the top of the *Daily Planet* building now looked as it had the last time she'd gone on a flight like this, so long ago.

They lingered slightly over the city, both of them overwhelmed by déjà vu. The concrete and steel canyons below them were still familiar, even though time and the upheaval of the past few days had changed them. Lois and Kal-El both felt a certain parallel in their own lives; circumstances had changed them both, but each one still recognized the person they'd fallen in love with in the other.

The river gleamed below them, and Kal-El came to a halt above the riverside house. Lois glanced down once, torn between the familiar gladness at arriving home and the nostalgic wish for this magic night to never end. She looked up into deep blue eyes as he spiraled them both down, his hands on her waist and her arms lightly around his shoulders. The pair could've been dancing, almost, if they were standing on something more substantial than air.

Lois' bare toes touched the weathered wood of the dock, and reality crept stealthily into the surreal fantasy of their flight. He'd brought her home, and now he would leave, and would anything really change between them? Or was this just a night out of time, another stolen moment like so many others she'd had with him? Lois leaned toward him as they landed, and he bent his head down to hers, their foreheads touching. Even as they stood so close, she had that familiar fear of his leaving her as he almost always had after a flight. That feeling of a spell being broken. "Tell me this isn't going to end now," Lois whispered, trying to keep the pleading tone out of her voice.

He kissed her brow, so soft and fraught with meaning, and leaned back slightly to answer her. Before Kal-El could say a word, however, two young voices called out, "*Mommy!*" Lois and Kal-El both turned quickly, startled and still in each other's arms, and saw the twins pelting toward them yelling gleefully.

Kala got there first, running full-tilt into Lois' side and flinging her arms around Lois' waist. For a moment, Kal-El was forgotten. With a relieved smile, she held the child close,

kissing the top of her head and murmuring endearments. Jason was right behind her, and with Kala hogging Mommy's attention, he turned to Superman. "You're okay now?" It was more question than statement.

"Yes, I'm fine," he replied, and Jason hugged him impulsively. It was a bit of a shock for Kal-El. The twins knew precisely who he was, and they knew he was their father. That had been an intellectual fact, the answer to all his hopes, but the reality of it was still a surprise. He'd wanted this to be his family from the moment he saw the three of them in the newsroom, but Kal-El realized with an uncomfortable flicker of fear that he had no idea how to be a father.

In the meantime, he dropped to one knee and hugged his son, aware of just how much he'd missed. Kala pried herself off of Lois and pounced on him as well. "You're better now!" she crowed happily. Kal-El couldn't help chuckling as he ruffled her hair.

Lois didn't even get a chance to get her breath back before Jason hugged her as well. "I missed you, Mommy," he said plaintively as she picked him up.

"I missed you too, sweetheart," Lois murmured, kissing his cheek, her smile matching his. "Both of you."

She and Kal-El looked up at the same moment. The kids couldn't have been home alone, and the light spilling out onto the back deck framed a man's shadow.

Standing at the back door was Richard. Backlit, he was just a silhouette in the doorway, and neither Lois nor Kal-El could see his expression.

Once upon a time

Once when you were mine

I remember skies

Reflected in your eyes

I wonder where you are

I wonder if you

Think about me

Once upon a time

In your wildest dreams

Once the world was new

Our bodies felt the morning dew

That greets the brand new day

We couldn't tear ourselves away

I wonder if you care

I wonder if you still remember

Once upon a time

In your wildest dreams

And when the music plays

And when the words are

Touched with sorrow

When the music plays

I hear the sound

I had to follow

Once upon a time

*Once beneath the stars
The universe was ours
Love was all we knew
And all I knew was you
I wonder if you know
I wonder if you think about it
Once upon a time
In your wildest dreams*

*And when the music plays
And when the words are
Touched with sorrow
When the music plays
And when the music plays
I hear the sound
I had to follow
Once upon a time*

*Once upon a time
Once when you were mine
I remember skies
Mirrored in your eyes
I wonder where you are
I wonder if you
Think about me
Once upon a time
In your wildest dreams
In your wildest dreams
In your wildest dreams*

*~ The Moody Blues, *In Your Wildest Dreams**

Little Wonders

Our lives are made

In these small hours

These little wonders

These twists and turns of fate

Time falls away

But these small hours

Still remain...

These little wonders still remain.

~ Rob Thomas, *Little Wonders*

Richard had been watching for them; he opened the back door as Superman and Lois touched down. The twins were at his side immediately, both eager to see their mother and the hero ... but they halted, looking up at him. "Daddy?" Jason whispered, his expression torn.

His love for the two of them squeezed his heart almost painfully, and Richard smiled sadly at Jason. "Go on," he said in a low, husky voice. Only then did the twins dart out onto the dock and mob their parents. That moment of hesitation meant more to Richard than the kids would ever know. There was their real father, a superhero, a man whose name every child in the city knew in spite of his long absence, and yet they still called Richard Daddy, still waited for his permission.

He watched as Clark and Lois stepped away from each other, hugging the kids. *Well, there it is, White: the family you always wanted. And it isn't yours. It never was yours.* Resignation heavy in his chest, Richard started walking toward them slowly.

Superman took another step back, and Richard saw the man inside the hero even more clearly. That little bit of nervousness was so very Clark that Richard couldn't help smiling wryly. But the voice that spoke was Superman's, low and carrying. "I'd better be going, Ms. Lane. The city..."

He never got to finish the sentence. "But we didn't get to go flyin'," Kala said pleadingly.

"Please can we?" Jason added quickly. "Pretty please? I wanna fly again!"

"You guys, no. You don't get to just go flying whenever you want," Lois told them both, shaking her head. Richard could see her watching his face out of the corner of her eye. It was something she always did when she thought she was on shaky ground and he recognized it as such.

"No fair, you got to fly," Kala complained, completely oblivious as to the tensions between the adults for once.

Before the twins could start whining, Richard said calmly, "Jason, Kala, if you want Superman to take you flying, you'd better go inside and put your jackets on. It's colder the higher up you go."

"Richard," Lois began with her expression already clouding, but the twins raced past her and into the house, yelling happily.

He glanced at Lois, but spoke to Superman. "Go ahead, take them up. They were really worried about you; besides, they should have some time with their father. And you don't have to worry about fixing everything in one night. I didn't know when you'd get out of the hospital, so I told Perry I gave you personal leave. You're cleared to miss work for a couple of weeks."

Both sets of eyes, the blue and the hazel, had gone comically wide. "Mr. White..." the hero started to say.

Richard sighed, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "C'mon. Enough, already. It's a damn good disguise - fools the whole city - and to be honest I might never have gotten it, not even after I figured out that the twins' real father had to be either Clark or Superman. What tipped me to the fact that there *wasn't* a 'Clark or Superman' - that Clark *is* Superman - was the way you looked at Lois when you went to deal with that island. And the way she looked at you. You both thought it was the last time you'd ever see each other. It's the same way you looked at each other when we were searching for the twins." Richard shook his head, chuckling bitterly. "*I know*. I know you're Clark, I know you're their father, and I know she's in love with you. Just ... you can stop trying to hide it from me. I won't tell anyone. I want what's best for Jason and Kala. That's *all* I want. I love those two more than anything else on earth."

Lois' expression was a complicated mix of surprise, relief, and heartbreak. Those hazel eyes were wide, astonished for the second time in as many days. First Kala, now Richard. "You ... you knew? Ever since..."

"Yes," he replied. "And I've been covering for you. So has Lana - she figured it out the same time I did. Speaking of which, Lana wanted me to tell you Mrs. Kent is staying with her at the Centennial Hotel. You'll want to go see your mother after you bring the twins back. Trust me, for a parent, there's a big difference between knowing your child is all right and actually seeing them with your own eyes."

"I know," Kal-El said quietly. "I was so afraid for Jason and Kala... They know, Richard. I'm not sure how, but they know who I am, and they know I'm their father." He paused after those words, looking intently at the man who should've been his rival. "The twins... they're just amazing. You're right; we have to do what's best for *them*. Richard, I don't know how to thank you."

"Just take care of them," Richard said, feeling bitterness rise in his chest. "They know who their real dad is now..."

The look on Lois' face was utter misery. Biting her lip and looking away, she damned herself for a coward. She wanted to argue this, make them both know that they were both just as important, but she didn't want to hurt either of them. Which was just as well, as Kal-El did it for her only a moment later.

"*You're* their dad," he said. "Richard, I haven't been here. They barely *know* me. You're the one who raised them, you're the one they call Daddy. Trust me, knowing who your biological father is means a lot, but there's no one who compares with the people who raised you. I would know."

Richard couldn't think of a single thing to say to that, and the arrival of the twins made an answer unnecessary. "We're really goin' flyin'?" Kala said hopefully, trying to hide the eagerness in her voice. Jason was right behind her with an annoyed scowl on his little face, still trying to get his arm through the sleeve of his coat, not an easy task while he was running.

Kal-El looked at Lois, and she nodded. "Yes, we can go for a flight," he said to the twins, who squealed with delight. "We can't stay out *too* late, though."

"Jason, come here, your coat's inside-out," Lois said, helping him put it on right. She kissed both twins before stepping back to let their father pick them up, her throat tight. "We'll be here when you get back." This was the scene she had always dreaded, watching the love of her life soar heavenward with her children, Jason and Kala waving to their earthbound mom.

Now, though, she was surprised to feel wistful instead of wounded. After all, could Jason and Kala possibly be any safer than they were with him? Kal-El and the twins flying together was also a hint of something Lois had never allowed herself to yearn for: the family she never

thought she wanted, whole and perfect.

Those half-hopeful thoughts were interrupted by Richard quietly clearing his throat behind her. "Lois?" he said softly. "I think we'd better talk."

Lois swallowed nervously as she turned toward him. This was a moment she had been dreading for so long now. She'd known Richard long enough to know that, no matter what he said, he wasn't entirely happy about the way things had turned out. And how could she blame him? She couldn't have it both ways.

Kitty finally breathed a sigh of relief. The last few hours had been eventful for her: she'd met Stanford as he left the hangar, and warned him that Lex was furious. The scientist was so worried that he probably hadn't given any thought to her casual remark about getting them some dinner.

That had bought her a little more time before Lex started looking for her. Kitty had hurried down to the ticketing area and bought herself two tickets using two different credit cards. Both flights - one to Star City, one to Gotham - left in less than an hour, but Kitty hadn't boarded either plane.

Instead, she'd left the terminal and gotten on the very next shuttle van, not even glancing at the destination. Hopefully Lex would try to follow both planes, or maybe look for her to have caught a cab at the airport. Kitty's stomach twisted with fear through the entire ride, eventually getting out at a hotel. She slipped away from the other passengers and went out to the parking lot to walk Tala.

The little Pomeranian was delighted to be free of her purse and ran in joyful circles on the narrow grass strip between hotels. Unfortunately, she was so happy that she darted away from Kitty and led her on a merry chase through the parked cars. Finally Tala found a vehicle big enough to run underneath easily, a red pickup with a bumper sticker that read "I ♥ My Paint" next to a picture of a horse. She hid from Kitty there, her little pink tongue lolling out in silent canine laughter.

Kitty was almost ready to break down in tears. Her escape couldn't be foiled by the caprice of a seven-pound dog, could it? Lex could be looking for her even now, she had to get away...

And then salvation had walked out of one of the rooms, carrying a suitcase and heading right for the pickup. "Can I help you?" the woman asked coolly as she looked at Kitty crouching beside the driver's door.

Kitty had looked up at her, lip still trembling, and saw how perfect the setup was. Tala was a better accomplice than she'd seemed... "My dog went under your truck," Kitty said. "Can you help me catch her? Her name's Tala."

The two women had managed to outsmart the dog at last, Kitty thanking her rescuer effusively. The woman had given her name as Mel, growing less suspicious. Then Kitty had asked the crucial question. "Are you... are you leaving the hotel?"

"Yes." The wariness was back in Mel's tone.

"Do you think you could give me a lift?" Kitty had asked pleadingly.

"I could call you a cab," Mel had replied. Of course, scam artists were everywhere, and Kitty knew that a complete stranger asking for a ride was guaranteed a cool reception.

Fortunately, she had a trump card. Kitty took off the sunglasses she'd been wearing to look at Mel. The bruise Lex had given her spoke volumes, and the fear in her eyes was real. "Please. I... I don't want him to be able to follow me. I just need to get away. I've got some

money, I've got my dog - I'm lucky to escape with that much. He's... he's dangerous."

Mel had made the obvious assumptions and given Kitty a lift, asking no more questions. The dark-haired woman could finally relax as they left the vicinity of the airport behind them. Mel, it turned out, was in town meeting friends and had a long drive home. Kitty was perfectly happy to ride with her for a while.

And now, several hours away from Lex (who was hopefully looking in the wrong direction), Kitty got out of the pickup and smiled at Mel. "Thank you so much," she said with genuine gratitude. "You probably saved my life."

"Just take care of yourself," Mel replied. She had frowned when Kitty refused to go to a women's shelter, but finally taken her to a small hotel in a strip mall instead. "You sure you're gonna be all right?"

"I'll be fine," Kitty assured her. A little place like this, she could pay for her room in cash and provide a fake name. It would take some time and work to create a new identity, one Lex couldn't track, but she was confident that within the week she'd be staying in a much better hotel in a different city. Things were finally looking up for Kitty.

She waved goodbye to her benefactor as Mel drove away, casting one more worried glance into the rearview mirror. Of course, recovering from the current setback would've been a lot easier if Kitty had just taken the wallet Mel had left under her seat during one of their stops. But she just couldn't bring herself to do it. The dark-haired woman laughed at herself. *Developing a conscience at last, Katherine Kowalski? Never thought I'd let an opportunity like that pass me by. I guess Lex was so darned evil he made me want to do something good for once...*

Richard held the door for Lois as they went inside, standing further back than he would have a week ago. Both were aware of the emotional chasm that had opened between them, mirrored in the physical distance they now kept from each other.

In spite of what he'd said, Richard kept silent as they walked into the house. Lois went to the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of milk, just to have something to do. For the second time that night, her fingers itched for a cigarette. Nicotine courage. Something, anything, to make her feel less small, less of a thoughtless coward. The weight of words unspoken seemed to crush her. *He's going to lose it. I just know he is. Richard knows every single lie I've told him, he knows I'm in love with someone else, he's going to go absolutely ballistic any second now...*

"Lois." His voice was very low, and the tone was hard to decipher. "I ... I think you should keep this."

The black-haired reporter turned to look at him, and saw the sapphire engagement ring lying in Richard's palm. He held it out to her, and to Lois' surprise his expression was resigned, not wrathful. "I found it in the hotel room. You took it off to have a bath."

"Richard..." Despite her struggle to stay calm in the face of this, she felt herself begin to crack as she looked down at it. It looked so small in his hand... *You don't deserve this, Richard. You don't deserve this.*

"Go on, take it," Richard said, giving Lois the ghost of his mischievous grin. "Besides, that's the rules. The woman gets to keep the ring if the man breaks the engagement."

Hazel eyes met his, full of confusion, but Lois took the ring from him. *Oh, God. It is it. This finishes us out once and for all*, she thought with a sick feeling in her stomach. Her voice was soft, husky with emotion when she said, "Richard... What are you trying to tell me?"

"You know, I've got this all worked out in my head, and it *still* hurts to say it," Richard sighed. "Lois... I've never known anyone like you before. And I'll always love you. Always. But it's become very clear to me over the last couple of months that, if we try to stay together, we're just going to keep drifting apart. There's a lot I didn't know about you when we met - and I'm not accusing you of lying to me, or keeping secrets. You were protecting the kids. I understand that now. But it's like the Lois I've gotten to know since Clark came back is a completely different person from the woman I thought I was going to marry. The damnedest thing is, I think I like the unstoppable hero-saving spitfire even more."

Lois bit her lip as she looked up at him, trying to read his expression. She saw pain and sorrow, but a strange kind of nobility, too. "Richard, I..."

He touched her face lightly, silencing her. "I know. It's not your fault, Lois. It's not either of our faults. We just ... we weren't meant to be."

Turning her cheek against his palm, Lois whispered with shimmering eyes, "Richard, I do love you. I *do*. I don't want you to think this was all... I never meant for any of this with Clark and the twins and Luthor to happen. It just ... it all just..."

"I know." He smiled then, and kissed her forehead, enfolding her in a hug. Richard was acutely aware that it might be the last time he would ever hold her like this. But he found it easier to tell her everything he needed to say while he rested his cheek against her hair. "Lois, I know you love me. I'm sorry I ever doubted you. But you love *him* more." Lois' shoulders tensed, and Richard just hugged her tighter. "Besides, he's *Superman*. How can any ordinary guy compete?"

"Richard, don't," she whispered against his shoulder. "Don't shortchange yourself. You're not just an ordinary guy, you're a wonderful man, you're..."

"Not a superhero," he said gently. "I can't catch falling aircraft or pick up islands. I can't see through everything except lead - and I'd have way too much fun with that if I *could* do it. I can't blow out raging fires like they're birthday candles. True, I *can* fly, but I have to file my flight plans with the FAA."

"It's not about his freakin' *powers*," Lois said, leaning back to look up at Richard. "It's about the man he is..."

"And I can't compete there, either," Richard said. "I worked with Clark. He's a better man than I am. If I'd been him, coming back to see you snuggling up to me, I'd have vaporized me on the spot. He's been a gentleman about everything, even before he knew about the twins, and now that he knows they're his he's *still* being a gentleman. He's a genuinely nice guy, Lois, and he's the perfect balance for you. I'm not gonna fight that."

She looked up at him, a tear trickling down her already-damp cheek. As often as they'd fought, as much as she'd yearned for Kal-El, losing Richard still hurt her deeply. "You're not exactly the villain here, Richard. You're being pretty damned noble right now."

"Yeah, but I don't *want* to be noble," he replied with a slightly bitter chuckle. "I *want* to be jealous and petty and make sure everybody else hurts just as much as I do. Problem is, I love you too much to do that to you."

"That's what makes you a good man, Richard," Lois said to him. "You'd have a right to be like that. But you won't. You're a better person than you think you are." She stroked his cheek and smiled sadly. "After all, you got Lois Lane, as arrogant as that sounds. The woman who only loved Superman loved you. Loved you enough to let you into her life completely. You *must* be good."

"I'll put that on my dating resume," Richard joked weakly. "Listen, Lois. I can't say that I

don't love you anymore, or that I don't still wish it could work out between us. I really did want to marry you and stay with you and the twins for the rest of my life. But ... I love you enough to let you go. It would break my heart to see you standing on the dock twenty years from now, looking up, wondering why you settled for me when you could've had him. I won't do that to either of us."

Settled. That was the word Lois hated the most, in all its connotations. When she thought that Kal-El would never come back, that the love of her life was gone forever, Lois had settled. She'd taken the best available option, settled for less than what she really wanted. And then she had settled down, become a tamer version of herself, as if the powerful ambition that drove her throughout her youth had been knocked into idle by the responsibilities of having children, a fiancé, and a house.

Lois sniffled, burying her head in Richard's shoulder again. She couldn't lie to him; if she had married him, she probably *would* wonder from time to time how things could've been with Kal-El. And with her ex - the father of her twins - so very visible as he flew around the world rescuing people, it would be certain to cause strife.

Richard kissed her hair and spoke again, his voice growing softer. "I want to end this now, when we can still look back at the last three years and smile. Before all the good memories get poisoned by arguing and jealousy. I don't want to wreck your life, Lois. I love you too much. And then there's Jason and Kala. They don't deserve to see us fight any more than they already have. I'd ... I'd like to still be a part of their lives, Lois..."

She pulled back from him again, catching his chin and forcing him to meet her gaze. "Richard. Don't be an idiot. You're their *dad*. I'd never try to keep the kids from you. *Never*. And neither would Kal-El, if he knows what's good for him. No matter what happens, I promise you, Richard, you're still going to be a *major* part of the twins' lives." It was Lois' turn to laugh, then. "I don't think Jason and Kala would give us any choice in the matter if we tried to decide something else. They love you, Richard."

That assurance was what he needed to hear. Losing Lois was hard - giving her up was the hardest thing he'd ever done. But just the thought of losing the twins was unbearable. Never again hearing Kala sing along with her favorite song on the radio, never again seeing Jason painstakingly put together a puzzle, never again snuggling with both of them on the couch while Godzilla flattened Tokyo... Richard felt his eyes sting a little with relief. Finally, he could stop contemplating a future without the kids.

Kal-El began the flight by taking the twins straight up, rather slowly. Kala quickly made herself comfortable, cradled in his left arm, and peered down at the city. "Cool," she murmured, fascinated. "Look at the lights, Jason!"

"Uh-huh," her brother said. He was holding on tightly to his father's neck, his blue eyes wide.

"Don't worry, I've got you," Kal-El said. "You're perfectly safe, Jason." At the same time, he was half-listening to Lois and Richard. Not precisely eavesdropping, just ... making sure they weren't going to argue. The couple had had enough spectacular fights; he didn't want them to have another.

At the moment, everything seemed okay. The pain in Richard's voice was all too clear. Kal-El felt terrible; Richard was too good a man to deserve something like this. And then to be so gracious as to give Lois up rather than embroil them all in the constant struggle of a love triangle... It spoke of a kind of nobility that humbled even the hero. *I'd like to think I would*

have done the same, he thought. I even thought about it, very seriously. Lois shouldn't have to be torn between us. The difference is, I don't know if I could really ever let her go. Not if I had to see her constantly ... and with the twins, I'd have to be a part of her life. I doubt I could stand to see her and Richard together. It would break my heart every time... Richard's braver than I am.

Kala had stared raptly at the city below them, entranced by the lights. They were hovering two miles up, the twins still breathing easily in spite of the thin air. But then the little girl frowned and cocked her head. "Daddy?" she asked, looking worriedly downward. "How come Mommy and Daddy ... Daddy Richard, I mean ... are talking 'bout fighting? And keepin' me and Jason? What's going on?"

Her father looked at her, startled. "You can hear them, way up here?"

"Uh-huh," she nodded, still looking at him very seriously. "I hear lots of things. Who's keepin' us? You're not giving us away, are you?" Oh, the look in those eyes. So like her mother's. *Don't let me go. Don't go away again.*

"No, sweetheart, no," he reassured her immediately, hugging Jason too as the boy started to look frightened. "No one's giving you up. *Ever*. All three of us love you both way too much for that."

"What'd they say about fightin'?" Jason said urgently. "Are Mommy and Daddy yelling?"

"No," Kala replied quietly, shaking her head. "They keep sayin' they don't wanna fight and they still love each other an' all mushy stuff. Grownups are weird." Despite her carefully-nonchalant tone, it was clear that what she had heard bothered her.

"Kala, you shouldn't listen to other people's conversations," her father said, just the hint of a scold in his tone.

"I can't help it!" she whined. That frustrated pout that was becoming so familiar. "Besides, they're talking 'bout *us*. Daddy, why would they fight? How come they sound like they're sayin' goodbye?"

"Is Daddy leaving us 'cuz you're here?" Jason asked in a tiny voice. "That's what happened to a girl in my class. Her parents didn't love each other anymore an' she got a new daddy. Her old daddy went away an' she never saw him again."

The innocent questions were like a blow to Kal-El's gut. His daughter glared across his chest at her brother and hissed, "*Shut up*, Jason." But the hero couldn't even feel comforted by her protectiveness.

"Listen, you two," Kal-El said sternly. "No one is leaving anyone for good, all right? All three of us love you both. And we all care about each other, too. They're talking about not fighting because, lots of times, mommies and daddies fight about stuff like this. And the kids get upset because the grownups are fighting. But we're not going to fight with each other. All three of us have said that. We love you two so much, we just want you to be happy. It's going to be a little bit weird for a while, trying to figure out how everything is going to work out, okay?"

Both twins nodded somberly. Kal-El continued, "None of this is your fault, and nobody will stop loving you, *ever*. You're the most amazing, brilliant, fabulous children any parent could ever want, you know that?"

Jason giggled at that, his earlier worries forgotten. Those blue eyes so like his darted over to Kala's, the girl's frown already having slipped away. Jason's twin smiled back at him and nodded. "Promise?" he asked for the both of them.

Kal-El knew from having watched the family over the past several months that the twins set a great deal of store by promises. Lois had on several occasions gone to extraordinary

lengths to avoid breaking a promise once made, and he knew that Jason and Kala would treat his promise like a sacred oath. Fortunately, he never went back on his word. "I promise. Everything's going to be all right, you two. Now, would you like to hear about the first person I ever rescued as Superman?"

"It was Mommy!" Kala said excitedly.

Her father chuckled delightedly. "Yes, it was. But to tell it properly, I have to take you to where we first met. Ready to go fast?"

The twins excitedly chorused, "Yeah!" and Kal-El dove toward the city, making them both gasp with surprise. At night, most people stayed off the streets of Metropolis. The few who were out tended not to look up; there was little to see above them. Except on this night, when Superman flew by at an incredible pace with a child clinging to each arm. By the time people below heard the squeals of delight and looked up, Kal-El and the twins were gone.

He swooped low and came up alongside the *Daily Planet* building swiftly. No one would be inside now, except possibly the maintenance crew, and all Kal-El had to do to avoid being seen was keep away from any lighted windows. He slowed to hover beside the darkened windows of the twenty-sixth floor. "Right here," Kal-El whispered to Kala and Jason. "Your mommy was in a helicopter up on the roof. It got into an accident and Mommy fell out." It hurt his mind to call Lois that, a feeling of utter disbelief coming even now. There was still so much to get used to.

"Whoa," Jason said quietly, his arms tightening around his father's neck again. "She fell all the way to here?"

Screaming like a fire siren the whole way, Kal-El thought. He'd consciously left out the part where Lois had clung to her safety belt, dangling above the pavement. "Yes, she fell, and I caught her right about here. Nobody had ever seen a flying man before, and she was so surprised she gave me a look like *this*." Kal-El widened his eyes as much as possible, provoking giggles from the twins.

"You look silly," Kala said.

"Well, so did she," he replied. "But she couldn't believe what was happening. Lots of people would've had their mouth open in shock, looking like a fish." He mimed that for them too, unleashing a storm of snickering. "Your mommy just looked at me, really surprised, and she hung onto my neck, trying to figure out how come *I* wasn't falling. I flew with her up to here..."

They spiraled up past the darkened floors, most of the windows covered in plastic. At least the shattered glass had been swept up, and knowing Perry he'd have all of the interior partitions in their offices replaced as soon as possible. Kal-El stopped again a few floors below the roof, and continued his story. "Then the helicopter fell right toward us. I caught it, and I took it and your mommy up here to the roof. It looked almost exactly like this, because the globe hadn't been built yet."

"Where's the globe?" Jason said, craning his head around.

"It fell in the earthquake. I'll put it back later," Kal-El told him, then returned to the story. "Nobody could believe what just happened. A flying man just caught a falling woman *and* a helicopter? Everybody was shocked. But your mommy is such a good reporter, she managed to ask who I was." Kal-El smiled at the memory. "I couldn't tell her, 'I'm Clark Kent, I work at the desk across from you, ' so I just said, 'A friend!'"

"That was a hint!" Jason said excitedly. "When did Mommy find out you were Superman *and* Mr. Clark?"

"Not for a while," Kal-El demurred. "I was trying to keep from letting *anyone* know. Your mommy's so smart, though, I had a hard time keeping her from guessing."

"Mommy's the smartest person ever," Kala said with quiet satisfaction. Then her brow furrowed, so much like Lois', and she asked, "How'd you come up with the name Superman, then?"

"I didn't," he told them, drifting upward. "Your mommy named me that. I didn't tell her my other name because it sounds a little strange to most people."

"Not me," Kala said, and grinned as she pronounced it carefully. "Kal-El. Right? Like mine?"

"Where'd you hear *that*, Kala?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Eavesdroppin'," Jason muttered, getting a glare from his sister. "How come Superman?"

"I guess she thought it was pretty super that I rescued her," Kal-El said teasingly, and the twins laughed, their momentary rivalry forgotten. "You'd have to ask Mommy, though."

"I will," Kala said, starting to yawn.

"All right, you two," Kal-El said. "Time for you to go home."

"Not yet!" both twins protested, looking at him pleadingly.

Hovering above the roof, Kal-El found it hard to deny the heartfelt plea in both sets of eyes, one pair blue as his own, the other Lois' hazel. "All right," he relented. "Once around the city, then we're going home and you're both going to bed. We can always go flying again."

Kala pouted, but Jason sighed and accepted the bargain. As Kal-El soared upward over the city lights, the little boy looked up at his father and asked shyly, "Do you love Mommy?"

The question didn't precisely surprise him, but the hero had to gather his wits to decide how to answer it. The simple truth, of course, was *yes*. But things were more complicated than that. In spite of the way Lois and Richard had been talking, Kal-El wasn't completely sure that he had a future with Lois. They had to think of the twins first, and it might not be in their best interest to have a dad who was always off saving the world. Lois herself had said that she didn't want to share him with all the people out there crying 'Help, come quick!'

No was still an absolute lie, and *maybe* felt like a silly answer. So Kal-El sighed and replied, "Yes, I love Mommy. Everything's complicated because I have to be two people, but I've always loved her."

Both twins' eyelids were fluttering, and Kala snuggled her head against her father's shoulder with another yawn. "Thought so," she muttered.

Richard had coaxed Lois into eating something. That sense of distance was still between them, but it didn't seem quite so cold after their conversation. When Lois sat down on the sofa to watch for the twins' return, Richard sat in the chair across from her instead of beside her as he would've done a week ago. They could both see out of the large windows overlooking the river, and waited in a far more comfortable silence than they'd grown accustomed to.

Lois had managed a few hours of sleep, but Richard had been awake almost constantly for two days. He kept nodding off, suddenly jerking back to wakefulness after a moment. Lois was almost ready to tell him just to go on to bed when a brightly-colored shape landed silently in the back yard.

"By the way, have I mentioned how weird it is to have Superman using my yard for an airstrip?" Richard muttered, rubbing his eyes.

Lois snorted as she got up. "Try wandering around your twentieth-story apartment in an old bathrobe and seeing him standing on your balcony, waving at you. That man is the reason I

always brush my teeth and hair the *moment* I wake up."

Richard chuckled as they headed outside. Both twins were drowsing, and the hero handed them over gently. "I have a lot to do," he murmured. "I'll be seeing you both. We have a lot to discuss."

Stifling a yawn, Richard nodded as he cradled Kala. "You bet. It'll all turn out for the best, I think."

"I hope so," Kal-El said quietly. "Good night, Richard, Lois."

"Good night, and go see your mom," Lois replied softly, and in a moment he was gone. She tried not to feel wistful as she carried Jason toward the house, luxuriating in the warm weight of him as he nuzzled his sleeping face into her neck. It was amazing how hugging her son tight meant to her, now more than ever. *If she loves you nearly as much as I do, as much as I love these two, it will be the only thing that will calm her fears.* "We love you. We'll be here," she whispered against Jason's hair as the foursome disappeared into the safety of the house.

Clark knocked hesitantly on the door, and heard Lana say, "Finally, room service." He couldn't help grinning shyly when she opened the door, and for a moment the redhead just stared at him in surprise. And then...

"*Clark!*" Lana leaped at him, flinging her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek resoundingly. "Thank *God* you're all right, we were so worried about you, I'm so glad you came by..."

"I'm fine," he said, returning the hug.

Lana stepped back slightly, still grinning with pure delight. "How's Lois? How're the twins?"

"They're fine," Clark told her, chuckling. "So is Richard."

She blushed and looked away, giving Martha a chance to see her son. Clark felt a trickle of ice down his spine; by rights he should've seen Ma first. And by now she had to know about the twins... How would she react to *that* news?

But none of that seemed to be on Martha's mind. She simply folded her much taller son into a hug, whispering, "Oh, Clark. Oh, my boy. I missed you so much."

Feeling safe and at home at last, Clark hugged his mother gently. "I love you, Ma. I'm okay. It's all okay now."

Coming Around Again

I believe in love

Now who knows where or when

But it's comin' around again...

I know nothin' stays the same

But if you're willin' to play the game

It's comin' around again.

~Carly Simon, Coming Around Again

When Martha stepped back from him, her eyes gleamed with unshed tears. For long moments she simply stood there, staring at Clark as if committing every detail of his face to her memory. Lana quietly made herself scarce.

"My son," Martha sighed. "Do you have any idea how much I love you, Clark?"

"Yes," he replied softly. "Yes, Ma, I know. At least, I think I do. Because..."

"Because of Lois' twins?" Martha asked, and Clark's eyes went wide. "Lana told me. I got to see them, briefly, and their mother, when they left S.T.A.R. Labs. Jason looks a lot like you did at that age, except your hair was as black as Kala's."

Clark blinked at her, startled. "I ... I need to sit down." A few moments later he was seated on one end of the sofa, Martha at the other. When he'd marshaled his thoughts into some semblance of order, he asked in a low voice, "So ... what did you think?"

"Of the kids?" Martha asked. "By all accounts they're amazing. I only saw them for a few seconds, but they seemed bright and well-behaved. A lot of children these days would've gone wild at the sight of that crowd, and all those cameras."

"Yeah, the twins are pretty well-behaved," Clark said. "And Lois?"

Martha pursed her lips slightly. "I'd like to meet the woman first, before I have anything to say about her," she replied, then her expression softened slightly. "She was completely focused on her twins when I saw her, though. That's certainly a mark in her favor."

That made Clark a little uneasy. It seemed as though the two women he loved best in the world might not be instant friends.

"Lois would move heaven and earth for those children," Lana said softly from the doorway. "Martha, I think you'll like her. She takes a bit of getting used to - she's sure not like anyone we know from Smallville - but I have the greatest respect for her."

"Lana, darling," Martha said with a smile. "I'll bet Clark is thirsty after flying around in this cold weather. Would you run downstairs and see if they have anymore coffee? We're out."

The redhead winced slightly, but accepted the dismissal. As the door closed behind her, Clark cleared his throat and said, "Ma, you just have to meet Lois. She's, well, she's incredible, to tell the truth. She's smart and strong and brave and funny ... and she saved my life."

"She's also the woman you love," Martha said gently. "And the mother of your children."

It was still something of a shock to hear aloud. Clark glanced downward again. "Ma, I'm ... I'm really surprised at how well you've taken, you know, all this." He made a looping gesture in the air that seemed to encompass all the things he couldn't quite name.

One silver brow arched up. "You mean the fact that I have two six-year-old grandchildren I've never met? And the other fact, that my son isn't married to their mother?" Clark began to blush as Martha crossed her arms and continued, "Clark, I can't say I'm absolutely thrilled about all of this. You've made some choices that, quite frankly, I thought your father and I hadn't raised you to even consider. "

"Ma," he whispered, unable to meet her eyes. "Ma, I didn't mean for everything to end up

this way. I always intended to marry Lois..."

"But you didn't," she replied, and her voice was softer. "Clark, I'm not saying you set out to become an absentee father. Circumstances beyond your control intervened. But that's why we do things the way we do in Smallville. If you don't go to bed with the woman until you've married her, you don't have to worry about being surprised by a set of twins when you come back after breaking up with her six years ago."

Clark was blushing furiously, even the tips of his ears red. Ma was right, of course, but at the time everything had seemed different. Being with Lois had seemed the most natural idea in the world, and waiting - waiting even a *day*, when they finally had the truth between them - had seemed ludicrous. Surely, he'd thought, they would have plenty of time to discuss marriage and children. Neither he nor Lois had expected the world to fall apart, Zod and his cronies to invade and conquer, during their absence. Explaining all that to his mother, however, wasn't so easy, and Clark kept silent.

"The situation you're in now is the consequence of your own actions," Martha continued in the same mild, factual tone. "And yes, I'm disappointed in you. However..." Martha paused and caught Clark's chin, making him look up at her. "It doesn't mean I love you any less, Clark. You've made mistakes, but you're man enough to admit to them and to do your best to rectify them. You're still my son, my beloved boy - *nothing* could change that."

Those words brought a tentative smile to Clark's face, and Martha continued, "Nothing will change the way I'll treat your son and daughter, either. It's not the kids' fault." Then she sighed. "I only wish I could say the same about everyone back home."

That was another topic to which Clark hadn't given much thought. With the chaos of the past week, he'd barely had time to wonder how Ma would react to the twins. But his other friends and acquaintances in Smallville... What would *they* think, when they heard the news? "It's a lot to think about," he said, tugging at his collar nervously. "I mean, I'm still trying to figure things out between me and Lois. I hadn't even started to wonder how other people - besides you, of course - are going to react. People back home are going to have a lot of questions..."

Lana had just been coming back into the room with a couple of packets of coffee, and she snickered to overhear the last few words. "Oh, you'll start a *river* of gossip when folks back home find out about the twins." As she started the coffee brewing, she raised her voice to a mockery of breathless excitement and accentuated her Midwestern accent. "Clark Kent? That nice boy who went off to Metropolis? He did *what*? Ohh, wait 'til his ma hears about this." Lana dropped the imitation of their hometown gossips and added, "It's high time someone gave them something new to whisper about, anyway. They're *still* talking about me divorcing Don with no good reason."

Clark couldn't help chuckling; Lana had lightened his mood considerably. Martha, on the other hand, had narrowed her eyes at the redhead. "Well, Lana, I suppose you've had more time to get used to the notion of my son's children?"

"Martha, I've lived in Gotham, New York, and Milan," Lana said coolly. "The way people in Smallville like to stick their noses in everyone else's business is fairly laughable after you've been places like those. Now, yes, I was shocked when I first heard that those kids were Clark's. But we've both been hearing about them for a while now, haven't we? The possibility was first brought up to me - and not by Clark - around the time the twins were kidnapped."

"Yes, well," Martha began, but Lana didn't intend to be shrugged off.

"And to be honest, Lois is a city girl. Things are different in Metropolis. Relationships

tend to move faster, and a lot of things that would shock people back home are just part of everyday life..." Lana trailed off. It had just occurred to her that the twins were around six years old. Not quite seven years ago, those other Kryptonians had tried taking over the planet, and Superman had been conspicuously absent... *Well, I guess I can understand why he didn't wait, then. Suddenly aware of his own mortality and Lois right there as always...* "Given the circumstances, everything that was happening back then, I think we can be a bit more understanding."

"It's not that I don't *understand*," Martha said. "The mother in me just wants to crow with delight that I finally have grandchildren, and by all accounts they're both precocious and adorable."

"So give Clark a break," Lana said. "He's got enough guilt for five men, he doesn't need you to tell him where he went wrong."

"Thank you, Lana, but I think I can handle this without your help," Martha said. "I do believe I know how to raise my own son."

"Martha, he left thirty in the dust a while back. If he's not grown up by now, he never will be." The quick retort left Lana's lips before she could censor it, and the redhead covered her mouth in surprise. *Oh dear God, I've been spending too much time around Lois.*

Clark could barely stifle a snort of laughter, and Martha swatted his shoulder. "Well, Lana, I can see why you're such a fan of Ms. Lane," she said archly, but a little traitorous smile lurked on her lips.

"And I really wish the two of you wouldn't talk about me like I'm not here," Clark said. "Or like I'm five years old and caught with my hand in the cookie jar."

"Like Jason and Kala rifling through people's coat pockets for sugar-free candy," Lana muttered under her breath.

"All right, enough," Martha sighed. "Children, it's late. This old lady needs her rest."

"You're not old," Lana and Clark chorused.

Martha reached over to touch her son's arm. "Clark, I love you. You know that. Whatever happens, whatever you decide to do, I'm always here for you."

"I know that, Ma," he replied. "Thank you."

Mother and son simply looked at each other for a long moment, then both leaned toward each other for a hug. "Good night, son," Martha said. "Take care."

"I will, Ma," he replied. "I've got a lot to do, and I'd better get started."

Martha hugged him as hard as she could, knowing she probably wouldn't see him for a day or two. But Clark suddenly winced, and Martha drew back in alarm. "Clark? Are you okay?"

He held one hand against his side, making a disagreeable face. "I guess this wound isn't totally healed up yet. I left it bandaged, and it hasn't bothered me much all day, but it's still a little tender..."

"Let me see," Martha said, a trace of motherly worry in her voice.

Clark obediently started unbuttoning his shirt. Both injuries had given him little pangs before, but the euphoria of flying with Lois and then the twins had masked the pain. Really, he felt lucky to be alive. A few twinges were a small price to pay for being stabbed *and* shot with the one substance that could kill him.

He wasn't wearing the suit underneath his clothes, having had to stop by his apartment to change out of uniform before coming to visit. So taking off the buttoned-down shirt and undershirt bared his chest, the perfection of it marred only by two large white bandages. "I'll

be in the other room," Lana muttered, and Clark started to blush again. He'd forgotten she was even there.

Martha carefully pulled up the edge of the bandage on his side, and hissed with sympathy. The wound left by Luthor's kryptonite shiv was now a raised scar, slightly discolored. She touched it gently, and Clark flinched more because he expected it to hurt than because it actually did. "It seems to be healing well," Martha murmured. "The wound's closed, and there's no swelling, just a bit of bruising."

"Leave the bandage off, then," Clark told her. "It itches."

The bullet wound was worse; there had been more trauma to his flesh, and it was deeply bruised. But it was healing, too, and Martha sighed with relief that it wasn't any worse. "You'll be all right," she said with finality.

Clark put his clothes back on, the tips of his ears still a little red, and said, "Thanks, Ma. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll look forward to it." With one more kiss on the cheek, she let him leave. Lana stepped out of the kitchenette long enough to wave goodbye, smirking with amusement.

Ah, déjà vu. Barely a week ago, I was lying awake in this same bed, staring at the ceiling, so supremely uncomfortable that I couldn't sleep. And here I am again. Lois sighed, shifting a little. She and Richard had planned to let the twins sleep in the master bedroom with Lois, while Richard slept in the guestroom. But Jason and Kala had awakened while being put to bed, and sleepily insisted on having both parents nearby. So the two children occupied the center of the bed, sleeping deeply for the first time since their kidnapping, while the adults slept on either side of them. While Richard and the twins slept the sleep of the exhausted, Lois' restless mind had awakened early.

Being in bed with Richard - even with the twins as insulation - was distinctly awkward. At first, sheer exhaustion had let her sleep for a few hours, but now she found herself awake again, troublesome thoughts chasing each other around her mind.

For Lois, everything was in flux. She and Richard had officially broken up, but no one else knew it. And they were still presently living in the same house, a situation guaranteed to unnerve her. She worried about how their situation would ultimately be resolved; doing what was best for the twins was easy to say, but in practice they had many decisions to make. Who would keep the house? How would they arrange custody? How in the name of God were they going to be able to continue working for the same paper?

As soon as Lois firmly told herself to stop worrying about the difficulties she would face in breaking up with Richard, another fear popped up. She and Clark had many things to work out, too. She'd kept secrets from him and lied to him, and though Clark seemed to have forgiven her, Lois still felt guilty about it. He had done his share of damage to their relationship, as well, and though Lois had finally relinquished her anger, that didn't mean that she could simply turn around and give him her trust once again, as blindly and wholeheartedly as the first time.

Yes, we love each other, Lois thought. *But we loved each other the first time, and look what a mess that turned into. This isn't some fairy tale where the hero and the damsel in distress declare their love on the last page, and the story ends with 'and then they all lived happily ever after'. Being with someone, trying to make a life and a family with them, isn't so easy. In real life, there's always more to the story past the flowery declarations of undying love. There are always complications.*

Not least of which are my in-laws. Lois shivered just a little; Jor-El surely hadn't changed his mind about her. She couldn't begin to imagine how the hologram would react to the news that his precious son had gone *back* to the same human woman who'd tempted him from the path of greatness once before. Not to mention the illegitimate half-breed twins; Lois ground her teeth silently, promising herself that she'd put a bullet through the giant floating head if he said anything amiss about her children. It wouldn't hurt the hologram, but it would do a great deal for her feelings.

Then she remembered that Luthor had stolen the crystals. He'd been very anxious about a locked steel case on the helicopter, and Lois figured that the crystals were still in it. So maybe she would never have to deal with her father-in-law again. *Wait, father-in-law? What the hell am I thinking? I sound like my sister, calling Ron's parents her in-laws by the third date. Good Lord.*

Even if Jor-El was out of commission, though, she still had Mrs. Kent to worry about. Truth be told, Lois was more worried about her than anyone else. She knew all too well how much a mother cared for her children, and she'd seen how attached Clark was to his mother. Lois wasn't looking forward to being introduced to Ma Kent, the sweet little gray-haired Midwestern lady who'd raised Clark to such exacting moral standards... *'Good to meet you after all this time, Mom, I'm the woman who corrupted your son. Oh, and these are your out-of-wedlock grandkids. Surprise!' I'm sure she'll be thrilled. I mean, I just **have** to be exactly the kind of woman she wants for her son. Yeah, right - she probably hoped he'd marry someone like Lana Lang. Hell, what do I mean, like? He was stuck on Lana long before he knew I existed.*

Lois' shoulders shook with silent, mocking laughter. *I'm so screwed. I can't pretend to be anything like Lana. Mrs. Kent's going to hate me, most likely, just as much as Richard's mother did. I saw how much weight Jor-El's opinion carried with Kal-El, I'm not eager to see what happens when his mother gives him a piece of her mind about me.*

She wrenched her mind out of that track, reminding herself that Kal-El wouldn't leave her this time - he had never completely given up on her, not even when he had left the planet in search of Krypton. Always, he had held her in his heart, and never loved another. And she had absolutely no intention of letting him go. The love between them was the one thing Lois could be sure of, besides the twins. Her only question was, would it be enough to overcome all the obstacles between them?

*Not least of those is **which** man I'm going to be with. Clark or Superman? He and I and the twins know the truth, but the public doesn't.* It would look very strange if Lois and Superman were to resume the relationship everyone assumed they'd had before, while Clark spent a great deal of time with the twins. Richard, at least, had assumed Clark was their father, and others in the pressroom might know or guess. Rumors flew through the *Daily Planet* building faster than a speeding bullet, and if Richard's suspicions had been overheard by even one person, half the staff would know by now. If he and Lois became a couple, the fact of the twins' parentage would surely be flung in Superman's face every time he met the press.

On the other hand, they couldn't allow anyone to even imagine that Jason and Kala were Superman's. Lois had battled that rumor since they were born, sacrificing her own reputation for her children's safety. Look what had happened when just *one* of Superman's enemies found out about them: Lex had nearly managed to kill the entire family. If the twins' heritage became common knowledge, every criminal in the world would try to use them against their father - assuming they weren't kidnapped and imprisoned in some top-secret lab somewhere.

Choosing Clark presented its own problems. Anyone who had known them years ago would have trouble believing in Lois and Clark as a couple. She was the ambitious, aggressive, too-hot-to-handle star reporter, and Clark was the resident nerd - although he *was* at least as good a reporter as Lois herself. The only real time anyone at the *Planet* had seen him really hold his own ground was when he was fighting for a story. They seemed comically mismatched, to say the least. Would anyone believe that he had managed to get her, when no one else in the office could even get a date? Except Richard, of course.

Furthermore, if they somehow managed to convince people that they really were together, people would taunt Clark with the supposed history between Lois and Superman. The rumor that the twins were actually half-Kryptonian might be brought up just to torment Clark, no matter how many times Lois snarled at people for not being able to count. And every time Lois covered a Superman story, the whispers would start again. *He's his own competition all over again*, Lois thought. *No matter what we do, Kal-El's going to have a hard time of it. Only a scant handful of people know the truth, and the rest of the world will think him a homewrecker or a fool. Or both - one image problem per persona.*

A last terrible possibility occurred to Lois then. If she chose Clark, the secret of his identity might be irrevocably compromised. Everyone would compare him to her ex, and perhaps more than a few would start to see the resemblance. The similarities of height and coloring were easy to ignore when you actually met Clark, but if he announced that he was the father of 'Superman's girlfriend's' twins, it would certainly cause speculation...

Lois heaved an aggravated sigh and sat up in bed. *Enough of this. I'm screwing myself up to back down from this, the one thing I've wanted in my deepest heart for years. I never used to analyze things to death in the old days. I'd just charge in and make the best of what I had ... which is how I wound up with amnesia and a mysterious pregnancy.*

*No, diving in headfirst doesn't exactly work for me anymore. But neither does worrying myself into knots. This time around I'll be intelligent and actually **talk** about these things with Kal-El. **Before** we jump right back into a relationship of any kind...*

Firmly putting all of those speculations out of her mind, Lois got out of bed carefully. *This is impossible. I'll just make myself sick trying to puzzle this all out alone. Wait until you can talk to Kal-El. We'll figure this out.* Richard and the twins stayed asleep, the latter curled up together as if to be sure of the other's presence. Again, she caught herself gazing at the two of them, her heart aching. The two little lives that they had created hung in the balance on this one. There was more than just the two of them to consider this time. *We'll figure it out, most of all for them.*

Staying a moment more, the first rays of the sun starting to peek through the drapes, Lois finally turned and started downstairs to make a pot of coffee.

The next few days passed in a blur of activity for everyone involved. Clark stayed absent from work, and Richard told everyone he'd given him two weeks off. Superman was very visible around the city, helping to clear debris and rebuild. Feeling responsible for the destruction, he worked around the clock, taking only brief breaks to sleep. He wouldn't have done that if he hadn't brought Ma to his apartment; she *insisted* that he get some rest. The only thing he hadn't been able to do was see Lois and the twins, despite the fact that he had already started to miss them. After the way they had parted, he wasn't quite sure of the protocol. He decided to let her make the next move.

Richard called Lana the very next day, and she was delighted to hear from him. The day

after that, however, she started to be very difficult to reach, and he wound up leaving messages on her voicemail or at the hotel more often than not. With Lois and Clark both off work, Richard had precious little time to himself anyway. He still missed Lana, even though he felt slightly guilty about it.

Lana herself avoided Richard as much as possible, precisely because she wanted to see him so badly. She kept in touch with Martha and Clark, though, and even got a call from Lois when the reporter managed to get her ruined cell phone replaced. Lana wound up being a go-between, relaying messages from Clark to Lois when the two of them were too uncertain to call each other. That amused her, but talking with Martha made her a little uncomfortable. Especially when she groused to the older woman about how she really needed to get everything packed and head off to Milan, she was supposed to be making a circuit of the major fashion markets, her personal assistant had been calling twice a day ... and Martha simply looked at her, smiled, and asked why she was staying. Richard's roguish smile immediately popped into Lana's mind, and she changed the subject.

Lois tried to go back to work and was gently pressured into taking personal leave by Richard and Perry. Kal-El was busy with the city-wide clean-up and she didn't feel comfortable pulling him away from that, not to mention the fact that Lana had informed her that Mrs. Kent was now staying at his apartment. That had been reason enough to let things calm down more first, to let him contact her. Nevermind the fact that the separation had begun to tug at her. But she had nonetheless teased Lana about hiding from Richard, much to the redhead's surprise.

She and the twins spent a couple of days visiting with Ella and the Troupes; Lucy burst into tears on seeing them, having finally heard the truth about the danger they'd been in. Once everyone's tears had dried, Lois sent the twins outside to play with their cousins and sat Ella, Lucy, and Ron down at the big dining table to tell them that she and Richard were breaking up. "Amicably," she added quickly, seeing even Ron go pale.

"Are you serious?" Lucy said, wide-eyed.

"Of course," Lois groused. "Would I even *mention* it if I wasn't? Look, we've been having problems. And he's met someone else."

"That sorry sonofagun..." Lucy began, but Lois cut her off.

"And I approve," the reporter continued, making Lucy and Ron stare at her wide-eyed. "She's perfect for him, and I'm happy for them both." Lois didn't see the sly, knowing smile on her mother's face.

"Well... what about the twins?" Ron asked slowly. "And who's going to keep the house?"

Lois sighed heavily. "We're still figuring all of that out. You guys are pretty much the first to know."

"Do the twins know?" Lucy asked, glancing out the window.

"We're getting there," Lois said grimly. "They know something's up, but we want to finalize things before we try to explain it all. I'm thinking about taking them and getting out of town for a few days, and Richard will probably do the same later."

As for the twins themselves, they went back to school a couple of days later and were instantaneous celebrities. The story of how a bad guy kidnapped them and Mommy, only to have his plans ruined when Superman rescued them, was repeated throughout the school in tones of awe. Every time another child told them how cool they were for knowing Superman, Kala and Jason just shared a small, private smile. They were still having nightmares, but were sleeping in the big bed with Mommy most nights so she was right there to comfort them.

Besides, in some weird way their newfound fame made up for the bad memories.

Maggie dropped by the riverside house two days after Superman left the hospital. She found Toby camped on Lois' doorstep, hoping for an interview, and had to chase the *Star* reporter off before going inside. Toby couldn't leave without calling over her shoulder, "You have to talk to someone, Lois, it might as well be someone who actually cares how you're represented in the press!"

Any further commentary on her part was forestalled by Maggie threatening to lock her out of their apartment. Lois just shrugged; she had expected as much. Her answering machine at work was already clogged with requests from other journalists, and at least Toby had asked how she and the twins were doing before fishing for a quote.

Once inside, Maggie gave her the good news right away. "You're cleared," she said. "Forensics proved that whoever shot Grant had stepped in Riley's blood, and we have video showing that you never did. There won't be any charges."

"Thank *God*," Lois sighed. "Now if only I could get my gun back from that rat bastard."

"Well, I guess I can help you out a bit there," the lieutenant said. "You know there's a ten-day waiting period on handgun purchases in the city, right?"

"Yes," Lois growled, "and I didn't dare go out and buy one while Officer Smith was trying to hang me for at least one murder."

Maggie grinned and unbuttoned her jacket. Her service pistol hung at her belt, as always, but she was carrying a second gun in a shoulder holster. Lois recognized the rosewood grip and her eyes brightened. "Now, this is the model 65, not the model 60 you had. A little heavier and a little bigger, but it has less recoil and fires six shots instead of five. I already had my gunsmith polish all the working surfaces and lighten the trigger pull for you."

She set the gun and holster on the table, and Lois just grinned. "Thanks, Maggie. This goes a long way toward making me feel better whenever I hear noises at night."

"You're welcome," Sawyer replied. "Just don't expect a Christmas present this year. Or next year, for that matter."

On an overcast afternoon three days after he'd left S.T.A.R. Labs, Clark stood in front of the hall mirror, straightening his tie and smoothing down his hair. He was so focused on making sure he looked his best that Martha's voice startled him badly. "Well, son, where are you going looking so very handsome?"

Clark whirled around, still not used to sharing his small apartment with his mother. Having dinner cooked for him every evening was a definite plus, but random maternal supervision was something he could do without. "I'm going out, Ma," he said.

"With whom?" she asked, silver brows rising.

"What makes you think I'm going with anyone?" Clark asked.

Martha just chuckled. "Clark. I love you, son. When did you call Lois?"

"Earlier this morning," he muttered. "We're going to dinner. I figured she ought to know... Well, there's a lot we need to talk about. Especially if I'm going..."

"And you want to see her," Martha said shrewdly. "Don't look so surprised, son. I've been in love enough to know it when I see it. Just don't forget, there's still her fiancé to consider."

"Not anymore," Clark said. "Lois told me this morning. The engagement's off; Richard ended it, not Lois."

"Well, now *that's* interesting," Martha said, but Clark didn't let her interrogate him

further.

"I have to run, Ma. We're meeting in an hour, and I can't use any 'special' means of transportation to get there. Not in *this* suit, anyway." He straightened the lapels of his new black three-piece suit, silently praying that the city would take care of itself long enough for him to have an uninterrupted meal with Lois.

Lois was trying to hurry and get ready without admitting to herself that she cared quite so much about this dinner. *I will not act like some idiotic high-school girl, dithering all over the place because her crush asked her out. I will not. I ought to be a little more calm about this - we have six-year-old twins, for the love of God!*

In spite of what she kept telling herself, she was running late and panicking about it. She'd gone through her entire closet trying to find something to wear, something elegant but not overdone. Something that respected the occasion and the man she was meeting for dinner, but that didn't make her seem as if she'd put *too* much thought into the choice. The blouse and skirt she'd finally chosen now lay on the bed, and Lois was wearing only her bra and panties while she stood in the bathroom putting on her makeup. After all, Richard was at work and Ella had picked up the twins, so she had the house to herself.

So thinking, Lois put the final touches on her makeup and walked out into the bedroom, her mind firmly on getting dressed and out the door with enough time to make the dinner date...

A moment later, Richard just walked in the bedroom door and skidded to a halt. For one long second, Lois and Richard stared at each other in utter shock. Then he mumbled, "Sorry," as he turned to leave, and Lois retreated to the bathroom with a startled yelp.

She laughed nervously as she flung on a robe. *Oh my God, what's wrong with me? When did I turn into a modest little ninny?* "This is ridiculous. It's not as if you've never seen it before."

"Yeah," Richard replied, and his laugh sounded forced. "I was just coming in to get a different shirt. Olsen managed to spill coffee on me right before that stupid dinner with the investors." He paused, standing outside the open bedroom door while Lois picked up her outfit and retreated to the bathroom again. "So ... you're going out?"

"Yes," she answered, dressing quickly and telling herself she was being an idiot. *You slept with him for **three years**, Lane, why are you suddenly acting like this? Hell, you haven't been body-shy since you were a teenager. And there's not an inch of said body that he hasn't already seen. Get real!*

Richard was silent for a long time, then he said quietly, "With Clark?"

"Yes," Lois replied in what she hoped was a nonchalant tone, unable to look at him as her heart clenched. Why did the softness of his voice have to make her feel so guilty? "Momma has the twins."

"I'll get them after the meeting," Richard said. "Lois ... I was thinking about staying over at Perry's for a while."

She stopped in the act of putting her earrings in. Now she was the one who sounded hurt when she said, "Oh. I guess ... I guess that means we have to talk to the twins first. I don't want to surprise them."

"Very little surprises Kala," Richard replied. "She hears everything whether she wants to or not, and Clark already said something to them."

"She understands, but not completely," Lois said, adjusting the blouse slightly. She came

out of the bathroom looking very serious. "Richard, I don't think the kids have even imagined you moving out."

Richard raked his hand through his sandy hair, watching Lois hunt for her shoes with a slight smile. He didn't like it, but seeing her fidgeting around made him feel vindicated. At least he wasn't the only one who found this topic profoundly uncomfortable. "Well, that's something all three of us probably need to talk to them about. When he gets some free time, you know."

Lois slipped her heels on and glanced at the clock, wincing. Trying to stop feeling like her conscience was bleeding. She had never felt the urge to flee so badly. "Oh, *crap*. I'm gonna be late. Dammit. Richard, I'm sorry, I've got to get going..."

She'd been walking toward the door as she spoke, and Richard stepped to one side to let her pass. For an instant, it was almost like old times, brushing past each other casually on the way in or out of a room. For the last three years, Richard would have automatically taken the opportunity to steal a kiss, and for most of that time Lois would have already been tilting her face up to his in expectation.

Their eyes met for the first time since Richard came home that day, Lois' wide and wary, Richard's resigned and wistful. Lois' expression turned sadly apologetic as she placed her hand on his shoulder, neither of them knowing what to say.

Richard covered her hand with his and gave a little squeeze, forcing himself to smile. Lois looked up for a moment more, and then whispered, "Don't be noble for my sake. I know about her and it's okay. Call her, Richard. Forget about propriety and *call her*."

He laughed shortly. "I tried. She's not answering. Not returning calls, either. I guess she's not as interested as I thought she was."

Lois sighed, tilting her head as she shook it at him. "Richard. She's running *because* she's that interested."

"What?"

"Lana's been divorced once, and she's an old-fashioned girl. Plus, you two have known each other less than a month. She's *scared*. The only reason she came to Metropolis was to do a fashion show, and she went and fell in love with you. Not to mention nearly getting killed saving the twins - that wasn't on her day planner, either."

"Oh, nice to see you're comparing falling in love with almost getting killed," Richard replied with a touch of his usual sarcasm.

"Hey, it's two of the most terrifying things I know of," Lois said seriously. "All I want is for you to be happy, Richard. If she'll make you happy then I'm all for it."

"Well, I'm glad *someone* is," he said.

"She doesn't want to be a rebound, Richard," Lois told him gently. "I've known her long enough to know that. And she's probably never fallen head over heels this fast before. She knew her ex-husband for, what? Most of her life? Give the girl a chance to get her mind wrapped around it."

He nodded wearily, and said, "You'd better get going if you're already late. When should I tell the kids you'll be home?"

"Around eight, at the latest," Lois replied. "You think about what I said."

"Yes, General," Richard teased, and saluted her.

Lois grinned and touched his cheek before hurrying to leave. She waited until she was at the front door to call over her shoulder, "Smartass!"

And had the satisfaction of hearing Richard laugh.

Dinner was a strange event for both of them. Katrine's Ristorante specialized in upscale Italian cuisine, but most of the locals hadn't yet discovered it, so it was fairly easy for Clark to get a table where they could talk privately. Lois arrived only a few minutes late, finding Clark waiting for her. He had been early, of course. They shared a nervous chuckle over the fact that both of them had worn black - "Look, we're a matched set," Lois tried to joke anxiously.

They'd been out to dinner in the past, before Lois knew the whole truth, but she rarely thought of those as dates. It was *Clark* after all, her best friend, and half the time they'd been going someplace casual with Ron and Lucy after work. All of the coffee and donuts consumed at three AM while they chased a story together didn't count as dates, either - that was business.

This experience was something else entirely. Lois hadn't expected him to take her to the kind of restaurant that didn't print the price on the menu. For that matter, she had never imagined dinner with Clark to involve an unbearable level of sexual tension.

He was being *himself*, for one thing, not the clumsy and clueless person he was around the office. And the black suit fit him very well indeed, recalling the night of the Pulitzer ceremony to Lois' mind. As a matter of fact, he'd been wearing a black suit in that godawful suite in Niagara, too. The night she shot him and learned the truth ... the night the twins were conceived. God, it seemed like everything reminded her of something in her past with this man these days.

Lois started to blush and glanced down, feeling even more like a fool when she realized she was wearing the ankle-strap heels. Their waiter saved them by arriving, and Lois ordered wine with her portobello chicken marsala. After placing his own order, Clark scolded her gently. "Isn't it a little early for wine, Lois? It's barely four o'clock."

Lois' eyebrow arched up and she retorted without thinking, "Listen, you. If I have to sit across from you, looking like *that*, in a black suit that fits *that* well, and go home *alone* afterwards, I'm damn well having a drink." Clark was so startled he couldn't help laughing, and it was the richly amused laugh she could feel like her bones.

That set the tone for the entire meal. Unintentional double entendres flew back and forth between them, as always, somewhere between the usual Lois and Clark teasing and the bantering Lois and Superman had enjoyed. Lois limited herself to two glasses of wine, knowing she had to drive home, and for the most part they simply enjoyed each other's company and conversation during the meal.

After the last course had been cleared, Lois leaned back in her chair and sighed with pleasure. "Ummm. Clark, that was lovely," she said, the name seeming a little less strange after having used it for the last couple of hours. Then her lips quirked up, and she added in an almost-offhand way, "It only took seven years and a pair of twins to get dinner somewhere other than a diner."

He glanced up and saw her devilish smile, his own answering it. "What, dinner at the Fortress didn't count?" he replied in a low voice.

Hazel eyes gleamed with mischief. "Of course not. *I* had to tell you how to make the soufflé. Which was very good, by the way, if I do say so myself. And I do."

"So was everything else you taught me that night." His voice had gone very soft, and Clark blushed to have said such a thing. Not that it made it any less true...

Lois blushed to remember. *Oh dear God, I can't believe he said that. Out loud, even. I think that's the first time either of us has actually said something overt about it, in spite of all we've thought about and alluded to...* She couldn't resist upping the ante, however. "What, you're trying to discount the next morning?" Lois couldn't stop her voice from sounding

breathless, her expression softening.

"No, *that* was beyond the power of words to describe," he replied huskily.

The words hung in the air for a long moment, blue eyes staring into hazel, and in their minds the pair of them were taken right back to that night and the dream that wasn't a dream. The room suddenly grew warm, and both of them knew that they were only a word or a touch away from leaving the restaurant to finish what they'd started in the hotel room on Cape Cod. It had begun as a half-asleep mistake, but Lois was wide awake now, and her heart beat quickly.

Clark took a deep, shuddering breath, and she looked away from him, unable to bear the tension. Breaking eye contact seemed to help a little, and Clark chuckled nervously. "Lois, there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Fine, as long as I don't have to look right at you for the next five minutes or so," came her muffled voice, her face buried in her hands. The magnetism between them was as strong as ever.

He cleared his throat and pressed on. "I've been thinking... And this is the perfect illustration, you know. Neither of us can think clearly when we're around each other."

"That's one way to put it."

Clark toyed with his napkin, trying to figure out how to word it, and then sighed. "Lois, I'm going back to Smallville."

"*What?*" Her head came up from her hand quick as lightning to stare at him in shock, her heated thoughts suddenly evaporating.

"Not permanently," he hastened to say. "Just ... Mom needs to get back, and she doesn't much like flying alone. And I have leave time from the *Planet*. I can commute to my other job, but staying in Smallville will help me sleep better, I think. I've ... I've been having nightmares, and all of the noise of construction keeps waking me up, too."

The effort to restore the city had been going on round the clock, and most citizens weren't complaining about the noise level since it was rebuilding their homes. Kal-El could hear *everything*, but Lois knew that was only part of it. She looked at him very seriously and said after a moment with a knitted brow, "It's me, isn't it? You're leaving town because of me, because of this."

"I hear your heart wherever you are," Clark replied. "I ... Lois, I love you. I've known that for years. And I know you love me, too. But whether we can be together ... that's a little more complicated. A lot of things are going to change, for all of us. I just... If being around you affects me this much, I assume it does the same to you. And I don't want you to make a decision just based on this, on how much we long for each other."

Lois' brow furrowed even more. "I'm not..." she began, then stopped herself. He had a point. And it occurred to her that Clark didn't want to be a rebound either. "All right. I understand. I don't like it, but I understand." It was impossible not to feel just a little hurt.

He reached across the table and took her hand. "Lois, don't think I love you any less. And don't think I don't want us to be a family. I want that with every bit of my soul. But I want you to be sure this is what *you* want. I can't be half of who I am, like my father wanted me to be. It has to be everything, Lois. And it won't be easy."

"I know," she muttered under her breath. "It hasn't exactly been a walk in the park so far, you know."

"Yes, I know, and I'm sorry I made everything harder for you by leaving," he said sincerely.

Lois chuckled then, unable to help herself. "Oh, for crying out *loud*. I didn't mean *that* part of it. I meant the last week - the twins getting kidnapped, Luthor, all of us almost getting killed..."

"That, too," he said. "You and the twins will never be entirely safe if you're with me. But I can deal with that - I can keep you as safe as possible."

"I wasn't entirely safe from the moment I met you," Lois reminded him in a soft voice, eyes on his. "Especially not once I realized how I felt about you. Everyone in the world knows that Superman always comes to rescue Lois Lane."

"Always," he said, squeezing her hand slightly. "So. I just want to give you a chance to think without me constantly hovering nearby. I'll be in Smallville. I'll have my cell phone. You can call me anytime you need to talk to me. I'm not leaving, I'm just taking a break."

"How long?" she asked.

He shrugged. "A week, no more. I need to get back to work before Perry decides rehiring me wasn't such a good decision. Maybe less than a week. But it will give us both a breather."

"All right," Lois said with a deep breath that trickled out into a sigh, and she squeezed his hand back. "One week."

What About Now

The investors' dinner had gone much easier than planned. It turned out that they were just concerned over the repair costs related to the recent disaster, and Richard managed to soothe them far quicker than he'd expected. It helped that the *Daily Planet* globe was already back in place, courtesy of Superman. The investors had wondered why telling them about it made Richard chuckle, but he couldn't explain.

That left him with a couple hours free, and Richard decided to call Lana. Lois had practically insisted on it, after all. But this time, he wouldn't *just* call. Standing outside the Centennial Hotel, Richard dialed Lana's cell number and got her voicemail. Clearing his throat, Richard said, "Well, I guess you've been busy. Listen, I was in the area, and I thought I'd drop by. Anyway, if you get this message, I'm in the restaurant at your hotel. If you've got some free time, I'd be delighted to buy you dinner."

Richard winced slightly as he hung up; hopefully Lana wouldn't think he sounded like a stalker. To his surprise, he actually had to gather his courage to walk into the hotel. He hadn't even been this nervous over Lois, but then, he'd had a pretty good idea of what she thought of him. Lana, however, was another story. Richard had no clue how she really felt about him.

He waited nervously in the hotel restaurant for almost twenty minutes, wondering if Lana had gotten his message, if she would show up, or if she was even *in* the hotel that night. *It's a good thing I only had a light dinner with the investors already. My stomach's so knotted up, I probably won't be able to eat a bite. Assuming she even shows up.*

Half an hour passed with excruciating slowness, and Richard was ready to give up. But just as he turned to leave, he caught a glimpse of red hair at the restaurant entrance. Accustomed to Lois' level of confidence, it only then occurred to him that Lana might be as nervous as he was. That was the only explanation he could imagine for her to lurk just outside the restaurant.

The waiter had stopped by just at that moment. "Sir, would you like something to drink while you wait?"

Richard smiled. "Actually, if I could ask a favor of you..."

"Certainly, sir."

"If you go out the front doors, you'll find a very beautiful woman with red hair standing just to one side of the entrance. Her name is Ms. Lang. Could you let her know her table is ready?" Richard added his most winning smile to the request, and the young waiter cheerfully complied.

Lana was nearly as red as her hair when the waiter led her over to Richard's table. The International editor got up to pull out her chair, and Lana sat down with a shy glance at him. The waiter kept smiling the entire time he took their order, which fortunately amused them both enough that they could laugh at themselves.

Richard kept the conversation to small talk during the meal. For her part, Lana was perfectly willing to speak of trivialities rather than the intensity of her feelings toward him. At times their eyes would meet, and silence would fall for several long moments while they were captured by each other's gaze. Then one or the other would look away with a nervous chuckle, breaking the tension.

By the time they reached the dessert course, Richard was feeling much better. Lana showed all the signs of being captivated by him, which did wonders for his confidence and his appetite. The fact that he felt the same way about her still left him slightly nervous, but it was the kind of anxiety that kept him alert and witty.

Lana had been nibbling at her caramel cheesecake, and she finally set her fork down with a sigh. "If I eat another bite I won't be able to fit into anything in my wardrobe."

Richard took her hand gently, and Lana curled her fingers around his. Another silence descended, this one comfortable and affectionate. "I've been thinking about you a lot," he said quietly.

"No more than I've been thinking about you," Lana replied.

He ran his thumb over her knuckles, surprised to see her shiver at that gentle touch. "When ... when we were in the plane, going to rescue Lois, I said we had some things to figure out after everything was over."

She nodded, those amazing green eyes meeting his steadily. "You said something else that day, too, Richard. Right before you dove at Luthor's helicopter."

"Yeah..." His throat was suddenly dry. "Yes. I meant it then, and I still mean it now. I'm in love with you."

For the first time, Lana closed her eyes, but her fingers tightened over his. "I love you, too," she whispered. "God help me, I never meant to."

She almost sounded as if she would weep, and Richard brought her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles gently. "Hey, don't. Don't, Lana. It's not cause for tears."

"Is it?" That look again, and now he could see the fear in her eyes. "Richard, this is all happening way too fast. It hasn't even been a week since you broke up with your fiancée. And we barely know each other."

"We know each other well enough," he told her firmly. "I've seen you in a hell of a lot of different circumstances. I've seen you at your job and at leisure, around old friends and new acquaintances, and around the kids. Not to mention, I've seen you risk your life to save someone else's. *Several* someones, in fact, one of whom was my fiancée at the time. Your rival, if you want to be technical, and you put yourself in danger to save her."

"Speaking of Lois..."

"She's the one who told me to call you tonight," Richard said.

That left Lana momentarily nonplussed, and he took the opportunity to reassure her further. "I said I wanted to figure this out. You need time to consider, I'll give it to you. Lana, I'm not asking you to go down to the courthouse with me tomorrow morning or anything."

The remark had the desired affect, making Lana chuckle. "All right. And ... thank you. I know you're not used to someone who takes time to make decisions like this..."

"I've never met anyone like you," he admitted. "But I love you more for that, Lana. You're special."

"Charmer," she said, smiling.

And they kept smiling at each other like dazed teenagers until the waiter brought the check. They held hands, too, until he brought back Richard's credit card, and then it was time to go. Richard pulled Lana's chair out for her again, and tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow as they strolled out of the restaurant. She laughed softly at his gallantry, but her smile was affectionate.

At the doors, he asked, "Shall I walk you to your room, my lady?" His very old-fashioned courtliness clearly pleased her, and Richard meant nothing more than exactly what he'd said.

Lana, however, raised an eyebrow at him, reacting to the implication. "Absolutely not, Mr. White. I do have a reputation to consider." And if he had seen into her mind, he would have known that she wasn't angry with him. Her heart was beating faster at the thought. Lana refused him not because she thought he would try to finagle his way into her room, but

because she was afraid she'd invite him in.

Aware that he'd crossed the line, Richard just smiled. "To the elevators, then."

Lana acquiesced to that, delighting in his nearness. It had been a very long time since a man had made her feel this shy and wistful, long since she'd yearned the way she craved Richard's touch. So the walk to the elevators was slow, savoring every moment of each other's company.

Both elevators were on the upper floors, and Lana didn't particularly mind the wait. She was leaning slightly against Richard, breathing in his scent, when he whispered her name.

Lana turned toward him, looking up, and his arm slid gently around her waist. For a moment as he leaned down to her, she had the choice; she could've drawn back, and he would've let her go. But instead Lana tilted her face up and let her eyes slip closed in pleasurable anticipation.

She had meant to keep the kiss simple, but at the touch of his lips on hers Lana's defenses crumbled, and she found herself kissing him deeply. Even more surprising, she didn't feel a trace of guilt, only the sweet thrill of being in his arms and running her fingers into his hair. Time seemed to stop while they kissed...

Until the porter coughed politely behind them. They broke apart, Lana's cheeks burning even as they both laughed. No telling how long the elevator had been standing open waiting for them to get on; the porter standing inside just gave them an approving grin.

"Lana," Richard murmured, a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

She placed a finger over his lips, suppressing a delightful little shiver at the thought of how she'd been kissing him, and said softly, "Good night, Richard."

Still grinning, he caught her hand and kissed the back of it. "Good night, Lana." And she could feel the warmth in his eyes even after the elevator doors closed behind her.

Stanford closed the door of his room behind him and breathed a huge sigh of relief. At last, peace and quiet...

Lex had been in a boiling fury ever since they lost Lois Lane. The chain of disappointments that followed - Superman surviving, the helicopter breaking down, Kitty escaping - had only stoked his wrath. And then today's discovery ... Stanford shuddered to remember it.

The steel case containing the crystals had remained locked ever since Stanford gave it to Kitty - or so he thought. Lex had never let it out of his sight while they traveled back to Nevada, but as soon as they arrived at the lab complex here, he had taken the case into his own rooms. Stanford had begun to relax then, looking over the stacks of research reports that awaited him and meeting with his team. The fascination of the work had begun to calm his shattered nerves.

And then Lex had burst into the lab and ordered everyone else out. Though his voice had been low and controlled, the wild look in his eyes had made the scientists scatter. Luthor had placed the steel case on the table in front of Stanford, flipped it open, and asked softly, "Is this your idea of a joke?"

Instead of the Kryptonian crystals neatly arranged in foam, the case held only the fragments of kryptonite and an alarm clock. Stanford had stared, dumbfounded, feeling his spine turn to ice. If Luthor believed that he'd been betrayed... "Sir, I have no idea how that happened," Stanford had told him, his voice shaking. "But it certainly wasn't my doing."

"Oh? And can you prove that?" Lex had all but purred.

Stanford knew he still had the Lane woman's gun - he'd taken to running his thumb over the cylinder repeatedly in moments of stress - and the will to use it. He'd swallowed, hearing his throat make a dry click, and replied, "If I'd done such a thing, sir, I would be smart enough not to be here with you now. I would've run as far as I could the moment I was out of your sight."

Lex's eyes had narrowed then, and the frenzied anger in them had hardened into cold, bright rage. "True, you *are* smarter than that. But Katherine... She carried the case from you to me - and she took the first chance to run. I thought she was still upset with me, but it seems she was suffering from a guilty conscience."

Stanford privately thought that Kitty would've run anyway, and been wise to do so. She was no real use to Lex anymore, only an expense and a convenience. She had tried to kill him once, and defied him openly over Ms. Lane and the kids. Stanford had actually been surprised that Lex hadn't killed her before she managed to escape. But to his boss he merely nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"Well," Lex had said, closing the case. "I will deal with Ms. Kowalski in my own time. Don't speak of this to the men, Stanford. I've no idea what she did with the other crystals, but she can't have thrown them overboard. We might still be able to recover them. And if not," he had chuckled, "that's precisely why we made copies."

"Exactly, sir," Stanford had said. Lex had left moments later, and to the scientists drifting back into the lab he had appeared his usual cool, collected self. But Stanford was shaken and the rest of the day ruined for him. But it wouldn't do to appear too apprehensive, not when cameras monitored everything in the complex. Lex might interpret that as guilt and decide that Stanford had something to do with the loss of the crystals, even if it was only neglecting to lock the case firmly.

Now, at last ensconced in his private rooms, Stanford gave in to the shivers he'd been suppressing all day. Lex was sane - terribly, utterly sane. It wasn't madness that made him so dangerous, but that absolute sanity coupled with absolute ruthlessness. Wherever Kitty was, he hoped she had the sense to keep running.

The morning after her date with Clark, Lois woke up at her usual hour. Not even being on leave could stop her from rising early; though she hated mornings, she was too accustomed to her schedule to sleep in unless utterly exhausted. Grumbling, she started her morning routine.

It was only once she was in her shower and starting to come out of the fog that she remembered the words and actions that had passed between her and Kal-El before they parted. Biting her lip as the spray beat down on her, Lois sighed. *Maybe he's right. Maybe trying things this way is good idea.* But why didn't she believe herself? Shaking it off, she reminded herself that she had promised to think things through and forcibly cleared her mind.

Just as she started down the stairs, feeling more awake and confident after showering and getting dressed, she heard Richard start to swear and abruptly stop himself. That piqued her attention, and she hurried down to see him glowering at a newspaper.

"What's the competition done now?" Lois asked. Being assistant editors, she and Richard subscribed to *every* paper printed in the Metropolis area, and several of the major national papers as well. Of course, the *Star* was used to line Captain Jack's cage after they'd read it, but at least they always knew what the competition was up to.

Richard reacted oddly to her casual question. He hurriedly closed the newspaper, putting it behind his back. "Nothing important," he said. "Want some toast?"

"Sure, but right now I want that paper," Lois replied. She'd seen the masthead as he folded it shut, and to her surprise it was *their* paper. "What on earth could be printed in the *Planet* that you don't want me to see?"

"What makes you think I don't want you to see it?" Richard countered. Lois just rolled her eyes and held her hand out for the newspaper. He sighed, and handed it to her, but before letting go of it he said, "*You* were the one who told me to call her."

Now that sounded intriguing. "Gossip column, I presume?" Lois started flipping through looking for that section.

"Look, she hasn't been answering her phone," Richard said. "I finished glad-handing the investors quicker than I thought I would. So, since your mom had the kids, I decided to go over to the Centennial. I called Lana and left her a voicemail saying I was in the restaurant..."

The evening was sharply etched in Richard's memory, and while Lois read the article his mind lingered on Lana's green eyes, her amazingly red hair. Lois brought him back to the present with a snort of laughter. "Good God, Richard," she muttered, shaking her head as he looked away, unable to meet her eyes.

His embarrassment amused her, and Lois proceeded to read the blurb aloud. "Millionaire designer Lana Lang, due to arrive in Milan last Sunday, was spotted yesterday afternoon in the passionate embrace of an unidentified man. The couple was observed snogging for nearly five minutes in the lobby of Metropolis' Centennial Hotel, holding up elevator service. Ms. Lang has made her mark in the fashion world without succumbing to the temptations of the jet set lifestyle - at least, until recently. Now that her recent fall line has received rave reviews and she's apparently acquired her own boy-toy, who knows what Ms. Lang will do next?"

Richard had turned crimson, muttering threats toward the columnist. "Boy-toy," he growled. "In my own damn paper."

"Snogging," Lois chuckled. "Shouldn't have let Rita vacation in London. She brought home their slang. What the hell did you do, Richard, lean her all the way back like you were Rhatt freakin' Butler or something? You and I kissed in front of 300 people at the company Christmas party, announced our engagement, and *still* didn't get this much notice."

"It wasn't like that," Richard protested, then changed the topic hurriedly. "Did you know Lana was a millionaire?"

Lois grinned. "Don't change the subject. Is Rita exaggerating, or was it really five minutes?"

"And how was your date with Clark, Lois?" Richard countered. "You may not have made the papers, but he's better at flying under the radar."

"You're avoiding the topic again-"

"Damn right!" Lois had *never* seen Richard blush like that.

"-but I'll have you know he caught a flight to Smallville this morning." Lois crossed her arms and tapped the newspaper against her hip.

"He what?" Richard asked. "But ... why?"

Lois' smile dimmed a little. "He thought I needed some time to get my head together."

Her ex-fiancé stared at her. "That man is too damned chivalrous for his own good. I wouldn't have given you the chance to get away, not when you're so obviously meant for each other."

"That's what happened the last time, Richard, and look where we wound up," Lois replied. "The Zod Squad almost took over the planet, and I wound up with unexpected twins. He won't rush into things this time."

Richard nodded slowly. "Yeah, I can see that. I couldn't bear to lose you twice, either." Lois bit her lip, and realizing what he'd just said, Richard chucked her under the chin. "Cheer up. Not like you ever have to worry about that again. I'm not going to knowingly try to steal the girlfriend of a guy who can vaporize me with one look."

"At least you have that much sense," Lois retorted. She paused for a moment, her expression going very serious, and then she tilted her head to the side as she looked at him. Even though she'd asked him once, the question still caught him by surprise. "Do you love her enough to be completely serious about her?"

Clark stretched his legs as far as possible, thinking ruefully that airline seats weren't designed for men his height. Beside him, Martha was dozing with her headphones on; the in-flight movie was one she'd seen before. That left him alone with his own thoughts. And, perhaps inevitably, those thoughts were of Lois. Their date last night had gone very well, especially the end. He'd walked her to her car, and for a moment, just a brief instant, Clark had thought of kissing her. But then he'd seen a surprised look on her face, and thought to himself that of course she wouldn't kiss him then. Not when he was so clearly Clark, glasses and all, just the best friend with the puppy-dog crush. At that moment he hadn't exactly been the hero she loved.

For years he had dreamed of kissing her; a large part of being Clark Kent was looking wistfully after Lois Lane. But it was obviously doomed. No one like her would ever take anyone like him seriously. The kiss in the supply room had been too unexpected, and too quickly interrupted, for him to think much on it. Even the kiss in the hotel had been a shock, and Lois hadn't been kissing Clark then - she had been remembering the past, remembering Kal-El.

But last night, to his utter shock, Lois had kissed him. It had been surreal to see her looking at him so seriously just before she caught his tie and rose up on her toes, eyes sliding closed as her lips met his. No illusions now; she was wide awake, and she had chosen it. She had made the first move, and for once it hadn't been pulling his glasses off.

Clark smiled as he remembered it, the pair of them standing by her car, kissing leisurely and thoroughly. The urgency of their stolen kisses wasn't there, but a deeper passion was. He'd felt as though he could spend the rest of the evening kissing her, *just* kissing her, and be satisfied. And the memory of her taunt...

But all good things must come to an end, and Lois had eventually pulled away from him slightly. "Good night, Clark," she'd said softly, and he had stood by watching her drive away, a small smile on his face. Eventually the scent of her perfume and the warmth of her skin had faded, but not in his perfect memory. And though Clark had known even then that he would be leaving the next morning, he had begun to count the hours until he would have Lois in his arms again.

Clark sighed deeply, reluctantly returning to the present, and adjusted his glasses. He'd have to remember to take them off when the plane landed; in Smallville, he tended not to wear them. He shifted his feet again, trying to get comfortable and failing miserably.

Do you love her...? It wasn't as if Lois hadn't asked him this before, that morning at IHOP. It was the sincerity of the question that seemed to drive him speechless, and Richard spread his hands wordlessly. "I... Yes. I love her; at least, I'm almost totally certain. Lana's the one who's holding back, asking for time to decide." Richard sighed in frustration, raking his

hands through his hair in unconscious imitation of Lois. Lana seemed to want to hold off on calling it love; the one time she had said it, doing so had nearly brought her to tears. "I know for absolute fact that I really like her - a lot. She's ... well, she's nothing like you, but not in a bad way. If that makes any sense. I'd have to get to know her better - you know, when we're not being almost killed - to be a hundred percent sure if this is love. But I like her, I respect her, and the attraction's definitely there." And he winced slightly to say it, hoping the answer hadn't been too frank.

Lois winced too - it didn't precisely bother her to hear that, but picturing it in her mind did sting. Seeing them together would likely be rather difficult. Still she asked, "Do you think you could love her? I mean, be with her, marry her, all of that?"

"Yes," Richard said without hesitation. "If ... if she'll let me. I'm still not sure how she feels."

"Then I'm happy for you. Genuinely happy." Lois' smile grew teasing as she added, "What *is* it with you and difficult women, Richard?"

"I had my lifetime allotment of easy ones in college?" The moment the words left his mouth, Richard groaned and dropped his face into his palm.

Lois just rolled her eyes with a sigh. "We know, we know. Good-looking pilot, four years older than most people there, fresh out of military service, and bursting at the seams with smarm and charm. It's a wonder you made any kind of grades."

"Says the woman who lived with my *uncle* through most of college," Richard countered. "*Except* on weekends, when you cut your own frighteningly efficient swath through the available masculinity. Perry may say he should've been your father, but living with him meant absolutely no parental supervision."

"One, you had more partners in college than I have in my whole *life* - and *don't* tell me it's a guy thing. I spent a whole year with the same person, in fact, which you never did 'til you met me. Two, I kept a 3.8 GPA in spite of my wild weekends, and Perry freakin' *admires* me for it."

"Fine, the moral high ground is yours," Richard said, raising his hands in defeat. "But just try to tell me you and Clark shook hands when you left the restaurant. If I busted you two in the supply room when we were still engaged, I hate to think what you'd be like now that you're free."

Lois turned an outraged look on him, but it quickly faded. *Idiot, he figured it out. And you thought you were being so sly that day. Like we didn't have the guilt all over our faces.* "That wasn't intentional in the supply closet, you know. Neither one of us expected... I was just about to blister his ears for even being within a foot of me and..." Her expression was painfully sheepish, "It just kinda happened."

"Now *you're* avoiding the question." Richard didn't really want to hear details, either, but since his business was public knowledge anyway, it only seemed fair. Besides, this was something like prodding at a sore tooth - it hurt, but it was almost irresistible. And sometimes, if you did it enough, you'd stop feeling the pain.

The dark-haired woman paused to take a deep breath, and then let it out with a sigh. He had a point, whether it was an uncomfortable one or not. And it was very likely that he wouldn't understand the logic. Very few people beyond her and Kal-El could. Slowly, as it was something she was still getting used to, Lois replied, "No, you're right. No handshake. Funnily enough, I don't think we've ever done that. But, I did something last night I never thought I'd do in a million years. Last night, I kissed Clark Kent."

Richard's eyebrows went up. "Oh really," he said, strangely nonplussed. "You mean you ... wait. You *had* to have kissed Clark before."

"Not Clark," Lois said, eyes downcast. Understanding dawned in Richard's eyes, but Lois' mind had returned to the previous evening, to Clark walking her to her car. He had always been so chivalrous, and yesterday was no exception.

A little of that old Lois-and-Clark awkwardness manifested when they arrived at the car. Lois had unlocked the door and turned to say goodbye, only to catch a certain very serious look in his eyes. Clark was standing quite close to her, and Lois looked up at him. At that moment, she had realized that she was on the verge of kissing him. Kissing *Clark*. The glasses were still on, and she'd been calling him Clark all night. No use telling herself Clark was just a disguise Kal-El wore. Clark was as much a part of the man as Superman was.

He had seen the look of surprise on her face, seen her hesitate. His slightly hurt, slightly wistful expression was very familiar to Lois, but at that moment she hadn't wanted to see it cross his handsome features again. He was the father of her children, she ought to get used to the reality of who he was ... all of who he was...

Lois had caught his tie, looking up at him intently. She had never let herself cross this line with Clark, always pulling the glasses off as she kissed him. But it surprised her to realize that she wanted to now. There was no danger any longer of leading him on, of shattering his feelings for her by indulging his crush on her and then not following through. She'd suddenly thought, *Well, Lane, you can finally have your cake and eat it, too. You get both men - your best friend **and** the hero.*

Thinking that, she had leaned up to him, and Clark slid his arm around her waist shyly. Lois had a moment to think how unreal it must be for him to kiss her at last, when as Clark he had been pining over her for so long. And then all questions of identity blurred beneath the thrill of the kiss, as if it were the first time. That intense magnetism between them wasn't deterred by a pair of glasses and a different kind of suit.

A long moment later, they'd stepped back, both breathless. Lois had looked up at him smiling and murmured, "This doesn't mean I'll stop calling you Kal-El, Clark."

In the present, Richard cleared his throat. "So, what are you going to do? While he's gone, I mean?"

"I'm not sure," she replied diffidently.

"You're not going to wait, are you?" he asked. "Lois, you never wait for anything. Permission, traffic, Christmas morning - you always jump the gun if you can."

"Which is what we're trying not to do," Lois replied, sounding harassed as she put her head in her hands.

"Hey, it's all right," Richard soothed. "It's just... This is a side of you I've never seen before. Lois Lane, fire-breathing reporter, being cautious and sensible. It's practically a sign of the apocalypse."

Lois peeked out at him from between her fingers and sighed, but there was a hint of amusement in her voice. "Shut up and make me some toast, boy-toy."

Richard's outraged reply was cut off by Jason running into the room. "Daddy! Kala's callin' me lizardbreath again!"

His sister was not far behind with her own complaint. "Daddy! Jason pulled my hair!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"You were callin' names first!"

"Jason, you *wanna* be Godzilla! That means you're gonna get lizardbreath!"

Lois and Richard just looked at each other and burst out laughing, thoroughly confusing both twins. "I guess they're back to normal," Richard finally wheezed.

"You two, stop fighting, get upstairs, and finish getting ready for school," Lois said as soon as she got her breath back. Seeing Kala open her mouth, Lois added sternly, "I don't care *who* started it, you will *not* be late for school today. Go. *Now*."

Sulking, the twins turned and trudged upstairs. Richard and Lois needed none of Kala's special hearing to catch the little girl's bitter words to her brother. "She always believes you."

"Does not! She yelled at me, too," he hissed back.

"Does so!"

"Does not!"

"Jason, Kala!" Lois called. "One ... two..." The twins' suddenly racing footsteps sounded more like a couple of elephants than a pair of kindergarteners.

"Oh, man," Richard sighed, shaking his head slightly. "You think Clark is ready for this?"

"They're six, and *I'm* still not ready for them," Lois replied dryly. Then she smiled and added, "I do love them, even if they drive me crazy. They'll probably have me as gray as my mother by the time they hit high school."

Lois almost managed to settle into a routine over the next couple of days. *Almost*. Not going to work was still driving her nuts, but the extra time she spent with her family more than made up for it. Especially now that Perry wasn't answering her phone calls. Having dinner with Ron and Lucy, window-shopping with her mother, or just spending an afternoon playing with the twins was precious, the more so for how close she had come to never being able to do those things again. Every moment spent with them seemed golden, and it almost eased the persistent ache in her chest.

Almost. Kal-El was out of touch, in Smallville, giving her time to decide. He had the cell phone and she could call if she liked, but she had kept herself busy as not to seem too needy. Lois had already made her choice; her heart had made it the moment he returned, little as she wanted to admit that even to herself. But she understood what this meant to him. Kal-El would never be comfortable in a relationship with her if he felt he'd somehow 'stolen' her from Richard, so this separation was necessary.

Speaking of Richard, he and Lois were still feeling their way along the new parameters of their relationship. It seemed they would still be able to be friends after the breakup; a few sharp words had been exchanged, but they quarreled less now than when they were together. Richard had decided, after walking in on her half-dressed that time, to stay with his uncle. Lois could see the logic in that decision - if they weren't constantly around each other, such incidents were less likely to occur and wound them both with memories. And she had spent last night in the most lonely and melancholy of states. It was over and they knew that, but it was a lot to adjust to. And the house seemed a lot emptier without Richard in it.

Worse, Jason and Kala were with him at Perry's tonight. In their absence at afternoon, every little noise was magnified, even the clocks ticking unnaturally loudly. The near-silence made Lois tense, and she had been prowling around the house as the afternoon wore on. It was simply impossible to get comfortable in her own home. She'd tried to lose herself in a book twice, but had reread the same page several times without getting any sense from it. Television was out as well; at this hour, all that was on were reruns of ridiculous sitcoms, the never-ending parade of talk shows, news she'd already heard at noon, and the most banal

programming of all, reality TV. Lois had turned the television off and tossed the remote onto the couch in disgust when the antiques road show started to look good.

That was how Lois had wound up in her study, staring at her computer and missing the twins. She hadn't wanted to explain too much to Jason and Kala just yet, although it was clear that they had strong suspicions. All of the adults needed to get themselves settled first, and explain things to the twins only when the three of them were certain of what would happen. She knew that Kal-El had spoken with them on the subject just enough to reassure them that they were loved, and Lois and Richard had both offered the same sureties. They avoided talking of the future, a final break with this life they all knew, and if Lois was honest with herself, that was at least partially because she was afraid the twins would blame *her* for the upheaval in their lives.

*Oh, yes. I can see this discussion going so well. "Jason, Kala, you both remember a time before Mommy met Daddy, but for most of your lives he's been here, telling you bedtime stories and taking you to school and watching old monster movies with you. Well, because Mommy's decided all of a sudden that she loves your biological father more, we're going to change everything you've come to rely on. **Everything**. Mommy can't stand to stay in this house with all the memories, so we're going to move, and Daddy won't be living with us anymore. And maybe if we're really lucky, freakin' Superman, who happens to be your father, will come and live with us and disrupt your lives even more." Dear God.*

Lois shook her head at those thoughts, sitting in her study with a mug of coffee. Why did this always have to be so damned difficult? No matter how much Jason and Kala liked and respected the man they now knew was their father, it was a lot of changes very fast, and they had never been pleased by that. And this was never something she had ever asked them to do. *This is such a mess, and I have no idea just how they'll react. Except I'm pretty sure it won't be good. This is the hell of being a parent - you have to do what's best for the kids, even if they don't necessarily like it. I'm sure Kala would be pleased as punch if she could keep both daddies in the same house...* The reporter allowed herself a snort of laughter at that notion, trying not to acknowledge the guilt. *Not snowball's chance in Hell of that. Clark and Richard get along well enough, thank God, but with me under their noses all the time? No. Besides, the office gossip would go wild.*

With those melancholy thoughts plaguing her mind, Lois brooded and stared at her coffee mug. The possibility of a wonderful future lay in front of her, one in which Lois could finally have the man she had always wanted, could reunite him with his children. An end to secrets, an end to guilt. But how was she to get from here to there without breaking apart everything in the process? Sighing, she leaned her head against her palm. *What am I going to do? How can I even begin to get this right?*

The radio had been playing softly ever since settled in the study, and now a new song came on. The singer's voice matched her own feelings, full of longing and hope and a shadow of loss. Slowly, Lois raised her head.

*Shadows fill an empty heart
As love is fading,
From all the things that we are
But are not saying.
Can we see beyond the scars
And make it to the dawn?*

*Change the colors of the sky.
And open up to
The ways you made me feel alive,
The ways I loved you.
For all the things that never died,
To make it through the night,
Love will find you.*

*What about now?
What about today?
What if you're making me all that I was meant to be?
What if our love never went away?
What if it's lost behind words we could never find?
Baby, before it's too late,
What about now?*

Lois sat very still, listening, her coffee forgotten. Once before she'd heard this same man on the radio, singing words that might have been plucked from her own heart. This time, it seemed almost as though Kal-El were calling to her through the music, his yearning for her as strong as it had ever been. The song continued, weaving into Lois' mind and heart, speaking of love that had never disappeared, only dimmed. Like a fire banked beneath ashes, it needed only a breath across the embers to spring to life again.

*Now that we're here,
Now that we've come this far,
Just hold on.
There is nothing to fear,
For I am right beside you.
For all my life,
I am yours.*

*What about now?
What about today?
What if you're making me all that I was meant to be?
What if our love had never went away?
What if it's lost behind words we could never find?*

*What about now?
What about today?
What if you're making me all that I was meant to be?
What if our love had never went away?
What if it's lost behind words we could never find?
Baby, before it's too late,
Baby, before it's too late,
Baby, before it's too late,
What about now?*

Stunned by the poignancy in the man's voice, Lois just sat there, the echoes of the music resonating through her soul. Her coffee had grown cold by the time her eyes lost their wistful

faraway look, filling with determination instead.

Clark had spent the past couple of days keeping himself busy. He was still visiting Metropolis during the day, helping with the reconstruction, but during those trips he studiously avoided seeking Lois out. He'd said he wanted to give her time and space to be certain of what she wanted, and even eavesdropping on her was a kind of cheating.

The twins, however, were a different story, and he practiced listening for their heartbeats. God forbid anything should ever happen to them again, but if it did, he wanted to be ready. Flying over their school and singling out the distinctive rhythms of their hearts made him feel connected to them, and to their mother.

Martha had also found ways to keep him occupied around the farm. She was worried about his wounds still, but after a few more days' exposure to the sun, they looked like old scars. That set both their minds at rest, and it was with a certain amount of pleasure that Clark helped her milk the goat and weed the garden.

Nights, though, were another matter. At night Clark was profoundly lonely. Ma went to bed early, and so did nearly everyone else in town. The only people awake close to midnight were a few local teenage boys whose energy was inexhaustible, and they were preoccupied with their own pursuits. By day, Clark had plenty to keep his mind and body active, but unless an emergency occurred somewhere needing Superman's attention, at night he suffered enforced idleness.

So he lay awake as he had the past two nights, staring up at the ceiling, missing the city. Missing *Lois*, if he were honest. *I haven't been away from my job at the paper for a while, either. I'm not sure if I miss it because it kept me busy and informed, or because I was almost guaranteed to see Lois every day while I worked there.*

Clark chuckled softly to himself. *Heck, I miss them all. Perry trying to be gruff so no one notices how much he cares about us; Jimmy and his never-slackening enthusiasm; Ron inviting me over for dinner; even Richard, whom circumstances say I shouldn't consider a friend.*

I wonder how Richard and Lana are getting along. She's absolutely smitten with him, and every time she and Ma talk you can hear the wistfulness in Lana's voice. I hope everything works out for them. They both deserve happiness.

Thinking of Richard led to thoughts of Jason and Kala, and Clark's heart ached even worse. The twins, *his* twins ... he should be spending every spare moment with them, trying to make up for the years he'd lost and would never get back. The thought ran through him bitterly, and he nearly got up right then and flew to Metropolis in search of them.

No, he told himself sternly. You missed six years. A few more days won't make that much difference, and they need time. Time to come to grips with the idea that you're their father, time to cope with Lois and Richard breaking up. And the three of us need time to decide what we're going to do so we can explain it to them without sounding like we haven't got a clue. It's never good for children to see their parents floundering for a solution. We can't let Jason and Kala start blaming themselves for all of this. They have enough to deal with just having been kidnapped by Luthor.

The thought of the megalomaniac touched Clark's soul with frost. He'd looked for Lex after the first few days, which had largely been spent in critical repairs around Metropolis, but Luthor seemed to have vanished. It was too much to hope that his helicopter had crashed, and Clark assumed his nemesis was still alive. *I'm almost afraid to find him now. Lieutenant*

Sawyer contacted me - as Superman, of course - about some strange crystals they found on board the yacht. At least those are back where they belong now - not that I've had the courage to use the father crystal - and guarded by some of the Fortress' less benign security devices. I can't take chances anymore. But there's no telling how much Luthor already learned, and he may still have kryptonite.

Thinking of the Fortress had brought his mind right back to Lois. She was the reason he hadn't spoken to Jor-El. Clark couldn't handle his father's condemnation at the moment. At least his mother seemed content to let him handle the situation, having stated her feelings on the topic.

But oh, how he missed Lois. The sunset the other night had been glorious, and he'd yearned to share it with her. One of the local boys had bought himself an old hotrod, and Clark had wished Lois were around to impress the kids with her car knowledge - nothing made her feel better than surprising people who underestimated her. And Ben had come to dinner last night, making Clark wish fervently for Lois' presence to restore his sense of humor.

Sighing, he admitted defeat. He and Lois had both said they would call if they needed each other, and as long as Clark stuck to casual topics he could soothe himself with her voice and not feel like he was pressuring her. Reaching for his phone, he flipped it open and dialed her cell phone.

"Clark?" She sounded very startled but not sleepy, so he hadn't wakened her.

At the sound of her voice, he sighed and lay back down on the bed, the phone against his ear and his eyes closed. "Hello, Lois. I was just... How are you?"

Her tone was strangely guarded as she replied. "I'm ... fine. What about you?"

"Bored," he admitted. "I miss ... the city, you know. You, Perry, Jimmy, everyone at the office, really."

"Oh, so now I'm in the same category as Perry and Jimmy again, huh?" He could hear the smile in her voice, the warm and teasing tone that was just like old times.

"Not hardly," Clark told her. "You're in a class by yourself, Lois, always have been."

"You're sweet," she said, half-distractedly. "So what brings you to call me at almost midnight?"

Clark glanced at the clock. "Yeah, it's four minutes 'til midnight here. Almost eleven, your time. I figured you might be up, and I just wanted to talk."

"I plan to be up for a few more hours," she replied, and her voice was wary again, almost secretive. "Anything in particular you want to talk about?"

"No, not really. I ... Lois, I wanted to hear your voice. I miss you." Clark could've kicked himself for saying it, after all his promises to himself about not pressuring her.

"I miss you, too," Lois murmured back. "I'm glad to hear it, Clark, considering how my evening's been."

"Oh? How bad was it?"

"Not so much bad as - holy shit, Clark, do you *really* have a town called Possum Trot?"

The question seemed so out of the blue that Clark could only answer it, wondering why she would suddenly ask something like that. "Well, yes, it's a little town a few miles from here. Never incorporated..."

His first thought, that she'd been looking at a map, vanished. Unincorporated towns like Possum Trot didn't appear on most maps. About the only other way she could've seen that name would be to drive past the sign for the turnoff.

The sign that was barely two miles from the Kent farmstead. And now that he let himself

listen, Lois' heartbeat was awfully close by... "Lois, *where are you?*"

"Umm..." While she hesitated, he took note of the sounds in the background of their call. Not just static, he could faintly hear a car engine and the rush of air as she drove.

"Lois," he said a little louder, jumping out of bed and scrambling to find his pants. And a shirt. Shoes - no, shoes weren't necessary. "Where *are* you, Lois?"

"Well, if I'm where I think I am, look out a window in a couple minutes," she said sheepishly.

"My God," he whispered in shock. Clark dropped the cell phone as he got dressed, his hands shaking with delight and anxiety. She was *here*, right here in Smallville, only moments from his touch. Never in his wildest imaginings did he think Lois would come after him, drop everything and fly halfway across the country just because she missed him. His heart pounding wildly, he raced across the upstairs hall and nearly tripped going down the stairs. Even his powers were forgotten, his entire mind focused on the thought of Lois arriving here.

At last he made it through the darkened house to the door, flinging it wide just in time to see headlights up the road. Clark flipped the porch light on to alleviate the darkness and hurried down the front steps barefoot.

Lois pulled the rented car up in front of the house, getting out almost shyly. Clark had stopped just past the steps, staring in disbelief at her while she looked at him nervously. *Please don't send me away* was written in her expression, and for a long moment they simply looked at each other.

Then Clark broke into a broad grin and opened his arms, and Lois ran to him laughing. No words could express his joy at seeing her, so Clark swept her up in a joyful hug and swung her around and around. For once, Lois didn't scream to be let down, but only locked her arms around his neck and laughed the louder.

When he let her down again, Lois looked up at him with her eyes shining and whispered, "For keeps this time."

Clark leaned his forehead against hers, still grinning, and whispered back, "For keeps."

Neither of them looked away from each other, not even noticing the presence that watched them from the open door until Martha quietly cleared her throat.

Indelible Impressions

Good Lord, it sounds like a herd of wild elephants tap-dancing, was Martha's first confused thought on waking. The thumping and scrambling down the stairs was followed by the front door creaking in protest as it was flung open. *Clark*, Martha thought with a sleepy smile. He hadn't been that noisy in a long time; it reminded her of his clumsy adolescence...

She *didn't* hear the door close again, and that was unusual. Then again, even when he'd had to leave the house at night for an emergency, Clark was considerate enough to be quiet about it. He could *fly* to the door without ever touching down. So why the ruckus just now?

A curious question, and one Martha decided to explore. She had trouble falling back asleep these days, so she might as well pull on a robe and go downstairs. Besides, the front door was standing open.

Martha didn't need to turn on any lights to find her way downstairs silently. But light flooded into the living room from the open door, and she frowned. It was downright odd of Clark to wake her up like this, and then leave the door open and the light on. Something far out of the ordinary had to have occurred...

The sight that met Martha's eyes was certainly strange enough. Clark was standing in the yard, his back to her, and a red Mustang was parked in the drive. *What on earth?* Martha scowled, until she took in her son's posture. Head down, arms in front of him - and then she saw a woman's hands clasped around the back of his neck.

She'd seen Lois Lane before, but not until that moment realized how much taller and broader Clark was. A slight smile curved Martha's lips - so she had come here after him, been brave enough and in love enough to drive out to the middle of nowhere after her man. Uninvited, no less. It was really very sweet.

The pair of them were laughing softly, and Martha just barely heard her son whisper, "For keeps." That was when she cleared her throat, making them both turn around wide-eyed.

Seeing the mother of her grandkids at close range for the first time, Martha took stock of her quickly. Lois Lane was a full head shorter than Clark, and delicately built. Bright hazel eyes, wavy black hair, striking features, and an expression of pure terror.

Clark smiled sheepishly, still too delighted by Lois' presence to worry overmuch about the introduction. "Oh, Ma, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up."

"It's all right, son," Martha told him. "Lois Lane, I presume?"

The raven-haired woman blushed scarlet. "Yes, ma'am - Mrs. Kent. I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up. I just wanted to let Clark know I was here. I'll go into town and get a room..."

Martha chuckled. "My dear, we only have one motel in Smallville, and there's no one at the front desk after nine o'clock. Besides, there isn't much point in staying in town. We have a guest room, and I'd think you would spend most of your time out here with Clark, anyway." The hint of amusement in her otherwise factual tone didn't seem to relax Lois at all, perhaps because the younger woman knew Martha was still a bit guarded about her.

Clark had slipped his arm around her waist, Lois sheltering against his side while he looked up worriedly at his mother. In his gaze Martha read his desperate hope that she would like Lois, that the two women he loved best would learn to love each other as well. *The jury's still out, son*, Martha thought to herself, but she softened her expression slightly. "Come on in, Ms. Lane. You're welcome to stay with us. Clark, honey, get Ms. Lane's luggage in, and then grab some extra blankets down from the linen closet."

"It's okay, it can wait 'til morning," Lois said quickly, but Clark just grinned and shook his

head at her. The keys were still in the ignition, and it only took a few seconds for him to open the trunk and get Lois' bags.

Lois had to follow his mother in and upstairs while he stopped to get the blankets from the linen closet. Martha's ulterior motive quickly became clear; of the three spare rooms available, she took Lois to the one next to her own and furthest from Clark's, surely the opposite of the choice her son would have made. A set of sheets were stored in the dresser drawer, and Lois scurried to help Martha make up the bed. "Please, Mrs. Kent, you don't have to go through all this trouble for me," she said, hating how pathetically needy for approval she sounded.

"It's all right, Ms. Lane, you're a guest," Martha insisted.

"If I'm a guest, then please, it's Lois," she replied.

Martha pulled the corner of the top sheet straight and held out her hand across the bed. "Martha. Pleased to meet you, Lois."

Lois shook her hand awkwardly, having to stretch a bit across the bed, and then Clark walked in with her luggage and two thick blankets. The look Lois gave him said *Help me* loud and clear, and he couldn't help chuckling. "Ma, Lois, it's awfully late, and I'm sure Lois has had a long flight and a longer drive. Shouldn't we all go back to bed and we'll talk over coffee in the morning?"

Hazel eyes met his pleadingly. They had only just seen each other again... Then she saw him wink at her, very quickly. "That's probably a good idea," Lois said. "Martha, I'm terribly sorry for waking you up at this hour."

"Dear girl, at my age I wake up in the middle of the night all by myself," Martha told her. "And it wasn't you that woke me, it was Clark making as much noise as half a dozen bowling balls bouncing down the stairs."

"Sorry, Ma," he said.

Martha chuckled. "All right, children. Good night, and I'll see you both in the morning." But she didn't leave just yet, standing right outside the door and clearly waiting for Clark to come with her.

He winked at Lois again as he said good night, slipping his cell phone partially out of his front pocket and putting his finger over his lips. Lois grinned in understanding. "Good night, Martha. Good night, Clark." The moment her door closed, she took out her cell phone and turned the ringer off.

Evidently Martha wanted to talk to Clark for a few more minutes, because he didn't call right away. It gave Lois time to get ready for bed and curl up under the warm blankets, so when her phone's screen flashed she picked it up quickly. "Hello," she whispered, burrowing down under the covers.

"Hi," he whispered back, and Lois could hear the smile in his voice. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I'd say me, too, but I'm starting to second-guess my intelligence," Lois muttered. The whole ride from Kansas City she had been praying that she could manage to save herself from being face to face with his mother until the next morning. Her sigh was heavy. "I seemed to have made a better first impression on you back in the day."

"Oh, Lois. Are you really as scared as you looked?"

"Yes," she hissed into the phone. "This is your *mother*, Kal-El. And I know she means more to you than Jor-El ever will; she's a larger part of your life. She determines whether the next thirty or so years of our lives are heaven or hell. Not to mention her reaction to the twins -

which, I get the feeling, might be part of the problem."

"She's not terribly happy with me," Clark said. "Ma hasn't been making a huge deal of it, but I know she's not pleased."

Which is what I've been worried about for a while now, Lois thought with a stab of guilt. But that emotion didn't sit very well with her anymore, especially not where the twins were involved. "What does she expect us to do, turn back time or something?" Lois groused in frustration, and Clark had to chuckle softly.

"I wouldn't, you know," he told her. "I wouldn't want to lose that night. Or Jason and Kala. But if we had it all to do over again, knowing what we know now, I think I would've left you your memories. And I would've stayed here."

"Damn right you would've," Lois said quickly. "Because I wouldn't have even let you consider it."

"That's my Lois," Clark chuckled, "protecting me from my own stupidity practically since the day we met."

"Oh, stop," she sighed. "I have *never* called you stupid."

"No, you haven't," he replied. "But fiddling with your memory and then leaving without telling you turned out to be pretty stupid decisions."

"It wasn't stupid, you were trying to spare my feelings," Lois said, finding herself arguing his point.

"Yes, well, I went about it badly."

He could almost hear her shrug. "We've been over that already and it's over. We both made mistakes. And thank you for dropping the use of the s-word. I've heard that enough from your daughter in the last year. Last year's was *random* because she heard one of the interns use it as an adjective. Had blonde hair with blue streaks. Kala thought she was the most amazing thing in the world."

Clark smiled. "Kala's a handful, isn't she?"

"You have no idea," Lois groaned, laughing as she thought of their daughter's many misadventures. "Some of the things she's pulled over the years... It's a good thing she's adorable, or I would've sold her on eBay. Special Deal. Rare Half-blood Kryptonian to the highest bidder."

"Lois!" Clark almost forgot to keep his voice down. "You'd never do such a thing, and you know it."

"Yeah, I'll remind you that you said that when *you've* had thank the nice firemen for getting her down out of the tree," Lois retorted. "I haven't told you yet about the time-"

Just then, Lois thought she heard a floorboard creak in Martha's room. "I think your mom's up," she whispered, not realizing just how much they sounded like a pair of teenagers. "We'd better go before she hears us."

"Yeah," he whispered back. "See you in the morning, Lois. I love you."

"I love you, too," she replied with utter sincerity, and hung up the phone with clear reluctance, placing it on the nightstand to the side of the bed. It was amazing how far away two doors down seemed in this kind of circumstances. Eyes falling longingly on the dark wood of her own door, she thought with feeling, *I miss you already*.

Oh, stop it. Mama Kent is likely on guard for her baby boy. He'll be there in the morning; it's not like he's going anywhere. Stop acting like a starry-eyed girl and get some rest. With a sigh of annoyance at herself, Lois nestled down into the covers and stared at the ceiling, utterly convinced that she'd be wide awake for hours in this unfamiliar place. It was

like that her first night anywhere she'd never been...

She'd barely had time to roll over onto her belly before Lois was sound asleep.

Richard was having a dream in which he was at the beach, trying to build a sandcastle. But every time he turned to pick up more sand, a wave would rush in and destroy his work. Then a fish swam up and grabbed his foot, trying to swim off with it...

He woke, muzzy-headed, and realized that Jason had hold of his toe and was shaking it. "Daddy?" the little boy whispered.

Sitting up, Richard winced at the stiffness in his back. Perry's couch wasn't terribly comfortable. "Son? Why are you awake at..." He glanced at the clock, eyes widening. "...two o'clock in the morning?"

"Had a bad dream," Jason said matter-of-factly. "Kala woke me up, but now I'm thirsty. Can I have a drink of water?"

"Sure," Richard told him, ruffling his hair. He wouldn't let himself scowl; these nightmares weren't unexpected, considering what Jason and Kala had been through, but the way the twins had taken to resolving them struck him as odd. Neither child ever came to their parents for reassurance when their dreams turned vicious, not since the kidnapping. Instead they comforted each other, and almost seemed reluctant to talk about the nightmares.

Richard padded into the kitchen and got a small glass of water for Jason. While the boy sipped it, Richard knelt beside him, looking levelly into Jason's amazingly blue eyes. "Jason, you know if you have a bad dream, you can come get Mommy or me or Uncle Perry, right? We're all pretty good at chasing the dream-beasties away."

The expression on Jason's face was too serious for a six-year-old. "Uh-huh. But this dream was about somethin' real."

"About Lex Luthor?" Richard's heart sank.

Jason scowled, his brows drawing together. "He's a bad man. He hit Kala! He tried t' hurt Superman, too!"

"He *is* a bad man," Richard said. "And you know what happens to bad people, right?"

"They always get what's coming to them," Jason replied. He and Kala had been taught from an early age that you get back what you give out, and people who did bad things would always - *always* - have to face the consequences of their actions.

"That's right," Richard said. "Bad people mess themselves up, and they get caught, and then they're punished. Besides, Luthor didn't get what he wanted, did he? You and Kala are okay, your mommy's okay, and Superman's fine, too. Luthor's ugly island is floating out in space somewhere, and the bad guy *lost*. So he won't come mess with *us* again, not after he got beat so badly this time."

"He'd better not," Jason said darkly. "Nobody hurts Kala or Mommy. Not *ever*."

Richard smiled and kissed his forehead. The sentiment would've been quite cute, if it hadn't come from a child capable of throwing a grand piano. "C'mon, tiger, let's get you back in bed. You've got school tomorrow."

"When's Mommy coming home?" Jason asked.

Richard didn't let himself wince. He'd told them Mommy had business in Kansas, which was true in a way. It was just that her business was for herself and the twins instead of for the paper. "I'm not sure, Jason. A couple of days at the most."

Jason nodded sleepily. Normally, an answer that vague wouldn't have satisfied him, but it was very late. Richard tucked him back into bed, kissed both kids, and went back downstairs

thoughtfully.

Lois had called him yesterday afternoon, and he'd heard the decision in her voice before she even asked him if he could keep the twins a little longer. She was going to Smallville, going after Clark, and Richard fully supported her. She had also told him that she would be back in two days, or would be sending for the twins. He didn't mind that, either, especially when Lois was careful to reassure him that she wouldn't keep the kids in Kansas for more than a few days. Not because missing a few days of kindergarten was so critical, but because she didn't want Richard to think she was trying to keep them from him.

He knew better, now, and told her so. Telling her he trusted her seemed to prompt a rush of confidence from Lois, as well. Her voice had dropped as she admitted that she was nervous. Richard had chuckled then, and he laughed softly now to remember what he'd told her. "You attacked Lex Luthor and rescued Superman, Lois. Why be afraid of a sweet little old lady in Kansas?"

Early the next morning, Ben arrived at the Kent farm. He noticed the red Mustang parked in the drive and wondered who could be over visiting. Clark hadn't rented a car when he and Martha had come in three days ago; Ben had met them at the airport and driven them home. So who could the Mustang belong to?

Ben's curiosity got sidetracked by Barkley, his elderly beagle. At fifteen, Barkley was too old to jump down from the truck, but he was standing in the seat sniffing industriously. Ben carried him to the porch and set him down, where Barkley sniffed deeply at the welcome mat and made low chuffing noises. "Hush, Barkley," Ben said affectionately. The soft grunting noises the dog was making now indicated something interesting on the mat, perhaps a chipmunk that had scampered across the porch.

The door was unlocked, and Ben stepped inside, automatically smiling at the thought of seeing Martha. She truly was the delight of his days, and over the past six years Ben had come to understand why Jonathan Kent was always such a happy man.

His smile lasted even though the first person he saw that morning was Clark, the younger man still not entirely pleased to see *him*. "Good morning, Clark," Ben said as he stepped into the kitchen. Ben met Clark's eyes, then his gaze slid past the boy to his mother, frying bacon at the stovetop. "Morning, Martha."

"Morning, Ben," she replied warmly, smiling at him over her shoulder. Clark also returned the salutation, but he was merely polite.

"Breakfast smells good," Ben commented, touching Martha's shoulder lightly.

She elbowed him gently. "You'd say that no matter what, Ben Hubbard. You're just trying to cadge a free meal."

"No, I'm here for the company, not the food," he replied. "Even though your cooking *is* delicious."

"I'm going to feed the chickens," Clark muttered.

Martha sighed and rolled her eyes as the door closed behind him. She glanced at Ben and they both chuckled, then Ben leaned in for a quick kiss.

"Say, I meant to ask..." Ben began, but he was cut off by Barkley's hoarse, bawling howl.

The sound was incredibly loud indoors, seeming to belong to a much larger dog, but it was unmistakably the bay of a hunting hound. Martha and Ben both jumped, startled in spite of the fact that Barkley lived up to his name on a regular basis.

What surprised Ben even more was the feminine shriek of surprise that followed

Barkley's howl. "*Holy SHIT!*" the unknown woman screamed, sending two sets of gray eyebrows skyward.

Barkley got his breath back and bawled again, louder than before. Ben scrambled to get his dog, he and Martha yelling, "Shut *up*, Barkley!" at the same time. The back door slammed as Clark rushed in, evidently having heard the howl or the scream.

Ben found a dark-haired woman clutching the banister, one hand clasped over her mouth in mortification. Barkley was standing at the bottom of the steps, looking near-sightedly up at the stranger and grunting as he tried to catch his breath. His master picked him up before he could bay again, and then turned to regard the newcomer.

She was striking, a little too much stubbornness in the curve of her jaw and a little too much fire in her hazel eyes for the conventional notion of pretty. But beautiful, slim, and at the moment, caught between shock and shame. "I'm so sorry," she started to say.

Barkley howled again at the sound of her voice, and Ben jiggled him slightly. "Shut up, you old hound," he said sternly. "No fault of yours, miss, he barks at everyone he doesn't know. Half the people he *does* know, too, until he can smell them - he's getting senile in his old age."

"That's dog's not senile, he's just out of his mind and always has been," Martha muttered darkly. She quickly shoved a dog biscuit in front of Barkley's nose, and after fumbling for it a bit, the beagle snapped up the treat, spraying crumbs all over Ben's sweater.

"Give him a break, Martha, he's half-blind and stone deaf," Ben scolded her. "Barkley's fifteen years old, in dog years that's..."

"Dead," Martha retorted. "Which is what he'll be if he ever waters my newel post again."

"Good Lord, woman, that was a year ago!"

Clark had come in while they were talking, took one glance at the situation, and hurried into the kitchen. He came back out just as Lois reached the landing, and slid a fresh cup of coffee into her hands.

By that time, Barkley had finished slobbering up the crumbs from Ben's sleeve, and he stretched his neck in Lois' direction. She patted his graying head tentatively while he sniffed at her hand, and then he relaxed. While Barkley wagged his tail and looked vaguely up at Lois, Clark murmured, "Welcome to breakfast, *chez* Kent."

Lois snickered softly, rumpling the dog's ears and sipping her coffee. Before she could reply, Ben had turned his attention back to her. "I am sorry about Barkley, miss. Pleased to meet you, I'm Ben Hubbard." He had to set Barkley down to shake her hand, and the dog began to sniff slowly and thoroughly at Lois' jeans.

"Lois Lane," she replied, shaking his hand and smiling warmly. At least *someone* was glad to see her this morning.

The name came as something of a shock. "Lois Lane? The reporter?"

"Yes," she replied, looking questioningly at him.

"Martha, why didn't you tell me?" Ben asked, then looked back at Lois. "Martha's a big fan of yours, Miss Lane. She has just about every article you ever wrote. I'm proud of you for winning the Pulitzer, too - people needed a kick in the seat of the pants. They should've been trying to help each other instead of complaining because Superman was gone."

Lois' eyes had gone wide with startled pleasure; no one else had realized how the infamous editorial had been intended. She chuckled, her smile widening. "Thank God someone got it! Most people back home tended to think I was just angry at him." Clark's gaze had gone thoughtful while he recalled the exact wording of the article.

Martha was giving Ben a cool, steady look, which no one noticed. "Actually, Ben, Clark's an even bigger fan than I am."

"That's right, he works at the same paper," Ben remembered.

"And they've got two kids together," Martha added casually. All the blood drained from Lois' face as the older woman continued, "Twins, about six years old now, right?"

Absolute silence, during which Lois seemed to shrink into herself, and Clark turned to look at Martha in disbelief. Only Ben saw the flicker of dismay in Martha's eyes, but instead of taking back the remark she just regarded Lois calmly. It was left to Clark to say quietly, "I just found out recently, when I came back from my trip. Lois had no way to get in touch with me while I was traveling."

"Well, that must've been a surprise," Ben said, trying to act as if finding out you had an unexpected pair of first-graders wasn't shocking in the least.

"You have no idea," Lois said shakily. She had never even seen the comment coming. Not to mention the fact that it hurt to know for sure exactly how much she had wanted the older woman's approval. And just how unlikely it was looking.

Just then, the scent of scorched meat reached all of them. "Darn!" Martha exclaimed, hurrying into the kitchen to deal with the burning bacon. Ben followed her, leaving Lois with Clark. He tried to give them both a friendly, reassuring smile as he left.

Martha was muttering under her breath as she scraped the burned bacon out of the skillet. Ben walked up to her and stood there with his arms crossed, Barkley waddling arthritically along behind him. "Martha Clark Kent, what on *earth* has gotten into you?"

She raised an eyebrow at him, but Ben wasn't as easily put off as her son. After a moment, she sighed. "Ben, I'm not accustomed to that kind of language being used in this house."

"I don't think she meant to say it," he replied. "Did you see the poor girl's face? Besides, that isn't all. You're not catty enough to make a remark like *that* just to get back at her for a little profanity."

"A *little* profanity, is it? And in the Lord's name?" Martha huffed, putting the skillet back on the stove. "Well, Ben, I can't say I'm exactly thrilled to have the mother of my illegitimate grandchildren - neither of whom I've never met or even heard of before the last few months - turn up at my house in the middle of the night *unannounced*."

"Did she say why, Martha?" Ben asked, leaning against the counter.

"Clark told me he told her he was leaving Metropolis to let her think about things," Martha said, her back to him as she started frying eggs. "She was engaged to another man, up until last week, I'll have you know. He wanted her to have some time to be sure, and I guess she made up her mind enough to come after him."

Ben heard the faint reluctance in Martha's tone. On some level, she admired the Lane girl for having the chutzpah to come out here. But something else still bothered her, and Ben figured he knew what it was: the children. For the moment, he said, "Awfully romantic of her to come out to the middle of nowhere after her man, don't you think?"

Martha just huffed, muttering at Barkley to shoo when the dog started sniffing at the burned bacon in the trash. Ben continued, "She must really love Clark to have made up her mind this fast. If it was you and Jonathan, don't you think you would've done the same? No matter if it was halfway across the country, in the middle of the night, or if his mother was potentially hostile."

Her shoulders slumped as she sighed heavily. How could she argue against that way of

thinking? "I might have done it for Jonathan," Martha said. "I might do something just as foolish for you, Ben."

"So you see..." he began, but was interrupted by Clark stalking into the room alone.

It was easy to forget how tall Clark was, and how much muscle was on that broad-shouldered frame. The man was so unassuming that most folks took his sheer size for granted. But not now. Now the thunderous look he was giving Martha made him seem every inch of his six-foot-four.

Before Clark could say a word, they heard the front door open and close again, followed by the Mustang starting up and driving off. Martha's eyes went wide, and she said in startled tones, "She's not *leaving*, is she?"

"No, Ma, she's not," Clark said steadily. "But if you want me to go back home and take her with me, I will."

Ben kept silent and out of the way; he'd never heard that kind of steel in the young man's voice before. *Please, Martha, don't say anything foolish. Don't make the boy choose between you and the woman he loves.*

He had never seen Martha look so defeated. "Son ... I remember when this *was* home."

"Not anymore," Clark told her quietly. The hurt in his voice was clear. "Not if I'm not welcome here - and if she isn't welcome, neither am I."

Martha moved the skillet off the hot burner and faced her son squarely. "Clark, Lois is welcome here. And so are your twins. I just... I was a little disconcerted by her language."

"Lois worked her way up the ranks in the newspaper, Ma," Clark said. "At the time she only had two choices: be one of the old boys, or be one of their secretaries. So she takes her coffee black, she smokes, she can knock down shots of vodka, and she talks like one of the guys, too. Not to mention, her father was military; she'd heard her share of salty language at home, too. It's a part of who she is, but not all she is."

"That doesn't excuse..." Martha started stiffly.

"And Barkley scared the daylights out of her," Ben added. "Out of all of us, really. Martha, she was horrified at herself for having said it in your hearing. The poor girl's trying to make a good impression..."

"That's the *only* reason Lois was awake at this hour," Clark confirmed. "She knows you and I are early risers, Ma. Lois is a night owl. She gets up early enough to get to work, but on weekends she sleeps in if she can. And last night she drove two hours from the airport after a five-hour flight. I'll guarantee you she was trying to impress you by getting up at dawn on so little sleep."

Martha sighed with frustration. Ben wisely collected his beagle and took himself out of the conversation, leaving mother and son alone to talk about the real problems.

Lois drove aimlessly, torn between anger and shame and heartbreak. *How in the hell could I have screwed that up so bad, so fast?* She wasn't sure whether to be furious with herself, or angry at Martha Kent, who seemed all too eager to judge her.

For the first time in a long time, the General's Daughter rose up, not necessarily trying to be hurtful, but giving her a calm wake-up call. *What kind of idiot were you for coming here? It was fine when you were in the city. It was just you and him, and no one else's opinion mattered. But out here? You're dreaming, Lois. Never happen. The Good Boys aren't supposed to be with Girls Like You, in a mother's eyes. And one that you can have kids with before you marry? Hah! You should have known better, Lane. Reality check. Go home and*

wait for him. And just pray that everyone eventually forgets this trip. Just be glad you got the man and make sure he never has to choose.

No, none of that was right. Or was it? Was there no way to fix this situation? "Dammit, why does everyone's parents hate me?" Lois growled, glaring at her reflection in the rearview mirror. Well, that wasn't entirely true; Richard's father had been fond of her, but he had always bowed to his wife's opinion, and Sylvia had never missed an opportunity to harp about Lois. Either she was *bold as brass* or ***much*** *too opinionated for a lady* or *too much like a boy* or... Lois had taken pains to behave around her, but to no real avail. His mother's opposition had been set in stone, though, the moment that Lois insisted - and not quite politely - that Sylvia's dogs be locked up while the twins visited. One 'playful' nip on Jason's ankle was one too many for the reporter, and Sylvia had never forgiven her putting her foot down.

With Clark's parents, though, Lois had fared even worse. Jor-El considered her a lower life form that distracted his son from his mission, and now Mrs. Kent... Lois was surprised to suddenly blink tears of frustration out of her eyes. *I didn't want to come bursting in at midnight, I didn't mean to swear this morning, I wanted her to **like** me. I know how much Clark loves his mom, and I could've dealt with Jor-El's bullshit if she would back me up. I guess that was too much to hope.*

She'd been driving past fields of winter wheat, and finally came to a crossroads. There was a gas station on one corner, and some shelves next to it that were probably part of a produce stand during the summer. Lois pulled in at the pump and started searching through her purse for her wallet.

"Fill 'er up, ma'am?" The voice outside her window startled Lois, and she looked up into a friendly smile. The station attendant was a wiry older man, and at her blank look he added, "Be glad to wash your windows and check your oil, if'n you'll pop the hood."

Understanding dawned. Lois hadn't seen a full-service gas station in a very long time, but she welcomed the extra attention. "Yes, thank you," she replied, opening the hood. "I'm going to go inside for a minute. Nothing to eat this morning. What kinds of breakfast foods do you have?"

"Lotta junk only kids 'n' tourists eat," the older man replied with a smile. "But the sausage biscuits 'r pretty good. Make sure you heat 'em up; microwave's in the back. Coffee's fresh, too."

"Thanks." Lois took his advice once inside, getting the largest coffee cup available and dosing it with sugar. That, and two biscuits, would be breakfast. No one was behind the counter, so she walked back to her car, only to see that she was no longer the only customer.

An old Camaro had pulled up across from her Mustang, and four teenage boys were clustered around it. The older man looked up from his work to nod in response to one of them, and that boy started filling up the Camaro's tank.

The oldest of the four, a tousled blond who wore his shirt collar turned up, was looking with interest at the red Mustang. "Your car, ma'am?" he asked.

Another thing Lois wasn't quite used to: polite conversation from a kid who looked like he spent recess smoking behind the gym. Then again, back when she was their age, hadn't she been the same way? "Yes," she replied, glancing at his curiously, then gave an approving nod. "Nice Camaro. Custom exhaust?"

He grinned broadly. "Yup. Did it myself. Dad's a mechanic, he shows me stuff. That Mustang looks like a sweet ride. What kind of engine you got in it?"

"Stock," Lois replied with a little shrug. A little white lie never hurt anyone. Especially

when they didn't have to know any better. "I've only had it two days, though."

The kid ambled over to peek under the hood. Lois went to stand beside him, still sipping her coffee and nibbling on the sausage biscuit, which *was* pretty good. She saw his eyes flick away from the engine, lighting quickly on her jeans-clad legs and traveling up to her raven hair. The glance was so brief that she nearly missed it, but Lois couldn't help her grin. *I may not have any luck with midwestern grandmothers, but I can still charm the daylights out of anything male. And this time it was the last thing on my mind.* It felt good to be appreciated, even by a kid who was more entranced by the car than by her. *And the mood I'm in right now... If I was ten years younger and hadn't met Kal-El, kid...*

He leaned back with a grave sigh as the gas station attendant finished topping up Lois' coolant. "Nice car, but it'd never beat mine on the road," he said sadly. "Maybe when you've had a chance to work on it some... I mean, stock, it'll do about one-forty. Now if you hooked it up with nitro and put in some custom exhaust..."

"That'd give me more horsepower, yes," Lois said knowledgably, one brow arched. She knew she shouldn't jerk the chain of someone that much younger, but it was just too easy. Unable to resist, she added with a serious expression that was ruined by looking the kid in the eyes. "But it's not how much power you have under the hood that wins the race, you know. It's how well you can handle it."

His eyebrows went up slightly, and his three friends snickered. "She got you," one of them teased. "Walked right into that!"

"You're right, Miss...?"

"Lane. And it's Ms., not Miss. I prefer not to sound like my great-aunt Tessie."

"Ms. Lane," the boy said, offering his hand. When she grinned and shook it, he continued, "I'm Wade Carmichael. And you're right - cars don't win races, drivers do. If you're ever out on state road 63, I wouldn't mind having some competition."

"I'll keep that in mind, Wade," Lois said. Little did the kid know, he'd managed to restore her confidence and her good mood. And after paying the attendant and thanking him as well, she got back into her car feeling considerably better than she had that morning.

As she drove off, Lois thought about her current situation with a little more equanimity. *I should've known Clark's mother wouldn't be delighted to meet the Corrupter of Innocence who seduced her son and then presented him with a pair of out-of-wedlock twins. Really, what right did I have to expect her to welcome me into the family?*

Her hands tightened slightly on the steering wheel. *No, my mistake was in coming out here scared and needy, crawling to Martha Kent with my tail between my legs. I've been acting like I did something wrong. No wonder she's treated me as the fallen woman - I practically sewed the scarlet letter on myself!* Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard a dry chuckle; the General's Daughter was pleased that her little pep talk about Good Boys and the girls they *should* be with had had the desired effect.

But don't screw this up, the Romantic said quickly, the interior voice wincing. *Please, please, don't go back there and tear the poor woman's head off. This is his **mother**, the twins' grandmother, you **have** to get along with her!*

"We have to get along with each other," Lois muttered aloud, a spark of that old determination in her eye. "And that's as much her job as mine. Respect is a two-way street. She's so worried about me being worthy of her precious little boy, let's see if she's ready to prove *she's* worthy of being my kids' grandma."

Both of her alter egos went silent at that, one radiating smug satisfaction, the other

nervous. Lois' lips curved up in a smile as she turned onto the highway, ready to burn off a little frustration. *Look out, Mrs. Kent. You're about to meet the **real** Lois Lane, the one your son fell in love with. And she doesn't have a lot in common with the nervous little mouse you met last night.*

After Ben sidled out the door, Martha and Clark just looked at each other for a long time. The expression on his face was unfamiliar to her, a steady, sober kind of sternness. It was even a little frightening, actually. As if a stranger stood before her instead of the boy she'd loved and raised.

And that's the difference, Martha reflected. *This isn't my little boy, this is the man he grew up into. I've been told all parents have trouble seeing that.*

Clark returned her gaze, even though he was sick at heart. He would *not* be forced to choose between his mother and Lois. The two women were going to have to learn to deal with each other, not just for his sake, but for the twins'. Clark wouldn't deprive Jason and Kala of one of their grandmothers, either. They had already missed meeting Jonathan Kent and Sam Lane, and they would only have the holograms of Lara and Jor-El. *Life is too short to waste quarreling with each other,* Clark thought. "Ma..." he began.

"Son..." Martha said, and both of them hesitated. She sighed. "Clark, I'm sorry I snapped at her."

"So am I," Clark said. "Ma, Jor-El had *plenty* to say about her, and why she wasn't good enough for me. Lois heard it all. She knows perfectly well that she's not the average midwestern mom's ideal daughter-in-law..."

"She's not my daughter-in-law. Yet."

"Maybe not ever," Clark retorted. "Lois... Lois is pretty gun-shy on the topic of marriage. Her parents' relationship wasn't like yours with Pa. I'm not sure whether it's totally true - Ella Lane doesn't strike me as the kind of woman who could be cowed - but Lois thinks of marriage as a shackle that can't be escaped."

"So she believes in having kids out of wedlock, but not in divorce?" Martha asked speculatively.

"We didn't mean to have kids," Clark said, and there was an edge in his tone that she'd never imagined possible. It dawned on Martha then that Clark had never brought a woman home to meet her - never even spoken seriously of one except Lois. Childhood infatuations didn't count; not that he'd acted on those feelings, either.

But Martha wasn't one to back down, either. "Clark, don't try and tell me she got pregnant by accident," she said, keeping her voice level. "She made a choice."

"She wasn't the only one," Clark retorted. "Ma, we didn't even know it was *possible*. I'm from another planet. There was no reason to suspect that she *could* get pregnant."

"Still..."

Clark had had enough. When he'd first mentioned the possibility of the twins being his, Martha had been stern, but quickly forgiving. She seemed to bear more of a grudge against Lois, though, as if that night had been Lois' fault. *Entirely* her fault. Clark decided to disabuse her of that notion. "Ma. If anyone's to blame, it's me, not Lois."

Martha blinked, and he could see her marshaling an argument, so he cut her off even though he winced inwardly at the thought of what he was about to say. "Lois didn't seduce me, Ma. *I* started it. If anyone was seduced, it was *her*."

Taking The Wheel

"And the supplier shipped us forty yards of *beige* silk instead of the indigo, which is going to set us back another week while they get us what we actually ordered in the first place," Lana's assistant, Kay, groused as she paced back and forth. "Oh, and you know, Sadie was doing the alterations in Milan. Well, she misread a label on some cold medicine - she doesn't read Italian - and took, like, four times the dose. She's always been pretty quiet, so no one noticed that she fell asleep in the middle of work. Oh, and they had to let out all her hems and do them over, because she was basically stoned on NyQuil. Not to mention, the guy we're renting the villa from says he'll have someone out to look at the..."

Lana was listening, but didn't interrupt. In truth, her attention was starting to drift, and she began absently toying with the water-ring her soda had left on her desk. Most of the things Kay was reporting on had already been dealt with, or would be soon. None of it actually required Lana's personal intervention. Actually, she didn't even *need* to be in Milan personally until next week. Although Kay didn't seem to agree...

"And if *you* were out there, like you should've been last week..." Kay continued, and Lana decided to put a stop to that.

"Kay," she said quietly. When the younger woman turned to look directly into her employer's eyes, she hushed immediately. Lana Lang was easy to work for - she was polite, undemanding, pleasant to be around, and she was always both sensible and flexible about what she asked of her assistant. If she had a fault, it was that she was a trifle *too* nice, the kind of person who sometimes got taken advantage of in the cutthroat fashion world.

Now, though, those sea-green eyes held a hint of steel, and her tone was quite level. "I appreciate your concern, Kay," Lana said. "But I'm not needed in Milan until next week. Perhaps not even then. More work will get done if 'the boss' isn't there hovering over everyone's shoulders, making them nervous, and anything that requires my personal touch can be handled by phone. For the moment, I'm staying in Metropolis. I have business here."

Kay had gotten into the habit of talking to Lana like a friend instead of a boss, and one moment of apparent sternness didn't change a long-established habit. "You mean your boy-toy," she retorted, and immediately regretted the words.

Lana just gave her a cool, steady look. "Richard is one of the reasons I'm staying, yes," she replied calmly. "And you've made your feelings known about that silly little gossip blurb before."

The younger woman crossed her arms. Since she'd started this, she might as well finish it. "Lana, I've known you most of a year. And you've *never* let anything distract you like this before. Especially not men. But this guy... You're willing to drop *everything* after the show and run off with him, and now you're putting off the trip to Milan because of him. What's going on? Out of all the guys who've asked you out, why is this one special?"

Lana sighed; it was true that she had kept herself clear of romantic entanglements since her divorce, in spite of having received quite a few invitations. Life was just easier that way, letting her focus on her business. "Kay, leave it. Richard is... He's a good man. And he's *not* after my money, whatever you might think." *I doubt he even knew about it, until the article in his newspaper pointed it out. And I'm certain he doesn't care. It takes a good amount of ready cash to be a pilot, and he's the International editor, so he's not broke.*

"You barely know him," Kay harped, and Lana let her go on. How could you explain that instant familiarity that being in a life-or-death situation created? Or how sharing a secret - one as huge as Superman's identity - could bring two people so close? If Kay didn't know, she

wouldn't listen to explanations.

During the entire conversation, Lana had been absently playing with the little puddle of condensation on her desk. Now Kay glanced down and exclaimed, "Good Lord, do you even know what you're doing? Drawing *hearts* in the soon-to-be water stain on your desk? Lana, *come on!* You're acting like a lovesick teenager!"

"Kay, I am far from a teenager," Lana replied with all the dignity she could muster. The heart shape had been entirely unconscious, but she wouldn't let her embarrassment show. "And I'm not being irresponsible. That will be *all*, Kay," she added, seeing her assistant open her mouth to speak again.

"So you're still not going to Milan," was all Kay said.

"Not yet," Lana said, ignoring the little voice in the back of her mind that whispered, *Some time away from him would be good. Being around Richard makes you light-headed. Otherwise you would never have wound up on the gossip page of a major newspaper.*

She stood up to go, thanking Kay for keeping her updated. An internal debate had begun over Richard in the past few days, Lana torn and unable to decide which advice she should take. Another little voice spoke to her then, and it was more persuasive of late, if less sensible than her urge to go to Milan *now*. *There's no need to go just yet*, it whispered. *They don't really need you over there until a day or so before the showing, and you've got two weeks still. See where this thing with Richard is going. What if you leave and he decides you're more trouble than you're worth, with all this traveling and everything? What if he loses interest and takes up with some blonde right out of college? Do you really want to be looking back on this when you're an old maid and wishing you'd had the courage to follow through?*

The answer came quickly, and it sounded just a little like her mother's voice. *If he does that, then he wasn't worthy of you to begin with. If he can't give you time to make up your mind, you're better off without him. Even Clark gave Lois that, and you know how badly he wants her back.*

Martha's jaw dropped slightly. *Well. I suppose I've just been told off*, she thought. "Son..." she said softly.

"If you're going to place blame, mother, it rests on *both* of us. On me more than Lois," Clark said. "Personally, I think we're six years too late for blame. There's nothing Lois or I can do now to change what happened then. And in certain cases, neither of us would want to. If it hadn't happened the way it did, we wouldn't have Jason and Kala. And I know the two of them make up for any of our mistakes - you'll see when you meet them."

"Whenever I finally get that chance," Martha said, a touch of bitterness back in her tone. But she wouldn't let Clark pursue that line of thought. It was too close to her real reason for snapping at Lois, too close to revealing the hurt that lay beneath her critical behavior. "Son, I'll try to be more understanding of her. I'm sure Lois isn't a bad person..."

"Of course not," Clark interrupted. "Ma, I wouldn't be in love with her if she was. She's just a bit different from the people around here. And I *like* her that way."

"I know," Martha sighed. "And you're right - I can't blame her and forgive you. That was shortsighted of me, but I am *your* mother. Do you know how hard it is to be stern with you, even when you've done wrong?"

Clark just looked at her, not sure what she meant, and Martha reached out to take his hand. "You're my son," she said. "My only boy, the son I thought I'd never have. You mean so much to me - always have and always will. I've been so protective of you your whole life, it's

still hard to let go."

"Ma, I'm a grown man," Clark said. "I'm old enough to make my own mistakes, and to do my best to fix them."

"I know," she replied, and chuckled weakly. "My *head* knows that, but my *heart* isn't listening. I tried to raise you to a certain standard. But when you fall short of those ideals - as any man must, you're not perfect and you *shouldn't* be, regardless of what that hologram tells you - it's so easy for me to forgive you. I can still see the boy who came to me with that hangdog look, apologizing because he accidentally knocked a hole in the barn roof while trying to jump over it."

The recollection brought a chuckle from Clark as well. "I think I understand, Ma. It would be very hard to stay angry at Jason for more than a heartbeat, even though I get the feeling he's more of a rascal than his sister - just a lot quieter about it." He sighed softly, and steered the conversation back on track. "The point is, you *aren't* Lois' mother. And she hasn't done anything to deserve the way you treated her this morning. That was ... that was *rude*, Ma, and I never thought I'd use that particular word to describe *you*."

Martha sighed. "Son, I'm sorry. She startled me; not even *men* talk like that around here, and you know it. At least, not in mixed company, and not first thing in the morning. Amongst themselves, watching TV and drinking beer during the evenings, some of them might. But women *never* use that kind of language..."

"Ma, there isn't a curse word Lois hasn't used in my hearing," Clark said blandly. "Drivers in Metropolis are basically insane, and she has a tendency to yell at people who almost hit her car. She's a city girl; things are different there."

"*You* don't have to talk like that to get your point across."

"I'm six-foot-four and two hundred twenty-five pounds," he replied. "All I have to do to get people's attention is stand up straight. Lois is only five-five or so, and she looks like a strong breeze could blow her away. She has to have an attitude, or get pushed around. And I *like* that about her. No, I *love* it. Lois Lane had the temerity to argue with Superman *before* she knew who I was or that I was interested in her. If sheer force of personality translated into height, she'd be a champion basketball player."

"I'll apologize to her," Martha said, sounding slightly harried. "Like I said, she startled me. And yes, I know Barkley startled her; that idiot hound is *loud*, and he sounds like a badly-tuned fire alarm when he gets worked up. It's enough to frighten anyone who doesn't know him. I just... We need some time to get used to each other, Clark."

He could tell she was skirting around something, and he frowned. There had to be some deeper hostility lurking beneath Martha's snappish comment. She seemed awfully reluctant to talk about it, though, and he knew from long experience that Martha would keep finding ways to avoid doing so. *Maybe it's something she and Lois have to work out between them*, Clark thought.

"Maybe that's best," was all he said aloud, and then inspiration struck him. "After all, I still need some time to get used to Ben. I was none too pleased to see him sitting at my father's place during breakfast that first morning home. It might be time for both of us to realize we don't have much say in the other's choice of lovers."

Martha raised an eyebrow. "The difference is, you didn't find an unexpected little brother or sister when you came home. And not because of my age."

Clark blushed a brilliant scarlet. "Ma! I didn't mean it like *that*. I meant people you're in love with, not... Goodness."

"I see your point, Clark," Martha said. "But what's between Ben and me isn't the same as you and Lois."

"No, but at least Ben and Lois get along," Clark said. "He seems to like her already." He saw Martha's mouth twitch, and wondered if that was part of the reason why she'd spoken so harshly that morning. Because Ben seemed immediately fond of a woman who was so different from the Smallville standard - or because Ben's casual remark had implied that *Martha* was a fan, when she'd actually saved all those newspaper articles for Clark.

And in fact, before she'd ever met Lois, she had been more approving. But that was when Lois was just someone Clark talked about a great deal. Even when she was the mother of his unexpected children, Martha had been more tolerant. Only when confronted by the woman herself had small-town prejudices reared their ugly heads. Perhaps all of this had been easier to deal with in the abstract, but having the reality of Lois here, in this house, forced Martha to consider her feelings instead of pushing them aside beneath a calm exterior. Clark had needed his mother's serenity during the last few weeks, especially when Luthor had taken the twins.

Regardless, this wouldn't get resolved until the two women spoke to each other. Clark couldn't help adding one last thing, though. "Ma, you know you and Lois are going to have to call truce. If not for each other's sake, then for the twins. I want Jason and Kala to be able to come out here, and that would be hard if you and their mom didn't get along." A spark of lively wonder lit his blue eyes, calling forth an answering smile from Martha. "I don't want them to have any hesitation in coming to see you. They'd *love* you. And I'd love having them out here. There's so much to show them - Jason and Kala have been city-raised, and I know they'd be delighted to see the fields and the livestock..."

Seeing her son excited by the prospect of introducing his children to his own childhood joys brightened Martha's mood considerably. He would make an excellent father. That much was certain in her mind. But another pang lurked beneath her smile. These were her first grandchildren, and she'd already missed so much of their lives...

The talk drifted to happier topics for a while, Clark's delight over the twins utterly obvious. Martha asked him if he was nervous about being a father, and gotten a rather anxious chuckle in response before Clark changed the topic, but it was clear to her that joy overwhelmed any fears he had.

After a while, Ben came back in, thanking Martha again for breakfast and letting her know he was headed into town. "If you don't mind, I'd like to ride with you," Clark said. "Lois left to cool off, but she doesn't know her way around very well. If she gets lost, she'll probably wind up back in town, and she'll need someone to guide her back out here."

"I don't mind at all," Ben said. The two men walked out to Ben's truck quietly, Barkley following them. The silence between them persisted while Clark got in and buckled his seat belt, and Ben lifted Barkley into the cab before getting in himself. Only after they'd started down the road to town did Ben finally speak again. "She seems like a real spitfire, your girl," he said.

Clark couldn't help smiling. Lois would have agreed with 'spitfire', but 'girl' might have given her pause. "That she is," he confirmed. "And a very admirable woman, too."

"Not likely to lie down and let Martha walk all over her, either," Ben mused. "No more than Martha's liable to smile and keep her mouth shut when she sees something she thinks is wrong. They're both kinda stubborn that way, you think?"

Clark nodded mute agreement. More silence, and then Ben said in a speculative tone, "Do you think our ladies would get along better if we gave them a good example to follow?"

The younger man sighed. He'd been thinking much the same thing during his talk with Martha. "Ben, it's not that I don't like you..."

"It's just that you don't like me with your mother," Ben finished.

Barkley chose that moment to rest his head on Clark's leg, expecting to be petted, and Clark obliged him while he tried to figure out what to say. At last he replied, "Ben... It's going to take a while for me to get used to the idea. That's all. You're a good man..."

"But I'm not your father, and I never will be," Ben stated. "I liked Jonathan a lot, Clark. He was a good friend, a good man. A *great* father, if the way his son turned out is any indication. And I don't presume to speak for him, but I doubt he'd be upset with the way things turned out between your mother and me. If it had been me and Martha that passed away, and Jonathan and Sue who got together after we were gone, I'd be glad to know Sue was with him. I'd want her to be with someone who loved her, someone who kept her interested in life, someone who made her happy. I wouldn't want her to spend the rest of her life in mourning. Not when she could be living her own life, not just bemoaning the end of mine."

That was a great deal to think about for Clark, and a part of him distantly admired how carefully Ben had phrased it. Had he said that Jonathan would want him to look after Martha, Clark would've been furious at his presumptuousness. But framed this way, as what Ben himself would have wanted for his own wife, it was a little easier to hear.

Still, there was no easy response. Clark had to examine his own feelings on the matter, and it took him the rest of the ride to root out the last of his sense of betrayal. Finally, he told himself firmly that he had no right to criticize Ben and Martha - even Martha's apparent dislike of Lois had more cause than his own surliness toward Ben.

As they parked in front of the general store, Clark turned toward the older man and offered his hand. "Ben, I'm sorry for being a jerk to you. I hope you and Ma are happy together, and... Well, I guess what I'm trying to say is, I give you my blessing."

"Thank you, Clark," Ben replied, shaking his hand. "For what it's worth, I think Lois Lane seems like a good match for you. And what you decide to do now is entirely up to you. Just, your mother would really love to meet those kids. The sooner you manage that, the sooner she'll calm down, most likely."

"You think?" Clark asked, but Barkley had sat up between them, peering nearsightedly through the windshield. A young man was just leaving the store, and even though he wasn't walking toward the truck or even looking at it, Barkley decided to warn him away on general principles. The ear-splitting bay of the hound drowned out Clark's question and distracted both men enough that they forgot where the conversation was taking them.

Clark wound up spending most of the day in town, which was what he preferred for the time being. He could hear Lois' heartbeat, and it was steady, which meant she likely wasn't lost. Unfortunately, he hadn't been into town since arriving in Smallville, so folks who missed him and wanted to chat surrounded him. He didn't have a chance to slip away and try tracking Lois down.

Instead he shared news of the big city and caught up on current small-town gossip. An interesting item was tales of 'that Eastern gal'. Apparently, there was a stranger in the area, a woman whom men described as good-looking and women described as citified. She had an Eastern accent and Eastern habits, like handing her money to the gas station attendant instead of leaving it on the counter like everyone else did. The Eastern gal - or 'that Eastern woman', as the local women called her with a hint of disdain - also drove too fast, passed cars that were

only doing ten miles under the limit, and made turns too quickly.

Clark had a pretty good idea of whom everyone was talking about before Wade Carmichael walked in, rhapsodizing about the lady in the red Mustang. It was he who supplied them all with her name: "Ms. Lane."

But the majority of Smallville residents had already started calling Lois 'the Eastern gal' or 'that Eastern woman', and it was those epithets that stuck. Clark sat in the diner, sipping a root beer float, and listening to them talk with a soft chuckle. Lois would have no idea of the sensation she was causing.

After a while, he headed back over to the general store. It was something of a rarity, which saddened Clark. Only small midwestern towns actually had general stores these days, places where you could buy nails, flour, bug repellent, chicken feed, motor oil, candy, and a host of other useful things. This was the country cousin of those big department stores in the city, but far more charming. For one thing, general stores only stocked items the local people would actually *use*, and in sensible quantities; no shelves upon shelves of useless plastic trinkets, and no five-pound jars of mayonnaise, either. For another, the people who ran general stores were much friendlier, being residents of the community themselves.

And no big-city department store would ever have a front porch with a line of rocking chairs, where the older men would come to sit in the sun and complain about how much better things were in the old days. Clark had been startled earlier to recognize a few of the same faces he'd often seen on that porch when *he* was a boy. *Youth is fleeting, but geezers are forever, as Pa used to say.*

When he arrived at the store, however, the usual phlegmatic discourse had given way to an atmosphere of excited anticipation. "Morning, gentlemen," Clark said. The four out here - Mr. Roy, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Lutter, and Mr. Ellzey - were all chuckling to themselves and peering down the road. "What's going on?"

"Met that Eastern gal yet, Kent?" Will Ellzey asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "The Carmichael boy says she's got a right fancy car, a Mustang."

"I'd heard that," Clark replied with a sense of foreboding.

"Well, down the main road yonder is state road two-ten," Al Lutter said. "And you can just barely make out the sun flashin' on that purty red Mustang."

Clark, whose eyesight was considerably better than theirs, could see the car now, coming along a reasonably straight and well-maintained state road. He hadn't traveled that particular road in a very long time, but it looked like Lois was doing a bit more than the posted limit.

"Hmm. Looks like she's speeding."

"She is, and can't blame her," John Roy said. "It looks like such a smooth road, you've gotta wonder why the limit's only thirty-five."

"What she don't know," Fred Thomas snickered, "is that *state* two-ten turns into *county* two-ten just a bit past th' Main Street intersection. And the county don't pay t' pave roads less there's more'n a few farms down 'em."

"Which means..." Clark trailed off. The mild feeling of foreboding had deepened to dread the more the older men chuckled, and he really hoped it didn't mean what he thought it meant.

"Bit of a dip there, hard to see the road. She ought to hit the gravel right about - *There!*" All four men cackled uproariously as the distant car suddenly threw up a huge roostertail of dirt and gravel. Clark winced at the sight, unable to help a small chuckle. Of course, no one else could hear what he heard: Lois cursing a blue streak as she brought the fishtailing Mustang back under control.

Lois was in a boiling fury as she backed the Mustang back onto the pavement. *I knew this was a small town, but damn, dirt roads?! And no warning for the unsuspecting motorist, either. There ought to be a sign like "Caution: Pavement Ends. Surface is gravel over washboard." Damn backward small-town country roads...*

It wasn't far to the previous turnoff, a straight shot that became Main Street. Lois had wanted to avoid it, taking the long way around, but her online map service hadn't noted the fact that the paved road ended.

Driving into Smallville along Main Street, Lois noticed the most people seemed to be looking at her car. *Must not be every day a strange vehicle comes through here*, she thought at first, but then she saw Clark standing on the front porch of the general store and pulled into an empty parking spot. When she got out, she realized that the dirt road was in plain sight from here, and the foul temper that had begun to disperse on seeing Clark redoubled instead.

It didn't help that the four old guys sitting on the front porch were all grinning hugely at her; seeing her hit the dirt must've been the most entertainment these folks could expect to get before *The Price Is Right* came on. But what really caused Lois' smoldering temper to burst into flame was the guilty smile on Clark's face. He'd seen her almost wipe out, and he was *laughing* at her! Outrage overwhelmed her shock at seeing him as Clark, but without his glasses.

"And just what the hell is so damned *funny*, Kent?!" Lois snarled, slamming her door hard enough to knock half the accumulated dust off the Mustang. "Is this what you country boys do for fun - take down the 'unpaved road' signs and watch city girls plow into the dirt at fifty miles an hour? What's wrong, get tired of watching grass grow?"

Clark paled, glancing from side to side. Everyone who was outside and in reach of Lois' voice had stopped to stare; he had no chance of quieting her until she'd gotten over the fright that had made her so angry, so he ducked quickly into the general store. At least they'd have fewer witnesses there...

Lois followed him, her boot heels loud enough to make it clear that she was right behind him. "Don't you run from me, Kent, you..." she muttered, then paused.

The four guys on the porch were grinning even more broadly, and the nearest leaned toward her slightly. "Good morning, Miss," he said, practically leering.

"Good morning," Lois said, her tone completely changed from angry growl to sweetly polite. *Oh, my dear God, who is he kidding? That's actually worse than Perry and Loueen.* And with a brief, insincere smile in return, she pushed open the door and stalked into the general store after Clark.

He had discovered, to his dismay, that the store wasn't empty. Not even close. Five or six of the female counterparts of the old men on the front porch were inside the store, shopping and chatting. Letting Lois yell at him in here would be tantamount to express-delivering her lecture to the gossip circles. But before he could do more than turn around, Lois had already stormed up to him with her boots echoing on the wood floor. Hope of escape vanished; she had him cornered against a wooden barrel of horehound candy.

"Now you listen to me," she snapped with her hazel eyes blazing, actually shaking her finger under his nose, and Clark knew there was no stopping her now that she had really gotten started. "I did not fly out here to the middle of B.F.E. in the middle of the frikkin' night just to *entertain* the local yokels! I don't care *how* funny you think it is, especially with me almost running that car into the ditch because there's no goddamned *warning* on that damned road,

you had better *not* laugh at me! After everything I've been through this morning, that stupid dog scaring the hell out of me, *your mother* snapping at me, and *every* slow-driving nitwit in Kansas idling along in my way, I'd suggest you have a little more *sensitivity!*"

"Lois," he tried to soothe, but she steamrolled on, oblivious to the shocked stares she was getting from the older women in the store.

"Don't interrupt me, Kent! I've only had one cup of coffee today, there isn't a Starbucks for a hundred miles, your mother *hates* me, and now I almost totaled a goddamned rental car! And you think it's *funny!* I'm starting to regret flying halfway across the country after you. It was a stupid romantic gesture to start with, and it's blown up in my face! *So don't you dare laugh at me!*"

Absolute silence reigned in the store, Lois shaking with anger, reaction, and the slightest touch of hurt. Only Clark knew her well enough to know that her present fury meant she'd been terrified when the car dropped off the pavement. And when she was that wound up, it was impossible for her to rein in her thoughts before she spoke. Everyone else just stared, round-eyed, at the Eastern woman who had just stalked up to Martha Kent's boy and basically cussed him out.

Except for one woman, Jane Lutter. She had been the closest to Lois during her diatribe, and the look of horrified disgust on her face now spoke volumes. Jane gave a tiny little sniff of disdain, and Lois whirled to glare at her. "What the hell are you staring at, sister?" the reporter snapped.

"*You* are no sister of *mine*," Mrs. Lutter replied icily.

Lois hadn't been angry before; that was merely fear masquerading as rage. *Now* Clark saw wrath blossom in the hazel eyes he loved so well. "*Amen*," Lois shot back with a savage glare that measured the older woman, and found her very much lacking.

With that said, Lois turned on her heel and stormed out again, slamming the door behind her. Clark had only a moment to glance at Mrs. Lutter and shrug helplessly before he hurried after her.

Lois was already off the porch and heading for her car when he got outside. "Lois?" he called. "Lois, wait! It's not like that!"

"I'd run after your girl, Clark," Mr. Ellzey said. "Think she's gonna leave you high 'n' dry here."

Indeed, Lois had reached the car without looking back, snatching the door open. As Clark rushed down the steps toward her, she got in and slammed the door shut, the ignition roaring to life.

"Lois, *wait!*" Clark yelled, reaching the car just as she put it into reverse. He grabbed the doorframe and leaned in the driver's side window. "Lois, c'mon, please. I'm sorry."

"That was *not* funny," Lois growled, glaring up at him with the furious pout he remembered from the California desert, so long ago. An expression he had seen most recently on their daughter.

"No, it wasn't," he replied seriously. "You could've been hurt - if you weren't such a skilled driver, or if I wasn't right here. You know if you'd been in any kind of real danger I would've been there in an instant, and never mind the secret."

Lois just stared at him for a long moment, but the raw anger in her eyes was beginning to melt away. There was grudging calm in her voice when she grumbled, "Remind me why I put up with you?"

"I love you," Clark murmured. "Listen, I talked to Ma..."

"You said something to your mother?" Lois interrupted disbelievingly. *Oh, God, like that's going to help matters any*, she groaned inwardly. *Why don't men ever understand that that just makes things worse? Good thing I stopped deciding I care, huh?*

"Yes, and I wasn't the only one. Ben had a few choice words for her, too," Clark replied. "Anyway, she agreed to be civilized to you. Why don't we go get lunch and then run up to Hartwell and catch a movie?"

Lois just stared at him in surprise. *That* she had not been expecting. "Are you asking me on a date?" she said incredulously. *Going out to dinner was weird enough, but now I'm going to the movies with Kal-El? What the heck?*

"Well, yeah," he replied. "I mean, why not? We might as well do things the right way around this time."

Lois snorted. "You sure you want to be seen with a hoyden like me?" Now that she was calmer, Lois began to realize just how many people had heard her outburst.

"Always," he told her, that slow warm smile lighting up his eyes. "I don't care *what* other people think of you, Lois. I *know* you, and I know if they let your language prejudice them against you, it's *their* loss."

His smile called up an answering grin on Lois' face. "Get in the car, you jerk," she said, a hint of laughter in her voice. Her mind was already leaping ahead of events; so they were going to get used to each other all over again, hmm? He was trying to show her who he really was, the kind of man who would take a woman out to a local movie theater. Even if they had two kids together, and even if he could've flown her anywhere in the world, he still wanted to take her on an old-fashioned date. Kal-El was far more Clark Kent than she ever expected, once you got rid of the faked clumsiness and the nerdy act.

Well, he'd better be prepared to see, once again, who the real Lois Lane was. Her lips curved up in a wicked grin as he buckled his seatbelt. "Hartwell. That's north of here, on highway 63?"

"Mm-hmm," he replied absently. The four guys on the porch were sniggering, which only he could hear clearly. Ellzey commented on the fact that 'Missus Kent's boy' had not only managed to stop that hotheaded Eastern gal from running off without out, he'd wrangled her into a *date* as well! The others' expressions of admiration were enough to make Clark blush guiltily.

"If this were a real old-fashioned date, I'd let you drive," Lois said, backing out of the parking spot. She glanced slyly at him and added, "But I don't think you could handle it."

Clark leaned back comfortably in his seat, letting one arm rest along the windowsill. "I could pick it up one-handed, but you don't trust me to drive it," he chuckled. "Fine then, Lois. It's quite all right. I like it when you're in charge."

Lois cast him a dubious glance. Did he really mean what she thought he meant? And if he did, what did he think he was doing reminding her of such things when they were in *Smallville*? There was nothing she could say to that remark that wouldn't sound like a further come-on, so she changed the topic instead. "Clark, are you aware that one of the old guys out there has apparently stolen the Jolly Green Giant's dentures?"

He laughed at the very apt description. "Yeah, that's John Roy. He's had those same dentures since I was about twelve - I think he got them out of the Sears catalog."

"*When?* In 1932?" Lois asked incredulously. "Are they *wooden*? They *look* wooden." She thought about for a moment, and then added with an amused snort, "Does he ever complain about splinters?"

"No, but he complains about pretty much everything else," Clark told her. "That's what the Geezer's Convention does, mostly. Sit on the front porch drinking the free coffee until their wives or daughters let them back in the house. And the whole time they're out there, they complain about their health, or the weather, or how things aren't the way they used to be. *Especially* how the younger generation - and I quote - 'ain't worth a mouse-fart in a tornado,' end quote."

The thick accent he added to the quote, as well as the actual expression, made Lois laugh so hard it brought tears to her eyes. Luckily there was a stop sign ahead, and Lois paused long enough to get herself back under control. "Oh my God, Clark, don't say anything like that when I'm driving. We'll wind up in the ditch," she wheezed.

At last she rubbed her eyes and drove on, a secretive little smile playing about her lips. "I guess Wade Carmichael would be one of the useless younger generation, huh?"

"Wade? He's a good kid for all that he dresses like a hoodlum. Probably going to take over his dad's garage when he grows up... Wait a second, how do you know Wade?"

"Oh, I met him when I was filling up this monster's tank," Lois replied airily. She didn't want Clark's mind to linger on Wade, so she didn't comment on 'hoodlum' - which was almost as bad as 'swell' - and also ignored the fact that Wade would be grown up in a year or two, tops. "While I'm thinking about it, where the hell are your glasses? Aren't you worried...?"

Clark chuckled. "Lois, people here remember Clark Kent as a kid. Shy, too intelligent for his own good, something of a daydreamer. No one is going to connect the boy who used to pitch in at harvest time with Superman."

"Still..."

"Lois, one time when everyone left school after football practice and left me there, I *ran* home. I beat them even though they were riding in the quarterback's car, and I had to finish picking up the equipment before I left. And no one ever suspected a thing." He paused, considering, and added, "I guess Lana finally figured out how I managed that, now. But anyway, I don't need the glasses here, so I don't wear them."

Lois nodded. "Personally, I like the no-glasses look. It's just kind of odd to see you out in public without them." They drove in comfortable silence, Lois trying to imagine Clark as a kid, and failing. After a while, she gave up, and turned to him to ask, "So, where are we going for lunch? Any good Italian places in Possum Trot?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," Clark teased. "Just drive."

Lois' half-aggravated, half-amused sigh and eye roll were his only reply.

Ben swung back by the Kent farm after his morning chores were finished, and found Martha rather disgruntled. "What's wrong?" he asked as soon as he saw her.

"Oh, nothing," she said peevishly. "Just half a dozen phone calls asking if I know who my son is seeing."

"So Ms. Lane's met the townsfolk?"

Martha huffed. "If I was her mother, I'd run through all the soap in this county trying to wash out that mouth. She had another meltdown - in public, starting in the middle of Main Street, and then continued her deluge of profanity inside the general store. Where the five gossippiest old biddies in town heard her and made sure to pass on the fact that not only was she cussing my son, he left with her."

"Mrs. Lutter and her bunch," Ben said knowingly. "If you heard from Jane Lutter, Martha, you know darned well she exaggerates every single thing."

"Not just her," Martha growled.

Trying a different tack, Ben asked, "So what set the girl off this time?"

"That's beside the point."

Then he chuckled. "What did Clark do?" At Martha's stern glare, he continued, "It could only be him, if you're *that* defensive."

"Apparently Lois made the same fool mistake half the out-of-towners do out on two-ten. And that pack of unwashed toothless old men that Silas lets hang out in his front porch rockers saw her. *That* lot's worse for gossip than Jane and her crowd. It wasn't them the girl turned the sharp side of her tongue on, though. Clark saw it happen, and I suppose she thought he was laughing at her."

Ben chuckled. "I'll bet you he *was* laughing at her. No matter how many times some leadfoot citybred fool hits that dirt road, it's *still* funny. We're just lucky no one's ever been hurt out there; that stretch right past the pavement is so washed out it feels like four flat tires."

Martha made a harrumphing noise as she set about getting lunch ready. Ben came to help her in the kitchen, deciding to change the subject. "Speaking of your son, he finally gave *me* his blessing."

That made Martha pause and turn to him, frankly amazed. "Did he now? Well, then."

"I'm not saying he's had a complete change of heart," Ben cautioned. "But he's trying. I imagine things will be a bit easier around here from now on."

"That's lovely news," Martha said, and kissed him.

He drew back slightly and looked steadily into her eyes. "Martha, it'd get a lot *more* tolerable if you'd just tell these kids what your real problem is."

The startled look she turned on him spoke volumes.

The date had been an absolute success. Lunch turned out to be an unprepossessing little mom-and-pop burger place, which had amused Lois with the similarity to her first 'date' with Clark. However, she stopped chuckling when her bacon cheeseburger came to the table - that was a world-class gourmet burger; a thick, juicy patty topped with sizzling bacon and melted cheddar cheese, all of it on a fresh homemade bun. It was more than twice the size of the burgers sold in chain restaurants, completely outstripped them in flavor, and still cost less.

For the first time since Lois was five years old, she needed a take-home box for a *burger*. Which was to say nothing of the Coke floats, the handmade malts, and the crisp fries the dingy-looking little diner served beside their gargantuan burgers; Lois was slightly humbled to realize that her jibe about Possum Trot cuisine had reminded Clark of this place.

It was a much further drive to the nearest movie theater. On a weekday and during school hours, the place was practically deserted. She and Clark had the entire back half of the theater to themselves even though they wound up seeing the current highly-recommended drama. Both of them felt that the movie's pace plodded a bit during the second hour, but that was no hardship. Much to Lois' surprise, she thoroughly enjoyed simply cuddling up to Clark's side with his arm around her. A few stolen kisses didn't hurt, either. Only a few, however; down in the front was a young mother with two small children, both of whom were prone to exclaiming about whatever was onscreen at the moment.

Afterward, Lois was delightfully relaxed - but not so calm that she wasn't up for a bit of devilment. They had to take highway 63 home, and the road was mostly deserted in the afternoon. Except for a car in the distance that was only visible when Lois topped a rise. *Hmm, it's after school hours...* "Hey, Clark, what kind of car is that?" she asked innocently.

He peered at it. "Um, looks like a yellow Camaro. Going pretty fast, too - *whoa!*"

His outburst wasn't unusual, considering that Lois had goosed the accelerator as soon as he confirmed her guess. That was Wade Carmichael up ahead, and this was the road he'd claimed was perfect for racing. Long, straight, mostly level, and rarely traveled, it suited Lois' purposes as well.

"Lois, what are you *doing*?!" Clark yelled.

"Well, today was all about seeing who we really are under all our masks," Lois said loudly over the wind that whipped in through her open window. She kept her eyes on the road right up until the moment she turned to him with a wicked daredevil grin. "I guess it's time to show you that I really *am* the girl your mother warned you about."

While Clark's mouth fell open in shock, Lois shoved the gas pedal to the floor, and the Mustang's engine bellowed. The car seemed to leap forward almost as if stung, swiftly catching up to the Camaro. Before Wade even had a chance to look in his rearview mirror and make sure the car flying up behind him wasn't a state trooper, Lois had blown past, laughing with exhilaration. Behind her came the whoops of Wade's friends and the roar of the Camaro's engine as the teenagers gave chase.

"Lois, this is crazy," Clark protested. "Okay, I believe you, you're completely out of your mind, now *slow down*."

"No way, not when I'm winning," she replied coolly, shifting so that she straddled the center line. Wade's car was faster, but he had to pass her first, and Lois knew a dozen ways to prevent that. "And don't go grabbing the sissy-bar, Clark, you'll break it. This is a rental, I don't want to have to explain any damages."

"If you're that concerned, try staying within shouting distance of the speed limit," Clark retorted. "Lois! *I* can't get hurt, but you and those kids *can*. Slow down, for the love of all that's holy!"

She just laughed wildly, swerving back and forth to keep Wade from trying to pass. He was getting closer by the instant, so she dropped her voice when she teased Clark. "Why, I do believe I managed to scare *Superman*! You don't flinch in the face of bullets and fire and falling landmarks, but being in a car with me when I'm driving fast scares you!"

"This would scare any sane person!" he yelled back.

"That coming from a man who can *fly*," Lois shot back. "Something the rest of us can't do, so we have to find our fun where we can!"

"This *is* flying, Lois! It will be if you hit a bump, anyway!"

Lois stopped laughing then, looking at him sternly out of the corner of her eye. "You know what? This is *me*. *This* is who I really am, Kal-El. Think you can handle it?"

Disbelief and shock crossed Clark's face before understanding finally dawned. And then the look he turned on her was full of fierce, blazing admiration. "I love you, you crazy woman," he replied at last. "You're more *alive* than anyone else I know."

"I'll take that as a 'yes'!" Lois chuckled. Watching his expression as well as the road ahead, she had to divert some of her attention from the Camaro.

The next thing Lois knew, Wade had managed to pull alongside her, driving perilously close to the shoulder of the road. "That stock engine'll never keep up!" he bellowed out of his own open windows, his friends cackling with excitement. "Give up before you blow a piston!"

"I told you it's not the car, it's the *driver*!" Lois yelled back, edging toward him. She knew the dimensions of any vehicle she drove to a nicety - during the police driving course, one of the exercises had been driving between two cones with less than four inches clearance to

either side. So there was no way Lois would allow them to actually crash, but Wade didn't have to know that. He yelped when he saw her sideview mirror within touching distance of his own, and floored his accelerator, trying to get around her.

Lois laughed, Clark winced, and the two cars thundered down the empty road at speeds in excess of a hundred miles an hour. It couldn't last, but while it did, Lois forgot every last bit of stress in her life. She had no *room* for anxiety while she was jockeying to keep Wade from passing her.

"Lois, this is *insane!*" Clark yelled. He was hanging onto the handgrip on the roof, which Lois had mockingly called the *sissy-bar*. If Lois did something totally psychotic, he'd use it as a convenient handhold to lift the car a couple of inches and put it down somewhere safer. Of course, he'd never tried lifting a car while he was inside it, and didn't want to start now, but if she got any closer to the Carmichael boy's car... "C'mon, you've made your point! Knock it off!"

"Oh *hush*," Lois teased, a wicked gleam in her eyes. "Don't be such a *girl!* It's just a friendly little race!"

"Friendly?!"

"I haven't hit him."

"*Lois!*" Clark was losing patience. "That's *enough!* You're going to get someone hurt if you keep this up! And *that's our turn - oh dear God! Lois!*"

The moment he pointed out the turn, Lois hit the brakes. Wade shot past, the two guys in his backseat turning to stare. Lois didn't have enough time to safely slow down and make the turn, so she turned the wheel to an exacting degree and let the Mustang start to slide.

Clark yelped, his hand tightening on the *sissy-bar*. Lois heard the faint cracking noise but dismissed it, absorbed in controlling the slide. Her rear wheels smoked as the Mustang continued to skid, the rear end slewing around. When the car was approximately perpendicular to its previous path of travel, and facing the road Lois wanted to turn down, she let off the brakes and straightened out the wheel.

The Mustang leaped forward, and Lois stuck her arm out the window to wave goodbye to Wade and his friends. Clark stared at her, hair completely disheveled with eyes as wide as saucers, ignoring the whooping and cheering from the rapidly-disappearing Camaro. It was nearly a minute before he asked with perfect incredulity, "You slid like that *on purpose!*"

"Lightweight," Lois muttered, and headed back to the farm with a broad grin plastered on her face. Whatever Martha Kent had to dish out, she was ready for it.

Better That We Break

Lois and Clark had arrived back at the farmhouse just in time for supper. Ben was there ahead of them, helping Martha in the kitchen, and the savory scents drifting from the oven made Lois' stomach growl in spite of the giant cheeseburger she'd eaten earlier. The meal would be ready in moments, and the two reporters set the table quickly. The older couple carried out the plates and everyone sat down to dinner. Even Ben's beagle Barkley and Martha's Border collie Shelby; both old dogs curled up under the table in hopes of a tidbit.

Under those circumstances, neither Martha nor Lois was exactly looking for a confrontation. But when Lois greeted her with a stiffly polite, "Dinner smells wonderful, Mrs. Kent," the older woman took the hint. During the meal, they were very civil to each other. In fact, if it hadn't been for Clark and Ben luring them both into conversation, the only words spoken between them might have been "Please pass the salt."

Afterward, lingering over coffee, Martha's eyes searched Lois' hazel ones intently. Lois met her gaze, level and unashamed, waiting for something she could sense but not decipher. Something was on Martha's mind; she had the look of someone with an entire planned speech on the tip of her tongue, but whatever it was she hadn't spoken of it yet. Lois answered Clark or Ben when they spoke to her, turning to either of them with a fond smile, but always turned back to regarding Martha. It wasn't challenge that the older woman saw in Lois' eyes, just readiness.

"Strange weather we're having," Clark commented, glancing out the dining room window. "It's awfully warm for November."

Ben turned to look over his own shoulder. The sun was setting outside, and the sky above was cloudless, turning to a deep sapphire blue. "It'll get colder quick when it does," he said. "Indian summers in these parts never last very long. Probably snow before the month is out."

"Lois, I owe you an apology," Martha said, cutting off any further meteorological observations. "I was rude to you this morning, and I had no right to be."

Well, that was about the last thing Lois expected to hear, especially delivered so quietly. For a long moment, she said nothing, just watching Martha's face and trying to gauge her motives. Tension hummed in the air as the silence spun out.

Martha watched her just as closely, her expression betraying nothing. No way for Lois to tell if this was a sincere and heartfelt apology, or simply something to appease the two men. Lois couldn't say it was all right - it wasn't. But she didn't feel like telling Martha that she had expected to be treated like that from the moment she arrived.

When in doubt, stick with the truth. "I really don't know what to say, Mrs. Kent." The tone was completely even, and as guarded as Martha's face had been.

The older woman blinked. "Hmm. I *am* sorry, you know. Both of these men have been chivvying me to make up to you - and I'm sure Clark's done the same to you..."

"That's why," Lois interrupted. "It's nothing to do with the two of them. It's between the two of us."

"I know," Martha replied, a trifle quickly, annoyed at being cut off. But she smoothed out her voice to finish. "I believe we know enough about each other, Ms. Lane, to know that neither of us going to pretend to be all smiles just for the sake of these men - no matter how much we love them. Wild horses couldn't make me apologize to you if I didn't believe I was in the wrong, and wanted to make amends." With that, she rose from the table gracefully, taking her coffee cup into the kitchen.

Lois bit her lip, barely noticing the wide-eyed looks from the two men, and muttered

under her breath, "That goes for both of us." Then *she* got up, planning to follow Martha and have this out once and for all, but Clark caught her arm gently. The stormy look on Lois' face said all that needed to be said. She was ready for this to be over, no matter how it turned out.

"Lois, please," he whispered, leading her gently into the living room. "She knows that."

"If she has a problem with me, she needs to bring it to *me*. She needs to say it to my face," Lois growled as she glared toward the other room. Ben had gone to the kitchen with her plate and Clark's.

"Please don't fight," Clark practically begged. "Lois, I love you, and I love her too. She's my mother - you're the love of my life. I can't bear it if the two of you fight!"

"Yes, but I can't bring our kids out here if she's going to act like this," Lois hissed, trying to make him understand. Crossing her arms and taking a deep breath, she went on. "Kal-El, I *miss* them. I want them to see you - hell, I want them to see *her*, if she'll be civil to them. Jason and Kala are pretty damned perceptive. I don't want to fight with her; I want this over and done with, one way or another. If she and I are being frosty to each other, they'll know."

He caught her shoulders, kissing her forehead. "I know, love, I know. You're going to have to talk to her. Just... Lois, you're brilliant, you're strong, you're..."

"*You're* trying to get me to *not* freak out," she interjected, a sardonic eyebrow ticking up. "You always pull this flattery nonsense when you're trying to calm me down."

"The twins aren't the only ones who are perceptive." He smiled wryly. "You're a whole lot more than anyone out here bargained for, Lois. Just, please, don't turn Mad Dog Lane loose on my mom. Please?"

"I. Don't. Want to." Lois ground the words out slowly, throwing her arms up in exasperation. *Why is it that men never understand female behavior in the slightest, not even him?* "I'm just tired of beating around the bush, that's all. I'm *over* it; I'm done being a scared little mouse. I just want to get this over with so I can enjoy being here with you - and possibly the twins. If your mother and I are going to *hate* each other let's just go ahead and get that out of the way!"

He could only hold her, praying with all his might for the two women to resolve their differences. "Lois, I love you. I love you so much. Ma can't hate you; once she gets used to you..."

Lois' short, bitter laugh cut him off, making her look away. "Used to me, huh? Yeah, that's exactly what I want. And what the twins will need. *Used to me*. Sure."

"At least she'll be out of the house," he started to say, then hushed, turning to look toward the kitchen with a frown.

"What is it?" Lois asked.

"Ma usually goes to bridge on Thursday nights," he said, half distracted. "Ben was just telling her to call him when she gets home, and she told him she's staying in."

Lois swore under her breath, her hands clenching in Clark's shirt. "*Dammit!* She's *chaperoning* us, Clark! Like we can't be trusted alone for an entire evening. Good *heavens*" - she made a sheer mockery of the word - "we might ending up having *sex* - oh, wait, that already happened. See our six-year-old twins that she's very clearly pointed out. *Jeez!* And she said something about *my* tact."

Clark hushed her, massaging her shoulders in a vain attempt to knead the tension out of them. "It'll be all right," he said. "It's just rude to go out and leave your company sitting at home. We'll have some time to ourselves..."

But Lois somehow doubted it would be as easy as he made it sound.

Lois had had enough. She had spent the last couple of hours watching television in the living room while Martha retired to her room to rest, leaving her uncomfortable and constantly alert for the older woman. Clark had gone out on an emergency; she saw him on the news, using his heat vision to melt the ice that had caused a twenty-car pileup on a bridge in Canada. Evacuating the injured passengers took him awhile, during which Lois began to grow increasingly bored.

By the time he got back, it was eight o'clock. Still quite early by Lois' standards, but not by those of Smallville residents, apparently. Martha bid them both a good night, getting a confused look from Clark.

"Something wrong?" Lois murmured, looking over the couch at her retreating form.

"Ma always goes to bed at nine," he replied. "I guess ... I guess she's giving us a chance to talk. Or maybe getting up in the middle of the night last night wore her out more than she let on."

"Hmm," was all Lois would say. She cuddled closer against Clark's side, breathing in his scent, his arm around her shoulders. Resting her forehead against his jaw, she thought of just how surreal things felt even now. It seemed impossible even now that she was here, that they really were together, that she could be this close to him without giving away the secret. To know that he really *was* hers. That they really had nothing to hide. It had taken nine years to get here, a long and painful journey from the moment they met to this one, but they had made it.

His most recent rescue came on the news again, and they talked about it in a desultory fashion. This was yet another new experience: talking to him more intimately than ever before after a rescue. There was nothing of reporting in this discussion, as informal as their interviews had always been, as more of understanding exactly what kind of effect it had on both sides of his life. And by proxy, hers now, as well. But this was also more about spending time together than anything else, and the talk drifted along lazily.

Still, Lois couldn't relax, not even when she leaned against his side with his steady heartbeat to soothe her. The day's trials had worn her nerves thin, and not even the nearness of the man she loved could cure that. Furthermore, she hadn't spoken to the twins that day, and the lack of them was a gnawing ache in her heart. The most recent confrontation between herself and Martha over dinner had been left unfinished, and that nibbled at Lois' composure as well. Impatience, loneliness, and the pure exhaustion of having been up since dawn on four hours' sleep combined to make Lois both restless and tired.

There was one sure remedy for that, and she hadn't brought it with her. The turmoil of her life the last week or so had prevented Lois from going back to Dr. Saavikam for more sleeping pills, and she'd used the last of her Tylenol PM that night at the hotel. By the time she drove far enough to find a drugstore open at this hour, she would either be asleep behind the wheel or it would be morning. And getting picked up by the local cops for dozing would just enhance the gossip.

But Lois did have one trick left up her sleeve, although it meant cutting their evening short. *Well, it's either that or insomnia. And it's not as if he won't be here in the morning.* It was amazing the comfort thinking that gave her. She yawned, not having to fake it in the least, and let Clark talk her into going to bed early. They made their way upstairs, turning out the lights in the living room as they went, hands clasped. But after they kissed at the door to her room - only a soft brush of lips, both of them eyeing Martha's door warily - Lois didn't get

ready for bed. Instead she waited somewhat guiltily, fully dressed, sitting on the edge of her bed and listening. *I shouldn't be doing this, it's the absolute last thing I should be doing, but...*

Clark took sleep where he could get it, and Lois could hear him moving around his room. By the time he had settled down and she was fairly certain he slept, or had at least settled in for the night, she could almost have fallen asleep sitting up. But in spite of her gritty eyes and bone-tiredness, her mind was still whirling and she still felt off-balance. The tension in her legs and back were growing by the moment. Not to mention, this was an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar town, with an unfamiliar and unfriendly woman in the room next door, a situation that was the diametric opposite of restful.

Lois knew of one way to make her jangling nerves settle down, and she set out to accomplish her goal. She tiptoed downstairs barefoot, carrying her boots. The other hand was in her pocket, making sure her keys didn't jingle as she moved through the darkened house. It really didn't help that she hadn't been here long enough to really know the layout of her path. Just one misstep, bumping into something just a bit too hard, and Clark would be awake and she'd never hear the end of it.

Slowly, Lois made her way to the front door. She quietly put her boots on, took her coat from the coat rack nearby, and eased the door open, slipping outside, the door only open a crack. The nighttime temperature gave the lie to Ben's comments on the weather; the air had a sharp bite, and the wind was starting to pick up. Winter was well on its way here in Kansas.

No matter. She wouldn't be outside for long. Lois eased down the steps and across the dooryard to her car. What she wanted had been thrust, half-subconsciously, into the glove box. Until earlier, she had forgotten that she had shoved them there when she had fondled them still in her purse at the airport. Out of sight, out of mind. At a moment like this, she realized that maybe she had subconsciously suspected that she'd need them. Good thing she hadn't thrown them away outside the concourse the way she had planned originally. Taking her prize, she returned to the tall evergreen bushes planted on each side of the front steps. The shrubbery would conceal her if Clark happened to glance outside; she didn't want him to see this.

Furtively, Lois shook a cigarette from the half-empty, crumpled pack. These were getting quite stale, but they were still smokable. *Oh, thank God...* She slipped the filter between her lips and lit up, inhaling with her eyes narrowed. *As soon as we leave town, I'm quitting. This time for good. No last minute changes of heart. Quit. Period. But God, this is exactly what I need right now...*

Nicotine began to percolate through her system, pulling a sigh from Lois as the tension started to release its now-iron grip. The familiar ritual of smoking soothed her more than the drug itself, even if performed while huddled in the shrubs like a sniper in enemy territory with a cold wind finding its way down the neck of her coat. Lois began to relax, really and truly *relax*, for the first time since seeing Martha Kent in the doorway. The date and the movie and the race had distracted her from her tension; this eased it, at last.

At least it did, right up until the front door opened. Lois froze, praying that whichever of them had come outside couldn't see her. This would be hard to explain to Martha, but Clark would smell the smoke and understand all too well. Lois bit her lip at this thought, knowing full-well that it was one topic that he and Richard agree totally on. Oh, he'd understand, and give her that slightly disappointed look that always made her feel terrible...

A long moment, and then the front door closed again. Lois sighed with relief, but that was short-lived as she heard the lock click. "*Dammit,*" she hissed, standing upright without a thought of the cigarette in her hand, smacking her forehead. "*Idiot!*" *Good luck*

*sneaking back in now, Lane! You didn't bring your lock picks - better hope there's a window open. Either that, or chuck pebbles at Clark's window and have to explain to him why you're out here. Or you could sleep in the car ... and have to explain **that** in the morning. Shit! And all because you wanted a cigarette. Goddamn things'll be the death of you yet!*

Before Lois could start looking for an unobtrusive way to break in, however, she heard an unexpected voice from the other side of the bush she was hiding beside.

"It's all right," Martha Kent whispered. "I've got my keys."

Lois froze, clenching her teeth over the startled and very profane exclamation that she would've made if she had been anywhere other than here. A dozen questions flitted through her mind: *How long have you been standing there? Why are you creeping around your own front yard? When were you going to let me know I wasn't out here alone? But mostly, Do you **want** to give me a freakin' coronary, woman?!*

Luckily, none of that made it out of her mouth. All Lois said, her tone neutral, was, "Mrs. Kent. What a surprise."

"I'm sorry if I startled you," Martha said quietly, coming toward her and flipping her cell phone closed. "I came out here to send Ben a text message - we usually call each other every night, but I don't want to intrude on Clark. He can't help overhearing sometimes."

Lois nodded, feeling startled amusement at the thought of the two of them sending one another text messages in spite of her state of mind. Here was her perfect opportunity for the confrontation she'd been expecting all evening. Martha was just watching her, not making any move toward the front door. She felt the same tension that Lois did, and the younger woman guessed Martha was just as ready to have it out once and for all.

But Lois hadn't started all of this - she had tried to be as polite and proper as she could from the moment she arrived, with the exception of one little slip-up. She had gotten up at a positively unholy hour this morning just to try to make a good impression - and that had backfired. It was Martha who had snapped at her, Martha who had begun hostilities. So it would be Martha who could make the first move. "If there's something you want to say to me, Mrs. Kent, then say it already."

Martha bristled slightly, then covered her reaction. "I... Thank you for being so circumspect tonight. It was very polite of you."

"That wasn't being polite, Mrs. Kent. That was being completely honest. I have absolutely no idea what to say to you. And, for *his* sake," -she jerked her chin in the direction of the house- "I'm trying to say as little as possible."

"I wasn't talking about that," Martha said. "I meant in how you've acted around Clark. The two of you have been behaving as if you're not much more than friends, and I appreciate the consideration..."

That was the *wrong* thing to say, made obvious by the way the younger woman's eyes flared. "I am *not* going to seduce your son under your roof," Lois ground out, desperate not to lose her temper. "I'll have you know we've barely done more than kiss since he came back - and not even had much of a chance to do *that*! We've been far too busy trying not to get *killed* to fool around. And in *your* house? *My* mother raised me better than that! And I'd like to think your son was raised better, too."

"So would I," Martha replied coolly.

"You could've gone to bridge night," Lois said through gritted teeth, telling herself not to rise to the bait. She took a slow breath in through her nose and let it out a little at a time. *Keep your mouth shut, Lane, and think about the twins. You have to at least **try** to get along with*

her for their sake.

"And leave a guest at home her first evening here?" The older woman seemed a bit taken aback. She lived by a set of traditions that city life had long forgotten, which included making the best dinner possible for a guest. "That would be unforgivably rude - my bridge group already found a substitute as soon as they heard I had company. Besides, I've played bridge with them most every Thursday for the last twenty years. It's not as if I'm going to miss anything..."

"Which is precisely why you should've gone," Lois retorted, all too aware of how the situation looked. "They'll spend the whole night talking about how you had to stay home and hover over 'that Eastern woman', defending your son's virtue. You're making me look like the kind of woman who can't be trusted around a man!"

A swift blaze of anger in Martha's expression, of guilty embarrassment, just as quickly tamped down. "I'm doing no such thing, Ms. Lane. I'm just trying to be a good hostess..." And seeing the bright flare of resentment in Lois' eyes, she added, "Which I wasn't this morning. I *am* sorry - I don't know how to say that so you'll believe it. I'm just not used to people who blaspheme before noon."

Lois' hazel eyes narrowed, rolling her eyes in annoyance. Did this woman have to misunderstand *everything*? "And I'm not used to people whose dogs *howl* at me before the sun is completely up! *I'm sorry!* I apologized this morning - I was *mortified*, didn't you see my *face*?! I didn't even know you *had* a dog. I only met the Border collie at dinner tonight, and nobody told me about freakin' Barkley!"

"Barkley's a blamed fool," Martha shot back. "He startled *all* of us, which is half the reason I snapped at you!"

"No, you snapped because *Ben* made it sound like you actually *approved* of me," Lois snapped. "God forbid *your* boyfriend should have a kind word for the scarlet woman, much less imply that *you* were a fan!"

Martha's sudden blush told Lois how very close she'd hit to the truth. "Well forgive me if you aren't exactly what I had in mind-" she began, and cut herself off abruptly.

So what the hell else is new? The hurt, angry thought called up a swarm of others. *I'm not good enough for you, I wasn't good enough for Sylvia White, and I most definitely wasn't good enough for Jor-El. I wasn't even good enough for my own father...* Then Lois squared her jaw, her eyes stinging, and said forcefully, "Well excuse me if I'm not Lana Lang! I may not be good enough for *you*, Mrs. Kent, but I'm good enough for your son. And I'm good enough for *our* twins. If need be, that's enough for me."

I'm through proving myself was the unspoken ending, but Martha heard it. She was further taken aback by the remark about Lana; she'd been hoping for quite some time that the divorcee would run into Clark again. He and Lana had so much in common; they seemed perfect for each other...

Well, Lois had made her point - Clark had made his choice. And it was one Martha had never expected. Realizing that she knew so little about the kinds of choices he would make - and realizing once and for all that *he* would make those choices instead of letting her guide him - made Martha defensive. Being told off by this foul-mouthed citybred hedonist didn't help her mood any. Rallying, Martha took a step toward Lois and spat, "Speaking of the twins, how come you hid my grandchildren from me?"

Then it was Lois' turn to stare in open-mouthed shock.

A Time For Every Purpose

Clark winced, pacing his room. Martha and Lois had long ago forgotten about his hearing, and they were now shouting at each other so loud he was surprised they hadn't woken Shelby up and started him barking. Just a bit louder and Ben could almost hear them at his farm two miles up the road.

A lot of the things they were saying were quite hurtful. Clark flinched every time Martha flung a veiled insult at Lois, and every time Lois used the sharp side of her tongue. But they were mostly - *mostly* - arguing with each other, not merely calling names. If it degenerated into a personal attack, he'd break it up by going downstairs. By making them both turn on him, if necessary.

As long as they were actually talking about the problems between them, though, he'd leave them be. No matter how loud they got.

What he really needed right now was a distraction. Something to take his mind off the two women verbally dueling outside. Clark decided to check on Shelby, and found the Border collie curled up under an end table in the living room, ears flattened to his skull in misery.

"Poor boy," Clark murmured. The dog could hear the argument too, and clearly hated it as much as Clark did. He coaxed Shelby out from under the furniture and up to his room, and helped the old dog get up onto the bed. While petting and soothing the dog, Clark finally managed to focus on something other than his own discomfort.

Further distraction arrived when his phone rang. Clark stifled a sigh as he picked it up. It was hard to believe that it was only nine-thirty. So much for a quiet evening. "Clark Kent," he answered, still rubbing Shelby's ears.

"Hi, Clark," Lana said. "Just calling to see how things are around the old homestead."

Clark chuckled, an edge of bitterness in his tone. "Not so great at the moment."

"Oh? What's wrong?" The warm sympathy in her voice invited confidence.

"Ma and Lois aren't exactly getting along," Clark said. "Actually, they're outside having a fight at the moment."

"Ouch," Lana said, and he could picture the wry frown on her face. "Well, they don't have much in common, besides the fact that they both love you. What are they fighting about?"

"Lois isn't what Ma expected," Clark said.

"No, I imagine she's not," Lana chuckled. "Your mother has been dropping hints ever since I got divorced, Clark. I've always stopped by the farm when I went home to visit, and since you came back she's been even less subtle. I guess it's high time your mother realized that it's *your* expectations that matter, not hers. And as far as I can see, Lois meets your expectations very well."

"Now just convincing Ma of that..." Clark muttered, listening in for a brief moment. "Hmm. I think they've finally gotten around to talking about what's really bothering Ma. At least, she's a lot louder now, and not even trying to be polite. Just a sec..."

Lana waited patiently while he listened to the argument outside. It had to be killing him to hear that, but if he could glean something from it that would help bridge the distance between the two women, it would be worth it. Lana had noticed how very polite Martha was whenever she had mentioned Lois, and knew that the older woman's stiff formality concealed her true feelings. Oh, Martha probably *wanted* to be accepting of her son's beloved, but the heart was an unruly organ, and would conceive a dislike of someone no matter what the mind ordered it to do.

Much the same way it would fall in love in spite of being sternly told that this was no time for love, and anyway, it just *couldn't* be love if you'd only known the man less than a month... Lana was rescued from that train of thought by Clark's voice. He sounded a great deal more optimistic when he asked, "Lana, could you do me a favor?"

Once the dam had broken, the older woman couldn't hold back the *real* reason she had been so angry with Lois. "You and I are - *were* the only people on this planet who knew the truth about my son! Why didn't you come to me when you realized you were pregnant?"

"Because I didn't know *how* I'd gotten pregnant until I was six months along!" Lois shouted back. Neither woman was thinking about Clark's hearing at that point - having this argument at last was like pulling a rotten tooth. Once begun, they couldn't stop; every bit of poison had to be extracted or it would fester forever. "*He stole my memories!* Your precious boy and his goddamned amnesia kiss! I had doctors trying to tell me that Lex Luthor *raped* me and *that's* how I wound up pregnant!"

Martha's jaw fell open. A chill swept down her spine at that revelation. If that's what the doctors thought, then their advice would have been to...

"If I'd listened to them you wouldn't *have* grandchildren," Lois snarled, advancing on her. "I couldn't remember what happened, but I always *knew* those kids were special, even before I found out I had *twins!* I wouldn't give them up no matter *what* the doctors said to me!"

"So why wouldn't you bring them to me?" Martha cried, frustration overwhelming her shock. "You got your memories back eventually..."

"Yeah, and had to deal with the knowledge that I'd almost been solely responsible for the end of the world as we know it!" Lois was shaking with fury as she yelled. "Everything the damned floating head said about me was true! I kept him from his mission *just once*, and look what happened! We stole *one night* and the freakin' Zod Squad just about enslaved all of humanity! All because of *me!* After all the snide little comments Jor-El made about me, why the *hell* would I come to you for more of the same?! If you even *existed* - for all I knew, you might've been part of his cover! I wasn't sure *what* to believe anymore!"

"Oh, *bull,*" Martha retorted. "You're an investigative reporter! You could've found out everything you needed to about me. He's had half his paychecks sent here since he started working for the *Planet*. All you had to do was check the address. I may not be a fancy college-educated city girl like you, but even I would have done *that* much!"

"I had a hell of a lot to worry about just then, thank you!" was Lois' snapped reply. "I'd just had twins, I had to divert everyone's suspicions from figuring out who their father was, all the while keeping his secret and trying to keep an eye on the twins so they wouldn't suddenly start showing his powers in public! Not to mention, they were *very* sickly when they were little - both of them had pneumonia more than once, and they had asthma, and they were allergic to practically *everything* including wheat! Do you know how much stuff has *wheat* in it? Or peanuts? *Jeez!* I never even *wanted* to be a mom, and then I had *two* of them, with all kinds of problems!"

"I could've *helped* you!" Martha lashed back. "I raised Clark - how many mothers even know what jicama *is*, much less that there's something in it that Kryptonians need? Or just how much calcium they'd need - he was going through spinach and greens like no tomorrow growing up!"

"I had my mom and my sister," Lois shot back, her emotions now in an uproar. "They were a lot of help, but how could I have explained to them why I wanted to go visit Kansas?"

Even if I *had* been sure you existed, even if I could've slipped away from my family, why would I come out here and be treated like *this*?"

"What are you *talking* about?"

"*This!*" Lois waved an arm to encompass Martha, the farm, and the town in the distance. "I never wanted to fight with you! I came out here cringing like a whipped dog hoping you'd *like* me! *Knowing* that was a fat chance - you've been looking down your nose at me just like Jor-El! Like a mongrel bitch that crawled into your kennel and got herself bred by your prize show dog! *God!* Just call me freakin' Hester Prynne!"

"The scarlet letter was for adultery, not fornication," Martha corrected dryly.

"**WHATEVER!**" Lois could feel her pulse pounding in her temples, and her vision began to blur from anger and frustration. "*So what!* I'm tired of being looked at like a goddamn *leper* for having slept with your son! *I will not leave him!* He left *me*, the first time around, and I'm damn sure not letting him get away with *that* again! So you'd better get used to me, because you *won't* get *rid* of me!"

"That's not the issue!" Martha shouted. "Child, do you *really* think you're the first unwed mother Smallville has ever seen? Just because it's 'not done' doesn't mean it never happened before!"

"And this is supposed to make me feel *better*?!"

"Yes! This is the Midwest-"

"And boy, do I know it," the younger woman hissed.

Martha lost the last shreds of her temper. "You don't know the first blessed thing about the Midwest, girl!"

"I know people are going to talk about me for *years*, and they haven't even heard about the kids yet! As a matter of fact-"

"That's only part of it! Shut up and *listen*, girl!" They were only a few feet apart now, yelling at the tops of their lungs, and Martha's eyes blazed with anger. "No, I'm not *happy* that my first and probably only grandchildren were born out of wedlock! I'm not going to *celebrate* the fact that their mother isn't married to my son! But they are *his* children, *my* grandchildren! They're *family!* He loves you, and they're *yours*, that makes *you* family too! And we don't turn our backs on family out here!"

"Oh, *please!*" Lois retorted. "As if you'd welcome me with open arms the minute I showed up! 'Hi, Mrs. Kent, I'm that girl your son used to talk about - only we did a whole lot more than talk in the end! Meet your newborn grandkids, which were born premature at eleven months! By the way, can I stay here for a bit and whip up worse gossip here than back in the big city?' Yeah, *right!* As if I'd ever be that presumptuous!"

That knocked one leg out from under Martha's resentment. Seen like that, Lois had gone out of her way *not* to presume on Martha's hospitality. That made her arrival her last night seem less abrupt. Clark had told his mother that Lois knew where he was, and that he'd given her some time to think. *He probably meant for her to come here when she was ready*, Martha thought, with the part of her mind that wasn't blazing with hurt and fury.

"I wouldn't have turned you away," Martha said, and though her voice was forceful, she'd stopped shouting. "I can't pretend I would be delighted to see you, but I wouldn't have turned you away. And I would *never* have let those kids even *imagine* I didn't love them. When Clark was gone, they were the only part of him still here. At least if you'd brought them here, I could've had them when I missed him..."

"And you think it wasn't hard as hell, waking up every morning to see them?" Lois

replied, anguished. "They *look* like him, *both* of them. Kala's hair, Jason's eyes, the shape of their lips, a thousand little things. Every time I looked at them I remembered him, and I knew he might *never* come home, and I knew I wasn't even supposed to remember..."

"I could've helped you," Martha said again. "You could've helped me. Pain shared is pain halved, Lois, just as joy shared is joy doubled. And there was joy in raising them - I've seen you with them, I've heard from Clark and Lana. You might not have been ready to be a mother, but everyone who knows you in the slightest knows you love them both with all your heart. Everyone who has seen you even for a moment knows you're a wonderful mother."

Lois fell silent, tears starting to well up. Anger had been her shield, but now that Martha wasn't snarling accusations at her, it started to grudgingly fade. And to be complimented, by someone who seemed an enemy, and on something so important to her... Beneath all the fury was the sixteen-year-old girl who could never please her father, no matter how hard she tried. The girl who had been scorned and rejected until she turned her heart into stone and rejected the father who had hurt her. The girl who made herself so strong and so independent that only a superman could touch her heart and make her a starry-eyed romantic in a way she had never been before or since.

Martha started to see that girl, then, in the painful sheen of tears in Lois' eyes. And she remembered what Lois had said earlier, about Jor-El, and what Clark had told her about his biological father's opinions on humans. *She's just a kid*, Martha thought, *a scared, angry kid who's been hurt so much she'd never have come out here expecting another serving of being looked down on. And God help me, I gave her exactly what she was expecting. The only reason she's here now is Clark - she loves him so much...*

"He's my miracle," Martha said softly. "I could never have children, and I wished and hoped and prayed with all my might for a son. And then he landed right beside me, the answer to my prayers, and within half an hour of finding him he'd saved Jonathan's life. With all he means to me, I can't help being protective of him."

"If he's your miracle, the thing you wished for with all your heart, then the twins are mine," Lois replied brokenly, her voice a little hoarse from yelling. "I never expected them, never even knew I wanted them. *I never* wanted to be a mom, but once they were here - oh, once they were here, I'd never wanted anything else. The idea of them scared me to death. But when they showed me Jason and Kala, so tiny... I loved them so much from the moment I first saw them, and I've only loved them more every day since. Jason and Kala are *my* miracles, and they're the only thing that kept me sane while Clark was gone."

The tears began to spill down her cheeks, and Lois' shoulders shook with the sobs she was trying to suppress. She dropped her head into one hand, trying to hide her face, the other arm wrapped around herself. As much as Martha had been bitter towards her, resenting the fact that Lois had never even *tried* to contact her, that they had never been able to share what comfort the twins could give in a world without Clark, now the older woman felt only sympathy.

Carefully, she gathered Lois into her arms, feeling the stiffness of the younger woman's shoulders. "Shh," Martha said. "Easy, Lois. I wasn't here to comfort you all those years; I'm here now. We're the only two in the whole world who know what it's like to lose him - to have loved him, been loved by him, and lost him, possibly never to return. You can lean on me."

That was all it took; Lois' famous self-control broke, and she wept openly. "I love him... I'm sorry, I'm sorry I didn't..."

"Shh," Martha murmured, stroking her hair. "It's all right. That's water under the bridge

now. Can't change the past - but I'll forgive you for being too afraid to bring them to meet a pigheaded old woman, if you'll forgive me for *being* a pigheaded old woman."

Lois gave a choked little laugh, nodding, trying to get the tears back under control. When she seemed as though she was through crying, Martha handed her a handkerchief, smiling faintly at her. "Let's get inside before we both catch cold," she said finally. "And Lois - you can bring the twins here. No, I don't *like* the circumstances, but he loves you, and you two have the twins. That makes you as much my daughter-in-law as if you were married, so far as I'm concerned. And I'll back my family against this whole small-minded town, if I have to. Let Jane Lutter say one word about you in my presence...!"

Another of those half-sob, half-laugh, and Lois let Martha steer her up the steps. Lois sniffled one more time, turning slightly to look at Martha, and said, "I take this to mean we have a truce?"

Martha laughed, tightening the arm around Lois' shoulders slightly. "Of course. I'm sorry it took so long for me to figure this out."

"I'm sorry, too," Lois said in a small voice.

Just as they reached the front door, it opened. Clark was inside, slipping his cell phone into his pocket, and he greeted them both with a wide if slightly frazzled smile. "Well, I'm glad you two got *that* out of your systems," he said, trying to joke.

"Son," Martha said after a long moment in which they both glared at him, "stop being a wiseacre and make us something hot to drink. It's blessed cold out here."

In spite of her red, swollen eyes and stuffy nose, in spite of the cold that nipped at her ears, Lois burst into laughter at that comment. Clark bundled them both inside, fussing over them until the two women protested. At last, they managed to sit down at the dining room table, chilled hands wrapped around mugs of hot chocolate.

"Well, I suppose we'd better make arrangements to get the twins out here," Lois said.

"I've already taken care of it," Clark said. Martha and Lois both stared at him, and he shrugged sheepishly. "I couldn't help overhearing, you know. And when you two finally got down to what the real problem was, I figured this was the best solution. Lois, all you have to do is make one phone call and say the plan has your approval, and the twins will be here tomorrow afternoon."

"The Emperor of Eavesdropping defends his title, ladies and gentlemen," Lois said, rolling her eyes. "Well, since you set everything up, I guess I'll make that call. But if anything goes wrong, Kent, *you* get all the blame since *you* went ahead and made the arrangements without asking me."

"Nothing's going to go wrong," he said. "The flight is pretty short, and they'll be accompanied. Besides, you miss them." A moment, and then a certain wistful light came into his eyes. "So do I."

Martha sighed. "Tomorrow afternoon, hmm? I've only ever seen them from a distance. It'll be nice to finally meet them." Her eyes sparkled with anticipation.

Lana rang the doorbell and waited nervously, her stomach in knots despite the early-morning sun. She wasn't sure what Perry White thought of her - if he suspected something was up between her and Richard, he might feel he had every right to sneer at her. Not to mention, the prospect of seeing Richard was enough to make her feel giddy and anxious at the same time. She'd avoided him since their date, afraid to admit just how much she wanted to see him...

The door opened, but it wasn't Perry who answered it. Richard himself caught Lana's hand and pulled her inside, the redhead giving a startled little yelp as he swept her into a hug. His arms around her, his cheek against her hair, the scent of his cologne under her nose - Lana's worries dissolved as she returned the hug, letting herself bask in the simple delight of being held.

"I missed you," he whispered, and she murmured agreement. They pulled back slightly, Lana looking up at him with bright eyes and smiling lips, about to make some teasing remark about his greeting...

And then he kissed her, and love and desire welled up and threatened to overthrow propriety. For several heartbeats, Lana let him, forgetting where she was and what she had come to do. Then she remembered; his uncle could walk up to them at any moment, or worse, the twins. Lana shoved him back, and glared as sternly as she could with her breath still wanting to quicken.

A faintly self-satisfied smile played around his mouth, and her sea-green eyes narrowed. *You may have been able to charm every other woman you've met into putting up with your mischief, but I'm not every other woman*, she thought, pulling back out of his arms. "I'll thank you not to take liberties, Mr. White."

"Liberties?" He looked honestly confused, and for a moment Lana pitied him. *What do you think you're doing, Richard, getting involved with me? You think nothing of a kiss like that - I was sixteen before I had my first kiss, and Brad and I dated for four months before I'd let him. Which is longer than I've **known** you, a fact I don't care to think about very often...*

"Do you *really* want to explain to Jason or Kala why you were kissing me instead of their mommy?" Lana asked, dropping her voice. Richard paled; evidently the thought hadn't occurred to him until just then. He'd simply been too glad to see her.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking exactly like a woeful schoolboy caught misbehaving, and Lana couldn't help smiling. "I just... I missed you. A lot."

"I could tell," she replied. "C'mon, are we just going to stand here in the foyer and stare at each other like a couple of infatuated teenagers?"

He laughed, touching her arm lightly and leading her into the house. "I feel like an infatuated teenager when I'm around you."

"You act like it," Lana said, making her tone teasing instead of accusatory. She wouldn't dare admit that was he made her feel, too...

"Things are kind of crazy at the moment," Richard admitted, talking softly. "Lois is out in Smallville, and I'm sending the kids to her. Well, Clark's coming out to pick them up and fly back with them. I would've flown them out to her, but he said not to worry, he'd handle it. And honestly, when I even mentioned the subject to Perry, he about had another heart attack. Something about letting his three best reporters take vacation at the same time - if I'd called in right after the New Krypton fiasco, he would've let me stay gone, but since I've been working he won't let me slack off now..."

Lana had been frowning, and as he paused she asked, "Clark's coming here to take the kids to Kansas? He said that?"

"Well, not in so many words," Richard replied. He lowered his voice further to add, "I think he's flying but not necessarily buying a ticket, if you get my drift. Which at least makes more sense than paying for a round-trip. Why?"

That didn't make any sense to Lana. Why would Clark leave Lois and Martha alone when they had just bridged the chasm between them? That was too perfect an opportunity for one or

the other of them to say something that would spark another bitter argument. "Richard, what exactly did Clark say to you?"

"All he said was, if I was okay with it, he'd handle getting them out there," Richard replied. "Why? Is something wrong?"

Understanding dawned, and Lana chuckled. "No, no, nothing like that. It's just that he asked *me* to fly out with them, and I thought I'd completely misunderstood."

The disappointment on Richard's face was comedic. "Wait - you're going to Smallville?"

"Richard, I *was* born there," Lana reminded him. "My parents still live there, and I haven't seen them since last Christmas. It's past time for a visit home. Actually, I volunteered to bring the twins, if it was okay with Lois. I've been kind of homesick..."

He looked so crestfallen than she elbowed his side lightly. "It's not like I'm moving back home, Richard. I'll be back in Metropolis eventually."

"Eventually?"

"You know how visits home are," Lana said glibly, pointedly not mentioning Milan. She needed some time away from this man and the way he made her feel. "Once your mom gets a hold of you, it's hard to leave."

"Not my mom," Richard said. "Her psychotic Yorkies just make me want to move farther from home. And mom herself isn't all that much better - Dad lets her act any way she pleases as long as she lets him putter around the garage in peace."

"Poor thing," Lana said. "It can't be that bad..."

"She has over three hundred porcelain dogs," Richard said. "And Dad let her paint the house, except his study, so it's all white and pink and everything has frills. Lois says it looks like someone exploded a giant bottle of Pepto Bismol in the White House - pun very much intended."

"I take it Lois and your mother didn't get along?"

Richard laughed. "That would be an understatement. Lois tried - but Mom's absolutely blind where her dogs are concerned. The 'puppykins' can do no wrong, not even when they're nipping at Jason's ankles. I thought I *was* a Yorkshire terrier until I started going to school."

"The dog bit Jason? We're lucky Lois didn't shoot it," Lana muttered.

"We're lucky she didn't shoot my mom," Richard replied. His laughter, though, had caught the twins' attention, and the pair of them now barreled into the hallway.

Jason and Kala came to an abrupt halt, startled to see Lana, and then were twice as delighted. "Hi, Miss Lana!" they chorused, both seeking hugs.

Richard had to grin; she was darned good with kids. Admittedly, the twins were perfectly friendly with anyone their parents introduced them to and showed approval of, but Lana knew just how to talk to them without talking down to them. The faint reservation that had lurked in his mind from the moment she said she'd take them to Smallville evaporated that instant.

Perry had followed them, and his eyes crinkled with pleasure even though his voice was gruff. "Ms. Lang! Come to talk my nephew into a little more free publicity?"

She laughed; thank God she'd figured out his sense of humor. "No, I'm just here to kidnap the twins. I happen to be headed out where Lois is, so I volunteered to escort them."

"You're going with us?" Kala asked.

"On a plane?" Jason added.

"Yes and yes," Lana said. "And your mommy will meet you at the airport - you won't have to be away from either parent for very long. Just the time it takes to fly there. Is that okay with you two?"

The twins consulted each other with a quick, silent glance, then looked up at Richard. "Fine by me," he said, once again warmed by their reliance on him. It hurt to send them to their *real* parents, but at least he was starting to believe in what Lois and Clark had both told him: he would always be the twins' dad, always be a part of their lives.

"Okay," Kala and Jason both said to Lana.

That seemed to settle it for everyone; the next two hours were a flurry of last-minute packing and long hugs goodbye for Uncle Perry and Aunt Loueen. For a few moments, it had seemed as though Perry would object to the twins going off on a long flight with someone *he* barely knew, but Jason and Kala seemed perfectly content in her company, and Richard was at ease.

The four rode to the airport in Lana's car, which she planned to turn in at the rental place anyway. They had arrived early, with plenty of time to get checked in and for the twins to stand at the windows and watch the planes. Richard stayed with them while Lana went to pick up their boarding passes, and he felt each second passing, bringing him nearer to the moment when he would have to let Jason and Kala go. *They'll be back*, he told himself, but even though Lois had promised they would all be back by Monday, it was still a painful separation. Especially since he knew the future held only more and more time apart.

"Daddy?" Jason asked, and Richard stroked his hair. "Is it okay that we're goin' to Kansas?"

"Sure, son," Richard said, with cheer he didn't feel. "It's fine."

"Why's it called Kansas?" Jason asked.

"Well, Texas was taken..." Richard began in a mock-serious tone, and was interrupted by Jason's scowl.

"Why's it *really* called Kansas?" the little boy demanded with a sigh.

That topic didn't interest Kala, and she had her own concerns. As usual, she simply overrode Jason's question with her own. "How come you can't come with us?"

"Baby, I have to stay here. I've got a lot of work to do. Besides, your mommy misses you both an awful lot, and I've had you all to myself. I can't be greedy - gotta share the best kids in the whole wide world, right? It's only fair." The comment provoked a pair of sharklike grins and almost identical giggles, making Richard laugh as well. "Mommy will be bringing you home again soon, so I only have to miss you for a little while."

"Just for the weekend, right?" Kala's voice hadn't lost that apprehensive tone.

"Right," Richard said. Lana had returned, but she was giving him his space. He couldn't walk with them to the gate, so they had to say their goodbyes here.

Richard went down on one knee, bringing both twins in for a long hug. "You two be good for Ms. Lana, okay?" he whispered.

"Yes, Daddy," they both whispered back, as reluctant to let go as he was.

"I love you," Kala murmured, kissing Richard's cheek. Jason was still young enough that he didn't think anything of doing the same, snatching one last hug as Richard tried to stand up.

Lana hadn't wanted to remind them, but they needed to join the line for security. And she was starting to feel a little wistful; she and Don had never had children, a blessing in the long run, but at the moment she wished she had a child of her own to snuggle. Her heart also broke for Richard, who certainly knew that this goodbye was only the first of many in a future of shared custody.

"I'll call you when we land," Lana told him, as the twins came to stand beside her.

Richard hugged her, whispering, "I'll miss you, too." Lana winced; she hadn't told him

about Milan, wanting a chance to get out of his presence and just *think* about things. Anytime she was near him, thinking was the very last thing on her mind. She knew that leaving was the best thing she could do, and the twins provided her with the perfect excuse, but she hated to do it. She tightened her hug just a bit, telling herself that she could do this. She had to.

They drew back from each other, and Lana saw it in his eyes before he could lean in and steal a kiss. Her hand on his chest stopped him, and Lana gave him a warning look. *No, not now. I'd never get on that plane...* "Richard..."

"How long before I see you again, hmm?" he asked. That *look*, slightly pleading, slightly hurt, and Lana felt a bit more of her resistance crumble.

But in front of the twins, all she could do was give him a quick little kiss, barely more than a brush of lips across his. "I'll miss you," she whispered, letting her voice and eyes tell him just how much. And for that, at least, she managed to make him smile.

As Jason took her left hand and Kala her right, they both waved goodbye to Richard. They headed to security, the twins calling out, "Love you!" one last time. It was all Lana could do not to look over her shoulder again one more time.

And as the three of them joined the line for security, Jason looked up at her and asked, "Why's it called Kansas?"

Clark waited nervously at the terminal exit, peering through the walls and crowds for a glimpse of Jason or Kala. Lois had elected to wait outside with the car; with her parked in the short-term section for Arrivals, they could load the luggage and get on the road much faster than if she'd parked in the garage.

He also suspected she was giving him a chance to see the twins by himself. He had to smile at how subtly she had played it. Not that he hadn't given his excitement away, having been awake even earlier than usual this morning to do his 'rounds', ready to leave long before both women woke. Lois could be remarkably intuitive that way...

It was red hair he saw first, Lana coming down the terminal with what had to be a twin holding each hand, hidden by the crowd, and her carryon bag slung over one shoulder. Only a few more seconds until they saw him; Clark started to push his glasses up, that old nervous habit, and realized abruptly that he wasn't wearing them.

Goof, he scolded himself, and then the crowd parted. He saw the twins clearly with no obstructions, and for the first time he saw them as *his*. His two children, each one toting a backpack with travel essentials, both of them walking on tiptoe while they tried to scan the crowd for him. *They're mine, they're really mine. Everything I never dared to hope for came true; their mother loves me, and I'm their dad.* He had to blink to clear his vision. *I'll never be alone; I have the family I always wanted.*

Kala looked up at Lana, and at this distance Clark could hear her asking petulantly, "Where's Daddy?" Obviously Lana had told them he would be alone. Jason saw him then; his eyes slid past at first, then jerked back as they widened. For a second he looked puzzled, and then Jason managed to recognize him in spite of the lack of glasses and the casual clothes.

"Daddy!" Jason yelled, leaping forward. There was simply no way Lana could hang onto him, as strong as he was. As the little boy pelted toward his father, Lana let go of Kala's hand so she could run as well.

Clark grabbed Jason in a hug, swinging him up into the air in delight. Jason just hugged him back. Kala was bouncing impatiently beside them, calling, "Me too! Me too, Daddy! Me too!" Laughing, Clark picked her up, tucking her under his arm like a football and making her

giggle as she clung to him.

Lana had reached them at a more sedate pace, but she was grinning at their antics. "They missed you," she said, giving Clark a peck on the cheek since she couldn't hug him with both his arms full of deliriously happy children.

"All right, you little monsters," Clark said, setting them both down. "Let's get going; we've got a ways to drive, and there's someone at the farm who really wants to meet you."

"We're really goin' to a farm? With cows an' sheeps an' horses an' chickens?" Kala asked, taking her father's hand.

"Yes," Clark said, "a real farm, but we've got chickens and a goat. No sheep. The neighbors have cows, though."

Before Kala could reply, Jason asked, "Daddy, what does Kansas mean?"

"He's been asking everyone that since Metropolis," Lana whispered. "I made the mistake of telling him the name probably came from an old Indian word."

"It means 'Shut up, Jason! Nobody *cares*'," Kala snapped.

"Kala, be nice to your brother," Clark and Lana said at the same moment.

"Yeah!" Jason added for emphasis.

In the midst of trying to shepherd the two children down to the baggage claim and keep them from arguing, neither Clark nor Lana noticed that one of the women at the information desk had gone to high school with them. Five minutes after they passed her desk, both twins trying to get Daddy to take their side in the argument, the young woman picked up her cell phone and made a call to her aunt in Smallville. "Guess who just walked past me, Aunt Jane?" she murmured. After a pause, she grinned and said, "Lana Lang, of all people - and she came off a plane with two little kids! ... Yes, you heard me! No, wait, don't call her mother yet. It gets *better*. ... You'll never guess who met her. I'll give you a hint, though - the little ones called him Daddy, and he's got jet-black hair just like the little girl... *Clark Kent!*"

The Girl Next Door

Small town homecoming queen

She's the star in this scene

There's no way to deny she's lovely

Perfect skin, perfect hair

Perfumed hearts everywhere...

Senior class president

She must be heaven sent

She was never the last one standing

A backseat debutante

She's everything that you want

Never too harsh or too demanding...

She is the prom queen, I'm in the marching band

She is a cheerleader, I'm sitting in the stands

She gets the top bunk, I'm sleeping on the floor

She's Miss America and I'm just the girl next door...

~Saving Jane, The Girl Next Door (Lois and Lana's Theme)

Lois stood beside the rented Mustang, the trunk open and the doors unlocked. It wouldn't kill her to wait, no matter how deep the ache in her stomach was. Clark had been without seeing the twins longer than she had, and his chances to be alone with them were few and far between. *Give him some Daddy-time*, she'd thought as she drove to the airport.

And from the delighted giggling she could hear from just inside the doors, it had been a good decision. Clark walked out laden with luggage while the twins each held an arm. Lana followed him, chuckling to herself as the twins caught sight of Mommy. They both ran to her, diving into her open arms, and the next few minutes were a chorus of plaintive murmurs of "I missed you" from both Lois and the kids. Nothing in the world was quite as wonderful to her as those two little voices after a separation. Somewhere in between the love-fest, Lois nodded and smiled acknowledgment to the redhead.

Clark loaded the luggage into the trunk as they cuddled, and by then time he got everything packed the twins were ready to go for a ride. "All right, munchkins," Lois said as she stood up from hugging them, planting one last kiss on the tops of their heads. "Who's sitting where? We can't all fit in the same seat."

"I'll ride in the back with Jason and Kala," Clark volunteered, Lois beaming at him.

"Yay!" both twins said excitedly.

They all managed to fit in the car, Lana sliding the passenger seat as far forward as she could to give Clark more leg room. "Thanks for giving me a lift," she told Lois as the reporter maneuvered out of the terminal traffic.

"No problem. You brought them all the way out here for us; it's the least I could do," Lois replied easily. "So, did you have a good flight?" Then her eyes flicked up into the rear-view mirror at her kids, chattering away with their father. "And did my wild heathen children behave?"

Lana shrugged. "It was decent, as airplanes go. Jason and Kala were little angels."

Lois snorted at that. "Did Richard drug them?" Sardonic hazel eyes glanced into the backseat and asked Jason and Kala with a grin, "Your daddy slip you two some NyQuil before boarding, didn't he?"

"Lois!" Lana looked scandalized even as the twins giggled, all too used to the teasing.

"They really are well-behaved."

"We each got a new book," Jason announced proudly. "I let Kala read hers first 'cause a gennelman always lets a lady go first."

Lois' eyebrow went up, and she gave Lana a look. *Please tell me she's not trying to win their favor that way...* "Uh-huh. And I suppose you paid for this out of your allowance?"

Both twins went silent at her tone, but Lana simply crossed her arms and returned the look. "Lois, I bought them each a book. In-flight movies are usually terrible anyway. But if you're going to look at me like that, I'll buy us all lunch, too. I can afford it."

"Yeah, I know you can afford it - I do read my own paper - but I'm not used to taking charity," Lois replied. Mentally, she winced. *Stop being such an idiotically over-protective mother. Grow up, Lois. It was just a couple of books on a long plane flight. Give the woman a break. It was actually really sweet of her. She just bought them a pair of books to keep them occupied on a long flight. Stop trying to read more into it.*

"It's not charity, it's returning a favor," Lana said, amusement lurking in her green eyes. She had an idea what had started this and was trying to make it clear that she wasn't trying to curry favor.

Before Lois could say anything, Clark spoke up from the backseat. "Sorry, ladies, but this is the Midwest. If anyone buys dinner for the whole party, it has to be the man of the group." And into the half-amused, half-annoyed silence that followed, he added, "Jason, I hope you brought your allowance."

It was an unexpected joke at the perfect time. All of the adults broke into good-natured chuckles at Jason's perplexed look. After a moment, still not understanding, he asked, "Can we get burritos?"

"Sure, sweetheart," Lois said, her defensive mood gone. "If we can find a good Mexican place nearby..."

Richard went back to the riverside house after he watched the twins' plane depart. Without the kids and Lana and the newspaper to distract him, he fell into a thoughtful mood. The house felt hollow in their absence, and he caught himself walking softly so as not to break the silence.

This is ridiculous, Richard thought. It's not like this house is haunted or anything. But the more he thought about it, the more apt that seemed. Haunted by the ghost of a relationship, maybe. What Lois and I had together was mostly lived here, and it's gone now. Still, everywhere I look in this house I'm reminded of her and the twins, of everything we shared. All those memories ... Lois in the kitchen glaring at crème brûlée as if she could caramelize it with her stare or nearly catching the room on fire the one time she had trying to make stir-fry on her own ... the twins making a fort out of sofa cushions and their mother's velvet throw ... watching Lois' eyes widen in wonder and delight as we walked through the front door for the very first time ... Jason sitting at his keyboard with a scowl of utter concentration, reminding his of pictures he had seen of Mozart, playing a piece over and over until he got it just so... Kala singing Aerosmith loudly along with his stereo system in the living room, making up the words as she went along ... and let's not even start on the memories upstairs. For a moment, there was the ghost of Lois past, as she had been the night they had moved in, at the head of the stairs in only a short dark blue silk robe, her head cocked to the side with a taunting question in her expression and heat in her eyes. He shook his head and she was gone.

Sighing, Richard walked up the stairs in spite of what he remembered. He wouldn't be living here anymore - that much he was certain of. What to do about the rest, however... *How the hell am I going to keep working with both of them? Lois and I fought over stories before - we're department heads, we have to. But now that we're also exes, those battles are going to have a lot more venom. I don't think either of us can help being competitive at work.*

*Not to mention, no matter how amicable this breakup is, I do **not** want to see Lois and Clark all lovey-dovey around the office. I'm willing to give her up - it's what's best for everyone, especially the twins - but I'm not willing to watch her with someone else. I'm sure they'll try to be discreet, but still...*

He walked into the bedroom, imagining a trace of Lois' perfume on the air. Richard wouldn't admit it to anyone, but he missed her acutely. They had been so much a part of each other's lives for the past three years that facing a future without her simply ached. Even if there was a possibility of someone else sharing that future, someone whose smile seemed to lighten his heart, ending a relationship still left him melancholy.

Richard sat down on the bed. *I guess I'd better do something productive, or I'll just mope. Let's see, we've still got some boxes in the storage room. I may as well start packing up some of my stuff.*

And while I'm at it, I might as well start trying to figure out what I'm going to with my life now.

By the time they reached the Kent house, the five of them were quite ready to get out of the car for a while. Clark in particular needed to stretch his legs; the Mustang hadn't been designed with the idea of a six-foot-four man sitting in the backseat.

The twins had drifted off to sleep leaning on Clark, much to Lois' amusement when she glanced back to find out why the back of the car was so quiet. Clark had been holding very still, just watching the twins doze with paternal pride blazing in his expression. His delight in them touched her deeply. Her worries about his adjusting to fatherhood were melting away by the moment.

When the car came to a stop, Jason and Kala looked up blearily. They tumbled out, yawning, as Clark unfolded himself from the backseat with a wince. But for the twins, their lethargy disappeared the moment they saw the chickens pecking around in the side yard. "Mommy!" Jason said. "They've got chickens!"

"And a goat, and a dog," Clark added as the twins shyly approached the birds. "The neighbors have cows."

The front door opened, and Martha stepped out, Shelby at her side. The elderly Border collie wagged his tail slowly at the sight of the strangers. Martha seemed hesitant for a moment, watching the twins with longing in her eyes while they looked back at her curiously. She seemed almost afraid to approach them.

"Hi, Ma," Clark called. "Jason, Kala, this is my mother."

"Hello," Martha said softly, coming down the steps. It was impossible to miss the look in her eyes, the smile on her lips.

The twins approached her together, fearlessly looking up. "You're Daddy's momma?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Martha said, smiling. "You can call me Mrs. Kent, or if you want, you can call me Grandma."

Lois felt her throat tighten at the wistfulness in the older woman's voice. Now she felt the

first touch of guilt for not contacting Martha sooner - how could she have doubted that Martha would love her firstborn grandchildren?

Kala and Jason glanced at each other for a second in that wordless communication common to twins. "Grandma, can we pet the doggy?" Kala asked.

"Sure you can," Martha said, grinning. Hearing yourself called Grandma... There really were no words for how she was feeling. "His name is Shelby - Shelby, c'mere. Meet the children."

The elderly dog obediently sat down and offered his paw to both twins, accepting a generous amount of petting as well. "I know it's been a long drive," Martha said, looking up at the three adults briefly. "Let's go inside and have some hot chocolate."

"We can't drink milk," Jason said mournfully.

"Have you ever had goat milk? Lots of people can drink it if they can't drink cow milk." Martha looked up at Lois, who winced slightly. "Or I can just make it with hot water and some extra creamer."

"That should be fine," Lois said, trying not to look nervous.

"Extra marshmallows?" Kala asked hopefully.

"Those, too," Martha said indulgently, and led them all into the house.

Kala and Jason followed her into the kitchen with utter trust, craning their heads back to look at the exposed rafters and peering at the photographs on the wall. Lois hung back a bit, giving Martha some time with them, and Clark and Lana waited with her in the living room. "Well, Clark, this is the first time in over twenty years your mother has completely ignored me," Lana teased.

"Yeah, I think she's forgotten who I am, too," he replied with a soft chuckle. "I can't believe I ever worried she wouldn't like them."

"Me neither," Lois sighed with relief.

"You had no way of knowing," Lana told her. "You've barely met Martha. And you know a little bit what this town is like - you had no reason to guess they'd be welcomed so warmly."

The two women smiled at each other tiredly, and Clark breathed a little sigh of relief. From the kitchen, they heard Jason ask, "Grandma, do you know why they named it Kansas?"

Lana groaned, Lois stifled a snort of amusement, but to everyone's surprise Martha answered the question easily. "There used to be a tribe of Indians called the Konza living here, Jason. When Europeans settled here, they called them the Kansa, and this was Kansa's territory, which is how we got the name."

Clark's jaw dropped, and Lana whispered, "Hallelujah! He's been asking that since before we left. Clark, your mother is *amazing*."

"Trust me, he'll find something else to drive you crazy with before the trip's over," Lois muttered as the phone rang in the kitchen. "Once Jason gets it in his head to find something out, he just doesn't quit. Ever."

Lana started to reply, but Clark quickly covered her mouth with his hand and pointed at the kitchen. A second later, they heard Martha's voice, and what she was saying silenced them all. "Why no, Annette, I don't expect them here for an hour or more yet. But I'll have Lana call you... What?" She laughed heartily. "Land sakes, *no!* Have you been talking to Jane Lutter again?"

Lois saw Lana's lip curl and an unfamiliar expression of anger blaze in her green eyes. Clark just looked perplexed until Martha continued, walking into the room with them in a vain attempt to keep the kids from hearing the conversation. "Of course not, Annette. I can't

believe you'd credit such a foolish thing." She waved at Clark to go in the kitchen and take care of the hot chocolate, which he promptly did, shushing the twins as he went.

Lana and Lois stared at Martha while she gave them both a strained smile. "Annette. Listen to me. I know you saw your daughter last Christmas. She didn't have them then, did she? And she hasn't seen my son in seven or eight years. At *least*." By then Lana's jaw had dropped in shock, but it took Lois a moment more to catch up with what was going on.

"Annette, *those are not Lana's kids*."

Lana had to grab Lois' arm before she could exclaim something disbelieving and probably profane. Martha looked at her with a helpless little shrug, and said into the phone, "Because I know who their mother is, Annette... Yes, I know all about it! Those are Clark and Lois' kids, and they're staying with me... Are you still there? ... Why didn't I say anything? Well, because Jane Lutter and her biddies would have a field day, obviously. I *did* want them to have a chance to settle in before everyone found out that 'the Eastern woman' you're all in such a tizzy over is the mother of my grandkids."

Lois threw her hands in the air and stalked off, muttering under her breath. Lana followed her into the kitchen. Clark was standing by the stove, looking embarrassed and horrified, with the twins standing right in front of him. A moment ago they had been watching the hot chocolate intently, but now Kala was staring at the wall separating her from the living room with a confused look on her face, and Jason was glancing from her to his father.

"Daddy?" Kala whispered. "How come they're talking about us?"

"Everyone wants to meet you," Clark said just as softly. "And a silly person saw you get off the plane with Miss Lana, and they thought she was your mommy. Now her mommy's a little upset because she thinks Lana never told her she had kids."

Both twins looked up at him, then over at Lana, then back at Clark. "That's silly," Jason commented bluntly, keeping his voice down. "Miss Lana likes our other daddy, not you."

Lana's cheeks blushed to match her hair, and she headed outside onto the back porch without ever meeting Lois' eyes. Worriedly, Jason glanced after her. "Is she mad at me?"

"No, sweetheart," Lois said, suppressing a chuckle. "Grownups don't like everyone to know who they like."

"Besides, Lana likes me as a friend," Clark said, glancing at Lois. "That almost made it sound like she's mean to me or something."

"Oh," Jason said, wide-eyed.

"Boys," Kala sighed, with a passable imitation of her mother's cynical eyeroll.

Lois just looked at Clark, raising her eyebrows and fighting a smile. "Perceptiveness, 100. Tact, 0."

Martha walked back into the kitchen, shaking her head as she replaced the cordless phone. "Ma, what happened?" Clark asked.

"Jane Lutter's niece works at the airport," she sighed. "And she inherited the loudmouth gene from her aunt."

Clark sighed gustily, and in response to Lois' questioning look, he said, "The twins starting calling 'Daddy' as soon as they saw me. Mrs. Lutter's niece must've seen them with Lana and then heard that, so she put two and two together and got twenty-two."

"Well, I'm sorry to cut your respite short," Martha said. "I had hoped to keep this a secret for a day or so, but I had to tell Lana's mother who the twins really belong to just to keep Lana from being scolded within an inch of her life. I still don't envy that girl when she goes home."

"It's all right, Martha," Lois groaned. Eyes heavenward, she rubbed her forehead. "It

seems I'm just destined to cause controversy."

Martha actually chuckled. "Child, this town could use a little shaking up now and then. At least Jane Lutter has something else to talk about besides poor Ben getting his feet under the table here."

The three shared a snicker while Jason and Kala stared up at them bemusedly. Before Jason could start asking what that expression meant, Lois said thoughtfully, "I'm surprised Lana's own mother would believe a rumor like that. I've only known her a couple weeks, and I know she'd never do such a thing."

"Not to mention, she was still married to Don when these little darlings were born," Martha replied. "But it's common knowledge that Clark was head over heels for Lana when they were in school. Now that she's been divorced for three years and Clark's been back in town, her mother's been looking hopefully in his direction."

Lois bit her lip as Clark chuckled nervously. "Ma, that's such old news."

"Oh, and I know it," Martha said blithely. "Besides, anyone who sees you with Lois knows better. But you and Lana are the two who left town and made good - and who still come home on occasion. Both of you being single, people will want to match-make until they realize you and Lois are an item."

That was about enough small-town gossip for Lois. She glanced at the twins, absorbed in their hot chocolate and in their study of their new grandma, and then said with what seemed like her hundredth sigh in the last two days, "I'm going out for some air."

"Can we come?" Kala asked eagerly. "I wanna see the farm."

"And miss your hot chocolate? Wait until you're nice and warm," Lois said, smoothing back her hair. "Then you can come out, okay? I'll be just outside."

"I'll show you how to feed the chickens and milk the goat, if you want," Martha said, still totally absorbed in the children. "And Shelby always likes a game of fetch."

Lois felt totally comfortable leaving them with their father and grandmother. It was rare that she trusted the twins with anyone on such short acquaintance, but just look at the difference Jason and Kala had made in her own dealings with Martha. As for Clark, he'd protect them with his life if necessary.

The reporter headed out to the back porch, where she found Lana leaning against the railing. The redhead turned to look at her when the door opened, and the pink in her cheeks wasn't from the cold air. "Lois, I'm sorry," she said.

"What for?" Lois replied, leaning against the railing beside her. From here, the view was of the barn and the cornfield, with a brown and white goat contentedly nibbling the grass within reach of her tether.

"I feel like I'm stealing your man," Lana said, very softly.

The raven-haired woman just shrugged. "Which one?"

The comment was meant to provoke, and Lana's eyes widened. "Lois!"

"Well? I just found out that everyone in town apparently thinks you and Clark are the One True Pairing of Smallville," Lois said, a touch of annoyance in her voice. "I knew you were his ex, but..."

"I'm not his ex, Lois," Lana said. "We never dated."

"You didn't? But the way Martha talks..."

"Oh, that's wishful thinking," Lana sighed aggravatedly. She turned to face Lois instead of looking out across the fields. "Look, Lois. I was a stupid teenager. I was every stereotype you can imagine for a pretty girl; I was the head cheerleader, I was friends with all the popular

girls, and I dated the quarterback. Basically I did everything everyone expected me to do. Including snub the kids who weren't popular, and that included Clark. He was shy - well, now I know why. He couldn't really get into sports, because he'd give himself away kicking a field goal into Canada or something. And my boyfriend hated him."

"Brad was a jock, and an arrogant, pushy jerk. Back then, Clark was ten times the man Brad would ever be - and I *saw* it, but I wouldn't let myself *think* it. I was too busy worrying about my little clique, and keeping my head cheerleader spot. I think Brad sort of guessed that I liked Clark, at least a little, because he was always picking on him. And Clark never fought back. How could he? He could've killed Brad accidentally in a fight. So he got the reputation of being a bit of a coward, too."

Lana dropped her gaze for a moment, then forced herself to meet Lois' eyes. "Everyone knew he had a crush on me, though. That was half the reason Brad picked on him. Not that Clark was ever a pest about it; he just had this mournful puppy-eyed look..." She trailed off as Lois chuckled in recognition, then continued with a slightly lighter heart. "Anyway, Jonathan Kent died our senior year, and Clark left town right after graduation. I got enough sense to realize that Brad wasn't going anywhere, and I wound up getting involved with Don while I was in college. So Clark and I were never together, but just about everyone in town wishes we'd date. Not many people leave and make good on it - not just leave for another little town, or a city nearby. Clark and I are about the only ones in our generation who left and went east. He went to Metropolis, and I've been living in Gotham, two of the biggest cities in the country. People just think we'd make a good match."

She smiled with amusement, and added, "But then, they don't realize that sometimes what you need in life isn't someone just like you. Sometimes what you need is someone very different - say, a citybred spitfire Army-brat Pulitzer-Prize-winning reporter."

Lois laughed; that was a fairly succinct description, and yet Lana made it sound flattering. "Well, rest assured that he's always thought highly of you, okay? I've heard more than a little bit about *The Little Girl Back Home* over the years. I'm glad you turned out much more interesting than he made you sound." Her eyes twinkled with devilry as she grinned at her. "So, I take you approve of us?"

"Would I be here if I didn't?" Lana countered. "Of course I approve. I'm not as blind as I was back then. I can see you two are utterly, madly in love - and more than that, you're willing to fight for each other and for the twins. You're both absolutely committed."

The door opened behind them, and Lois replied casually, "I ought to be *committed*, to a mental institution that is. Never figured on hooking up with a farm boy."

Clark came up behind her and ruffled her hair affectionately as Martha led the twins past them and down to the yard. "I love you, too, Lois." He was carrying two mugs of coffee in his other hand, and offered one to Lois, handing Lana the other.

Both women thanked him, but Lois rose up on her toes to kiss him quickly while Martha's back was turned. "Now scram," she said, hazel eyes dancing with mischief. "This is girl talk."

He followed Martha and the twins as they led the goat into the barn, Jason and Kala full of questions about life on a farm. Lana and Lois watched them go, Lois with an affectionate sigh, Lana with a wistful one. "No, I wouldn't even try to steal him from you," Lana said softly. "But I do envy you, Lois."

Lois grinned slightly. "So if you're not stealing Clark, it must be Richard, right?"

The other woman's blush was all the answer she needed, and Lois chuckled. "Lana, it's okay. Really. I'm the one that told him to call you, that night when he showed up at your

hotel."

"And we wound up in the newspaper," Lana muttered. "Dear God. Do you have any idea how much grief Kay's given me over that? She thinks she's my mother instead of my assistant."

"So quit acting ashamed about it," Lois opined. "Lana, what's wrong with liking a man and going out with him?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe the fact that two weeks ago I was giving him relationship advice pertaining to his fiancée - *you*," Lana replied. "I've just never gotten involved with someone so *fast*. Every time I turn around, I'm breaking my own rules over him..."

"Yeah, I know that feeling," Lois said. "My motto used to be 'I never miss a deadline, I never let anyone else get to the scene first, and I never sleep with anyone I work with.' Richard's really good at making you break the rules. Devious, charming devil that he is."

Lana turned to face her, green eyes serious now. "You're sure it doesn't bother you? Lois, the very last thing I want is to make an enemy of you."

Hazel eyes rolled. "Dear God, what do I have to do, give you an engraved invitation? *Lana!* All I want is for Richard to be happy, and quite frankly, you'll make him happier than I ever could. You have my blessing, okay? Go for it. Geez."

The redhead couldn't help laughing. "Okay, okay, I can take a hint! That's all I needed to hear."

"Good, because I'm getting sick of telling *him* I don't mind him asking you out," Lois replied tartly. "I feel like I'm some kind of demented matchmaker here."

"Well, it does sort of feel meant-to-be," Lana admitted. "Which is half the reason I'm fighting it. Experience has taught me to be leery of Princes Charming, as well as anything that seems too good to be true."

"Richard snores," Lois said. "And he's a smart man, but he can't figure out how to put the cap back on the freakin' toothpaste. He loves old horror movies and he'll stay up 'til four o'clock in the morning to watch anything with Margot Kidder in it. He also thinks it's incredibly funny to run around the house barefoot in the winter, and then stick his cold frikkin' toes into the backs of yours knees when he comes to bed. Trust me, Lana, Richard's not some impossibly perfect fairytale prince."

"Close enough for me," Lana said, and grinned. "We're going to have to work on that toothpaste thing, though. That'll drive me nuts."

"I just bought the glacier mint flavored stuff for me, and the regular for him," Lois said. "That way my toothpaste never got all dried out and gross."

The two women looked at each other, each half-smiling as they realized the absurdity of their situation. A week ago, they had been fighting for their lives against a madman and rescuing a superhero. Right this moment and right in front of them, the world's defender was walking out of the barn with the two secret heirs to his Kryptonian legacy. And what were they talking about? Toothpaste.

Clark and the twins both looked at them like they were crazy when Lois and Lana started cracking up for no apparent reason. Their laughter faded into a shared smile.

They just looked at each other steadily, each appraising the other as women are so prone to do. *She's a looker*, Lana thought with a grin, *but I'm not too shabby, either. I can still fit into my high school cheerleading uniform, if I wanted to.* "You know, I'm very glad we aren't rivals, for *either* of their affections," Lana said after a moment.

She met Lana's thoughtful gaze, guessing what was in the other woman's mind. Lois grinned lazily, leaning against the railing a little further. "So am I, considering that I've had two

kids and I can still wear the skirts I wore when I was twenty-five - even the white one with the split up the side. It wouldn't be fair to either of these men to make them choose."

Lana laughed again. "Yes, well, I can wear the jeans I wore in high school, even if they're hopefully out of fashion. All else being equal, Lois, I hate to tell you this, but red hair trumps everything."

Her tone was teasing, and Lois snorted in amusement. "Oh, really? Ask Clark."

"I'd rather ask Richard," Lana retorted, and both of them started laughing again. It was nearly impossible not to - this was one of the strangest conversations either one had ever had, playfully taunting when not too long ago, they'd considered each other potential rivals of the bitterest sort.

"Well, he's always had a thing for redheads," Lois said casually, still chuckling.

"I'll be sure to remember that," Lana replied, eyebrows arching up for a moment.

That started Lois laughing again. "Never thought I'd hear you say something like that without blushing, Lana."

"Remember, Lois, I'm the one who left town and made good in the big city," Lana said. "Just because I'm a good old-fashioned small-town girl doesn't mean I don't have a brain or a spine."

"I never said that," Lois said quickly.

"No, but it wouldn't surprise me if people thought it," Lana replied. "Even you, before you knew me well enough."

Lois sighed and rolled her eyes. "The worst I ever said or thought of calling you was 'cheerleader,' and that's accurate. Richard wouldn't have left me for an *idiot*."

The redhead winced again at those words, and Lois leveled a glare at her. "Would you stop? You're not a thief! You're not a homewrecker, either. I'm totally okay with it. Go on, you and Richard are great for each other - be happy and quit flinching every time I mention the fact that he's my ex." The reporter sighed, and added, "It's not that I never loved him - I still do love him, and I always will. Richard's very important to me, and he's always going to be a part of my life because of the twins. But you'll make him happier than I ever could."

"And you're absolutely sure you're not bitter about that? Not even a little?" Lana asked. "Because Lois, I *know* if he and I are together, you and Clark and your kids are always going to be a part of our lives. I admire you - I wouldn't have lived my life the way you've lived yours, but I admire your determination and your courage."

"*Our* lives?" Lois asked gently. "Seems like you've already made the decision, Lana. Besides, what right do I have to be bitter?"

"I did say 'if'," Lana told her, but softly. "Fine, then. If you're sure you're all right with Richard and me - absolutely and totally sure - then I'll take you at your word." She held out her hand and smiled. "Friends?"

Relieved, Lois shook on it. "Friends." However, she couldn't resist adding with a teasing grin, "But if Richard finally starts to get on your nerves, don't you come looking for Clark."

"Lois!"

"Women screaming in surround-sound from your darkened living room at three in the morning," Lois said warningly. "Let's see how happy you are about all this next Halloween, when the movie marathons go on 24/7 for two weeks straight."

Martha carefully showed the twins how to toss a handful of scratch feed so that it scattered in an arc, which kept the chickens from fighting over it. She knew this feeling of

blissful contentment that had settled over her - she'd felt it before, when Clark had toddled up to her from that spacecraft and held his arms out, hoping to be picked up. She had known she couldn't have a child, but she had prayed for one anyway, and her prayers had been answered in that little miracle from the stars. Now he had brought her two more miracles, all unlooked-for, the grandchildren she'd assumed she would never have.

As human as Clark had appeared to be, Martha had always known in the back of her mind that he was anything but. It just didn't matter to her; he was her son by upbringing, alien birth notwithstanding, and she had always believed in the power of nurture over nature. But knowing what he was, she had never expected him to become a father, and her own delight in the twins was magnified by his obvious love for his new role in life.

In that mood, she would have found love in her heart for the twins' mother even if she had been a two-headed ogre. A prickly temper, a sharp tongue, and the occasional cigarette were so easily forgiven that they might not have been problems in the first place. Martha glanced over her shoulder at the back porch, where Lois and Lana remained, watching the twins and sipping their coffee. She offered both women a fond smile, and got the same in return.

"Grandma?" Kala asked. "Can I pet a chicken?"

"Sure, sweetheart," her grandmother told her. "But don't scare them. Here, I'll hold her, you just pet her gently..." With those words, she carefully gathered up the oldest hen in the flock. The bird clucked slowly, but didn't struggle; she had been handled often as a chick, and had no fear of people. She was also particularly calm, and merely turned to look at the little girl who tentatively stroked her feathers.

Jason petted the hen, too, but he was more interested in exploring. "Are we allowed to go for a walk?" he asked.

"Better take your father with you," Martha said. "At least until you know your way around the property. Clark...?"

He had been hanging back, watching them together, his heart so full of love and relief that it ached. Now he came forward, smiling at the twins. "I've got a better idea," he said. "It's chilly out. How would you two like to go for a flight to warm up?"

Two sets of eyes, one blue as his own, the other hazel like her mother's, brightened as his suggestion. "Can we? Can we really, please?" Jason and Kala pleaded in unison, and Clark laughed.

Lois was near enough to hear them, and she waved indulgently. "Go ahead," she said. "But look out, Clark. They're going to pester you for a flight every chance they get. Thank God no one's at the Pioneer Center to see you guys. "

His broad grin told her that was no problem at all, and lifting them both up, he took a quick look around with his x-ray vision to make sure no one happened to be nearby. Then he was gone, soaring into the heavens, and the three women who loved him - mother, lover, and oldest friend - watched him go with identical smiles.

After a moment of silence, Lana said quietly, "That is ... amazing. Does he always just...?"

"Yes," Martha and Lois replied in unison. Martha added with a chuckle, "It's pretty impressive if you've never seen it, but for a while I was more used to watching him fly away from lectures."

Shaking her head, Lana said, "All right, that's about as much as my mind can hold on any given day. I'm *still* getting used to the notion that the boy who sat behind me in fourth grade is Superman."

"You think that's amazing, try watching him dive off the *Daily Planet* roof and then swoop back up and hover," Lois said. "Even better, try being *with* him, the showoff."

Lana shivered. "No thanks. If I'm going to indulge in aerial hijinks, I think I'd rather be safely buckled in." A thought occurred to her, and she glanced upward. "Strange that the twins aren't scared at all..."

"Oh, trust me, they're fine," Lois said casually. "Of course, they've never fallen a couple thousand feet because he lost his grip. And they had better not ever. I'll kill him."

"He was pretty traumatized by that," Martha said. "Poor boy, he told me he couldn't believe he dropped you."

Lois' lip curled in amusement. "After the catch, you couldn't tell he was traumatized. Obviously his grip's gotten a lot better over the years."

Martha just smiled. "Lois, you *do* realize you're the first person he ever flew with, right?"

The reporter hadn't known, and she perked up. "Really?"

"Come on inside, ladies," Martha said. "Lana, I know you want to give your mother a chance to settle down before you head home. We might as well have some hot chocolate and trade stories about my son."

Lois was delighted to have an in-law - *prospective in-law*, *Geez, I'm worse than Lucy* - who would actually give her information other than how unsuitable she was for the Last Son of Krypton. Lana, however, chuckled. "That poor man. Then again, he should have known it would happen eventually. The three women who know him best are sharing information."

Clark touched down gently an hour later. Jason and Kala were profoundly relaxed but still alert, both of them practically glowing with health and happiness. The moment he set them down, the twins stretched like a pair of cats and then trotted off toward the house. Was it his imagination, or did they both move more surely now?

He didn't have much time to think on it. The three women were just walking out of the house as the twins headed in, and Lois kissed both children affectionately while they chattered excitedly about everything they'd seen.

"An' we flew over Africa, an' it was so dark! An' Kala wanted to get a meerkat but Daddy said no, they were all sleepin', and then we went over the ocean and we saw a whale," Jason said.

Lois ruffled his hair and kissed her daughter twice. "Kala, the meerkats don't want to leave their families. Especially not at night - they'd be scared. Besides, Captain Jack would be jealous."

"Yeah," Kala said, perking up. "I like ferrets, too. Captain Jack was the best birthday present ever."

"Nuh-uh, Ignatius is cooler," Jason protested, provoking a long-suffering sigh from his sister.

"You got her a ferret?" Martha muttered in surprised tones.

"Perry White got her the weasel, not me," Lois murmured, pressing her palms to her eyes.

"And *what* is Ignatius?"

"God, don't make me say it," Lois sighed, hiding her face in her hands. "He's an archeological experiment gone bad."

"Oh, that's Jason's iguana, Ma," Clark said as if Lois had never spoken.

"Iguana?" The older woman turned to look speculatively at Lois, who held her hands up.

"I had nothing to do with it," Lois said. "Blame my boss-slash-father-figure."

"Aren't lizards sort of delicate?" Lana asked. "I heard they're hard to take care of."

"You couldn't kill Gazeera with an ax," Lois replied under her breath, deadpan. "Trust me, I've tried."

"Mommy!" Jason, suddenly understanding that Gazeera's honor was being tarnished, turned an affronted look on his mother while the other adults laughed.

After a moment, Lana glanced at her watch and frowned. "I hate to say this, but I need to go. Eventually my mother's going to realize I didn't come straight home."

"What are you, twelve?" Lois growled.

"I'll give you a ride there," Martha said, but she glanced wistfully at the twins. "At least Annette won't start anything while I'm there."

Lois looked up at Clark, then back down at the twins. She had missed them powerfully, but Martha had six years to make up for. An hour or so couldn't hurt. "Take the munchkins with you, if you think it'll help," she suggested. "I think it's safe to say she'll take one look at them and know. Kala's eyes, especially."

The older woman beamed. Lois had to smile back just from the sheer warmth in that look. "Yes, I think that would be a help, Lois. Thank you." The younger woman only nodded. "Jason, Kala, would you like to ride with us?"

After glancing at their parents for confirmation, the twins readily agreed. They demanded another hug and a kiss from Lois and Clark before they left, however. "Are we gonna see cows and horses?" Jason asked as Martha helped him into the cab of the old pickup truck.

"And turkeys?" Kala added hopefully.

Clark slid his arm around Lois' waist, and they waved as Martha drove off. Instinctively, Lois wrapped her arms over his. "Well, at least that'll put that rumor to rest," Clark sighed, his chin on top of her head.

"You sure nobody in her family has hazel eyes? Not even way back?" Lois mocked, laughter clear in her voice.

"I'm sure Annette Lang got a complete description of you yesterday," Clark told her, hugging her close to him. "Including your hair and eyes. If that doesn't make it obvious who their mother really is, just let Kala open her mouth."

Lois had to lean against him, she laughed so hard. "You're learning, Kent."

He just held her for a moment, kissing her hair and smiling. "Did you and Lana get everything straightened out?" he asked. "I tried not to overhear, but you two were talking for a while."

"Yes, we did," Lois said sardonically, a wry expression on her face. "We're dueling at dawn to decide which of us gets to keep both men. That reminds me, gotta clean my gun..."

"Lois," Clark said, tickling her ribs. "Stop being silly."

"No, Kal-El, you won't have to break up a catfight anytime soon," Lois said with playful aggravation, swatting at his hand. "I'm happy for her and Richard, and she's happy for us. He'll finally get what he always wanted; you and I can finally have each other..."

"And Lana will finally have someone worthy of her," Clark added. "If Richard was any less than who he is, I'd have my reservations. But seeing how things stand, I'm glad for them. I just hope he realizes that Lana won't jump headfirst into this."

"If he doesn't, he'll learn," the dark-haired woman opined. "It took him a long time to win me, Kal-El. I was still holding on to your memory even three years later. Besides, I think Lana might just surprise us. The only thing that's been holding her back so far seems to be the fear that I'd consider it theft."

"Hmm," Clark murmured, noncommittally. "Well, since we've been left completely alone for the first time in *how* long, would you like a tour of the farm? I need to make sure there's nothing around that the twins can hurt themselves on."

"D'ya think Martha turned the surveillance cameras on?" Lois said with a snicker. "I'm surprised she did leave us here alone."

She has to leave us alone at some point if she wants more grandchildren, Clark thought, and bit his lip. That was not a thought he needed to entertain. "C'mon. I'm mostly worried about the barn - there are rakes and pitchforks in there. Not to mention, there used to be a rope swing up in the hayloft, and with what you've said about Kala and climbing..."

Lois shuddered as they reluctantly broke apart. "A rope swing? God, those are dangerous."

"How do you think I learned to fly?" Clark said with a grin, holding her hand as they moved away from the house. "The first time was an accident, but after that I'd jump off the swing on purpose to get myself airborne. For a while I couldn't consciously control it, and I had to be *falling* in order for the flight to kick in."

The dark-haired woman couldn't help shaking her head. "Now *that's* a mental image," she teased.

Clark led her into the barn, his superior sight easily picking out potential hazards. He'd never realized just how dangerous farm tools could be - good Lord, there was even a *scythe* on the wall! Suppressing a shiver, Clark gathered it up along with everything else that had a point or an edge, and looked around for a good place to put it all. *The loft. I doubt the twins will actually get up there, and if I have to, I can pull the ladder off the wall. That'll be safest.*

"Wait here for a sec, Lois," he said, and flew up to the loft. It was just as he remembered it, a dim space redolent of hay. Instead of baling the stuff, the Kents had always stored loose hay up here, simply forking it down to the livestock below when necessary. Now it was piled to twice Clark's height in the center of the loft.

That was the spot to aim for when you jumped off the rope swing. As a kid, it had been exhilarating fun, all the more so for being absolutely forbidden. He'd swing out over nothingness, a seventy-foot fall to barn floor below him, and then the rope would tighten and whisk him back in over the safety of the hay.

Now, as a father, it horrified him. *I've got to take that rope down anyway, and the only safe place to keep these tools is up among the rafters.* He flew up again, first securing the tools close to the wall, and then walking easily out along the central beam toward the rope.

Clark was pulling it up, hand over hand, when he heard Lois' voice. "Jesus. And I thought the one I broke my arm falling off was scary - Clark, if you'd fallen from that, you'd break your neck."

"Not me," he replied, turning to look and grinning to see that Lois had climbed the ladder into the loft just beneath him. "But anyone else ... that's why I'm taking it down. It's better not to have the temptation."

He untied the heavy rope and coiled it, stepping lightly off the beam and floating down to Lois as if he weighed no more than the motes of dust in the dim air around them.

"The crazy things you country people do for fun," Lois muttered, shaking her head. She was over at the edge of the mounded hay, and he smiled wickedly. He could smell her perfume from here, and they were, after all, entirely alone...

"We crazy country people can think of a lot more to do in a hayloft than just risk our necks on a rope swing," Clark said, tossing the rope down through the opening behind Lois.

"Like you have any experience with that," Lois teased back, her eyes bright.

"You're right, I don't," he bantered. "Want to change that?"

Lois blinked in surprise, and Clark started to blush. Had he *really* been that bold? But before he could stammer an apology, her expression became amused and very knowing. "I never did either, not in a hayloft, anyway," Lois purred, coming toward him. "Never knew why a *hayloft*, of all places. But I'm sure you could show me..."

I haven't even really had too many chances to just kiss her, and I miss that. I miss it a lot. We can always stop... Telling himself that, Clark took Lois' hands and brought her with him to where the hay was deepest. It held them up, surrounding them in its soft, grassy scent as they sat down together. Clark leaned in to kiss her...

And Lois started giggling. "Dear God," she muttered, hiding her face in her hands. "After all the grand pageantry of whisking me off to bed in the Fortress all those years ago, this is what we've come back to. Making out in a hayloft in Kansas like a couple of teenagers. Oh, *Geez...*"

Clark just looked at her with a half-smile playing over his lips. "Lois, I think we both know you love the man as much as the hero," he said quietly. When she stopped her nervous laughter and met his eyes, he added, "Now's your chance to prove it."

One last little half-laugh. "You're awfully sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Only when it comes to you," he told her, and kissed her.

That impulsive little kiss surprised them both. Clark hadn't let himself think too much about it; he would get nervous as he always did with her. Her lips were so soft beneath his, the brush of her hair against his face, her swift gasp lost in the kiss. The faint scent of her hair, her perfume, her skin, overlying the sweet hay... *Lois*. Here, she was really here, with him. Really his, *finally* his to hold, to kiss, to love. Very quickly, the world narrowed to himself and Lois, the way her arms slid around his neck, those delicate hands burrowed into his hair, the sudden intense pressure of her lips when she returned the kiss gladly. It was as it had always been; even more so. Lost in her, lost in everything about her...

The last sane bit of his mind warned him, *Better listen for the truck. It doesn't take all that long to get to town and back, and Martha might never trust you two again if she catches you up here the first time you're alone...*

No Holding Back

Now on their sides, facing each other as they lay down, his arm around her waist pulling her close and her hands tracing his features, Lois and Clark had both momentarily forgotten where they were and who might be coming home any moment. He was lost in her, savoring the softness of her skin under his lips, kissing her neck and her throat. Lois' eyes had closed at the first real rush of sensation, as she tipped her head back and let him do as he would with her, whimpering softly every time his mouth brushed her neck just so. After all of the tension between them, the only word she could think of to describe the feel of his mouth against her skin was delicious.

He could feel her shivering, and slid his hand down her side to her hip, delighting in that sweet curve. Without even a thought, Lois pressed even closer, craving his touch like a drug. Clark traced the curve of her hip down the outside of her thigh, Lois arching into the touch with a low murmur as her nails raked lightly over the back of his shirt. It was startling to realize just how well he remembered how it had felt to caress those long legs, bare skin against his palms, and how he had delighted in the feel of them tightened around his waist.

As his kisses slipped lower down her neck, Lois couldn't stop the soft moan that slipped from her lips, remembering his perfect face nuzzled into her neck, the curve of her breast, his cheek against her belly... He had kissed her almost reverently then, tender and adoring, and she recalled wondering how something could be so achingly sweet and so blazingly erotic at the same time.

Clark ran his hand back up her side, accidentally catching the bottom of her shirt and pulling it up. Her reaction was immediate. Lois hissed; the air was cooler than she'd thought. But he just as quickly warmed her, nuzzling his face against her bare skin and kissing her hungrily. Lois' head fell back into the fragrant hay, dazzled by the extremity of want that rose in her. She couldn't help gasping and clenching her fingers in his hair as he continued. There was no hesitation in him now, just desire; Clark hadn't had a chance to get nervous the way he often did around Lois. He was so completely enthralled by her pale skin, by the faintly spicy rose scent that clung to her, and by the way her breath suddenly sped up when he nudged the blouse up a little higher.

He stopped then, hands on her sides just below her breasts, the sweater gathered above his fingers, and looked up at her with his lips still pressed to her belly. Lois' eyes had gone wide and wild, but the smile she gave him was slow and sultry, warm as a summer day. Her hips rose against him slightly, Lois lost in the moment and now boldly encouragingly, and he grinned, those amazingly blue eyes darkening. He rose up over her, capturing her mouth for another long kiss...

Neither of them heard the truck pull in the yard, too captivated by each other and this small world they'd managed to find. The world outside of the loft had failed to exist for this moment frozen in time. Lois' breath was coming more quickly as she ran her nails down his chest, catching briefly against the waistband of his pants before hurriedly pulling his shirt up. Her hands were cooler than he expected, cold compared to the rest of her, making his body tense as she splayed her hands over his chest. Just to feel him was temptation of the worst sort after so long. Although not as perfect as his, her recall of that beloved form was still sharp, as much as she had tried to deny it over the years. Those perfect muscles, that smooth skin... Just the knowledge of this being him, *Kal-El*, this man she loved, after all this time was driving her madder than she had meant to allow herself to get. They had so little time, no way to finish this, but... Oh, *dear Lord*, how she *ached* from this. Lois growled softly in intense need and

nipped at his lower lip.

He answered her with more passion, a kiss that took her breath away as his hands slid up under the blouse at last, and she felt the warmth of his skin even through her bra. The reaction from his touch there was instantaneous, tender flesh rising to harden against his palms as she broke the kiss to shudder openly. The normally-hazel eyes that met his then were desperate, hungry, and stained dark emerald. "Yes," Lois breathed as she arched into his touch, letting her nails rake his back again. He only moved his hand slightly, teasing, but it was enough to close her eyes. Her dark head rocked back, her voice breathless when she whispered, "Oh yes, Kal-El. *Please.*"

But a different voice answered her from the barn far below. "Daddy? Grandma said to go find you. Are you up there? Daddy?"

Jason...? The blue eyes that matched her son's stared into Lois' from inches away, and she clearly saw the disappointment in his eyes. She understood and shared it completely. For a moment, she couldn't get her breath, couldn't tamp down this fire in her that they had both kindled, but what if they tried to look for them? Not moving to sit up, her entire body still shaken, she continued to lay there as her lover spoke up. "Yes, Jason, I'm up here," Clark called back in a tone of absolute calm. "Tell Grandma I'll be right down."

"Bring Mommy with you," Kala's voice echoed out this time. "Grandma's looking for her, too. We brought home candy!"

Well, that knocked all of the sexiness out of the situation with no hope of return, Lois thought with a long-suffering groan. Clark just dropped his head, trying not to laugh, but Lois felt his shoulders shaking. She stroked his hair - he'd happened to rest his forehead on her chest, but it was more comforting than arousing at the moment, with their children standing at the bottom of the ladder and calling for them. Well, she had known... "We have got to get that child some earplugs," Lois muttered, her frustration all too clear.

"Definitely," Clark said, and kissed her one more time before helping her up.

He quickly brushed the loose hay off Lois' clothes while she attempted to do the same for him, and then they headed down to the barn floor. "I intend to collect a rain check on this, mister," she said as she stepped into his arms, her eyes still dark as she raised her brow at him.

"You aren't the only one," he told her, smiling slowly and wickedly.

Lois was aware of his closeness as he held her and drifted down, not bothering with the ladder, and she shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the cold weather. Clark was just as conscious of her, and studiously avoided looking into her face until after they'd landed.

"That's so cool," the twins sighed. It seemed as though they were still fascinated by their father's flight; when he carried them, they clung to him tightly, but Mommy was very comfortable flying with him. She made it look easy, as if gravity didn't apply to her when Daddy was around.

"C'mon, you two," Clark said when they touched down, rumpling Kala's hair as he reluctantly took his arm from around Lois' waist. "Did Grandma take you to the general store?"

"Yeah!" both twins chorused. Kala continued, "We met Miss Lana's mommy, and then we went to the store, and Grandma let us pick out candy but it had to be safe stuff. They had a *whole barrel* of pickles, Mommy!"

"Wow," Lois said, knowing just the right tone of interest to use. She caught her little girl's hand and pulled her into her side for a hug. "And did Miss Lana's mom still think Lana was your mommy?"

Jason giggled as they all four made their way out of the barn. "She said I look just like

Daddy when he was little, 'cept for my hair! D'ya think I'll have dark hair like you when I grow up?"

Before anyone could answer, Kala looked up at her mother and added, "After we left, Miss Lana's mommy said somebody called Jane Lutter was a dizzy broad. Mommy, what's a dizzy broad?"

Lois laughed so hard that she couldn't speak, picturing a prim and proper midwestern woman muttering something like that - and having no idea that the child outside in the truck could hear her. Clark answered both kids while Lois tried to control her laughter. "Jason, your hair will darken up when you get older - your mommy's hair did. And Kala, calling somebody a dizzy broad is like a really mean way of calling them a silly goose. I don't want to hear *either* of you using that phrase, okay?"

They blinked at him somberly, then Jason asked, "What's a silly goose?"

That started Lois snickering again. "My kids speak Big City and French, Kent. They'd never heard anybody say 'swell' 'til they met you."

"A silly goose is a silly person - maybe not the smartest in the whole world," Clark elaborated. Kala turned to look at Jason speculatively, a little grin clear on her lips. "And it's not really nice to call anyone a silly goose or anything else."

"It also means to be a nosy loudmouth," Lois added, thinking that she disliked Jane Lutter without ever having properly met the woman. At her comment, Jason turned to look at Kala with a superior smile.

"Of course, you two are both too smart and too sweet to be anything like that," Clark said, putting one hand on the top of each head and turning the twins toward the house. "Let's go inside, it's getting close to dinner time."

"Yeah, Ben should be getting here any minute," Lois added thoughtfully while they crossed the yard, glancing up the drive.

"Mommy, who's Ben?" Kala asked, and Jason just grinned and whispered, "Nosy!"

"Ben is your grandma's boyfriend," Lois replied with a smirk, ignoring the long-suffering look Clark gave her.

"Grandma's got a boyfriend?" Jason said, wrinkling his nose. "Like kissing-boyfriend? Eww! How come everybody has a boyfriend or a girlfriend?"

Lois and Clark looked at each other and grinned, breaking into laughter again as they shepherded the twins inside.

Lana couldn't visit her mother without answering an exhaustive round of questions. The idea that the twins were *hers* had been quickly dismissed as ludicrous, but Annette was still very interested in 'that Eastern woman' and just how her daughter knew Lois Lane.

Her mother's curiosity wasn't easily satisfied, particularly not when Lois had made such an impression on the town. Lana took a perverse delight in letting all of her admiration show as she described the reporter. "Possibly the bravest woman I've ever met," Lana said, sipping a glass of soda. "I mean, she dove into the open ocean - while handcuffed - to save Superman's life. How could you *not* respect that? Clark certainly adores her. I'm sure he knows how lucky he is."

"You think so?" Annette asked, watching Lana's face curiously. She and her daughter looked very much alike, with the same classic beauty and the same deep auburn hair. But Lana's green eyes had come from her father, who was presently reading his newspaper and pretending to ignore the feminine gossip.

"Oh, yes," Lana answered with a chuckle. "The two of them are madly in love. And those twins of theirs - absolutely precious. They're amazingly bright, but then, they get it from both parents."

Annette made a noncommittal noise, and Lana knew she would seek out Lois and the twins to see for herself. That was all well and good - the Langs had had to learn how to deal with their daughter running off to the big city, and bringing home all sorts of city habits like locking the doors after dark. They would be more accepting of Lois and her quirks than most of the other townspeople.

Just when Lana thought she could start plotting her escape, however, Annette fixed a serious look on her and asked, "So have you met someone yet?"

Yes, Mom, I think I'll take Lois' ex now that he's on the market. Good thing she and I are friends, huh? Lana bit her lip before she could say that - Lois *was* having an influence on her - and simply replied, "Well, there is an interesting guy, but I don't want to rush things."

And then she let her mind wander, just nodding in the appropriate spots, as her mother gave her the usual lecture on why she shouldn't wait too long, you're only young once, et cetera, et cetera. At one time, this would've turned into an actual argument, with both women eventually raising their voices. It infuriated Lana to no end to hear her mother talk as if the only worthwhile goal in the world was to get married and have children, when she herself had graduated college and worked as a receptionist throughout most of her marriage. The *last* thing Lana wanted was to be left home by herself, servant to some man's needs, ignored unless he wanted something of her, and her chief purpose in life being to bear his children. No, she'd had enough of that with Don, and thank God they'd never actually had kids.

Time had softened Lana's attitude, however. Her mother wanted to be a grandma, just like Martha Kent. And time *was* ticking. Clark, at least, had already fathered the twins, and with a younger woman. Lana didn't have too many more years left if she wanted to be a mother.

And if I'm honest with myself, I do want someone to look up at me with bright eyes and call me Mommy. My heart aches just about every time I see Lois and the twins. But everything I have right now, I worked for myself. I took the divorce settlement and invested it in my dreams, and grew my business with perseverance and hard work. Now I'm officially a millionaire, my line of clothing is sold all across America and Europe, and I don't owe anyone anything for my success. There just wasn't time for settling down...

But now, here's Richard. A great dad, obviously attracted to me, devastatingly handsome, and a hero in his own right. The only man on earth who could compete with Superman, and noble enough not to. Everything that Don wasn't, as a matter of fact. And I'm so incredibly attracted to him it's driving me crazy.

"Mom," she finally said, and her calm tone stopped the flow of words. "His name is Richard, he's a pilot and the head of the International department at the *Daily Planet*, and he's *just* come out of a long-term relationship. So I am *not* rushing things. But we have some important things in common and we come from different enough backgrounds to make life interesting." As even her father glanced over the top of his newspaper, Lana grinned and continued, "He's also very good-looking and absolutely nuts about me. If all goes well, I might bring him home for Christmas."

That started a whole new line of inquiry, and Lana found herself having to decide just how much she could tell both parents about Richard and how she'd met him. So much of it was bound up in Lois and Clark and the twins - not to mention Clark's superhero persona. *To think,*

Martha has dealt with this all her life - and Lois had to do it even when she had every reason to hate Clark. Welcome to your future, Ms. Lang; you're going to get very good at keeping Superman's secret.

Martha was unpacking their purchases, holding aside the candy Jason and Kala had picked out, when Lois and Clark walked in. The pair studiously avoided standing too close or looking too long at each other - that behavior was as obvious as a billboard over their heads reading *Guilty*. The older woman just raised an eyebrow at them both. "Where were you two?" she asked casually, handing the bag of canned goods to Clark.

"Childproofing the barn," he replied as he started putting the cans away in the pantry. "All the tools are up in the loft now, if you need anything."

Martha nodded, smirking a little. Lois kept quiet for the moment, turning to look seriously at Kala, who was edging closer to the candy. "Not until after your dinner," she said.

Unfortunately, she'd turned her back on Martha, and the older woman reached out to pluck a piece of hay from her rumpled hair. "Childproofing the barn," she said as Lois whipped around and stared guiltily at the hay held between Martha's fingers. "I see."

Lois blushed, and Clark did too, seeing his mother's knowing expression. Martha looked at both of them steadily, then allowed herself a tiny smile. "I can't begrudge Clark what he missed when he was younger." Then she pointed the piece of hay in their direction, shaking it slightly. "Nevertheless, just see to it that you behave, children."

Jason and Kala watched the three adults, their heads swiveling back and forth. "What're you talking about?" the black-haired little girl asked, scowling. "Are Mommy and Daddy in trouble?"

"Not yet," Martha replied dryly. The doorbell ringing cut off any further discussion. Shelby, who had been sleeping under the coffee table in the living room, raised his head and barked once. Martha simply glanced at the clock and smiled. "Come in, Ben."

The twins perked up, looking toward the door as the older man walked in. "Evening, Martha, kids," he said with a nod for Lois and Clark. Then he caught sight of the twins, and the corners of his eyes crinkled up in a smile. "Well, hello there. You must be the famous Lane twins."

"We're famous?" Jason asked, cocking his head.

Lois chuckled. "Around here you two are. Or *infamous*, more likely. You two, this is Ben Hubbard. Ben, these are my twins, Jason and Kala."

"Very pleased to meet you," Ben said, sitting down and leaning forward to be a little closer to their height. He had a kind face, and both twins were drawn to him.

"Nice to meet you," they said in unison, both shaking his hand. Jason added with a quizzical look, "You're Grandma's boyfriend?"

"Are you gonna be our grandpa?" Kala asked.

Ben laughed, his eyes merry. "Yes to the one, maybe to the other. I don't know if this wild young woman here will ever settle down with me," he said, giving Martha a broad wink. Then he continued, "I *knew* your Grandpa, Jonathan Kent - Clark's daddy. A fine man, and I'm sorry you didn't get to meet him."

Martha and Lois sat down at the table, Clark taking over putting things away. Jason hopped up into Lois' lap to better examine Ben, and Kala frowned at him for getting the seat first. But then she grinned, the gears turning swiftly in that pretty little head, and held her arms out to Martha, who promptly picked her up. Surveying the table from her lap, Kala asked Ben,

"What happened to him?"

It was Martha who answered her. "He passed away, honey. A long time ago, before you were ever born. He had a problem with his heart."

Both kids looked sad and disappointed, snuggling into the women who held them. "I wish I could've met Daddy's daddy," Jason said plaintively.

"He was a lot like your daddy, though," Ben said. "They say if you've met the son, then you've met the father. So in a way, you *do* know your Grandpa. Clark's got his sense of humor and his kindness, the same way you've got your daddy's blue eyes. The same way Miss Kala has her daddy's black hair - Martha, I never knew how your family managed to throw a black-haired little boy like Clark. Must've been some Gypsy in the bloodline somewhere."

"Oh, stop it," Martha sighed, but she was smiling. "My mother had hair almost that dark."

Shelby barked again, from the front door this time, and Ben turned back to the twins. "Do you two like dogs?"

"We like Shelby," Jason replied.

"But not little yappy dogs," Kala hurriedly added, frowning. "They're mean."

"I've got some dogs," Ben said. "They're little, kinda, and they bark a bit, but they don't bite or anything. They're beagles."

The twins glanced at each other. "Beagles?" Jason said. "The black an' red an' white ones? Like Shiloh?"

"Yes," Ben said. "I've got about twelve at home right now, but there's three of them outside. Shelby's barking because he can smell his friend Barkley through the door and wants him to come in."

"You brought *three*?" Martha hissed, as Jason and Kala consulted silently again.

"Barkley, Mathilda, and Sadie," Ben said. "He goes everywhere with me, you know that, and two of his daughters wanted to come along."

"Sure," Kala finally said with a nod, her expression curious. "Long as they don't bite."

With that, Ben smiled triumphantly at Martha and went to the front door. Seconds after he opened it, two young beagles raced into the kitchen, sniffing enthusiastically around everyone's legs. With both twins up in someone's lap, the dogs had to stretch to sniff their feet, but they were obviously friendly. The two dogs' white-tipped tails wagged so hard they smacked into their own sides and whacked the legs of the chairs. Other than a few low chuffs that sounded more like chickens than dogs, Mathilda and Sadie didn't bark.

Jason and Kala were already giggling at the two female dogs when Ben walked in carrying Barkley. The elderly hound raised his head at the unfamiliar scents, and drew in breath for his trademark bawl. But Ben rumbled his ears and sat down, still holding him, distracting him long enough for the twins to get used to him.

"Barkley here is an old man," Ben said. "He can't see or hear too good, but his nose works just fine. Let him smell your hand, the back of your hand - that's right - and then he'll know you're friends." Jason and Kala both patted the old dog's head, his tan and black markings faded to white and gray with age. Barkley, for his part, sniffed them both and then insisted on being set down so that he could chuff threateningly at the boisterous younger dogs and explore the house.

"Of course, Barkley's so old, he forgets a lot," Martha added. "If you two see him again tomorrow, he'll probably howl his fool head off at you until he smells you. Ben, if he gets my newel post again..."

"Martha, he won't," Ben said.

Clark had been looking through the pantry and the refrigerator while the others talked, ignoring the two dogs that sniffed hopefully at the open fridge and gave him pleading looks. Now he came back into the room and said, "Dinner's going to be a bit interesting with the twins. The worst problem is the wheat - we can get around milk and shellfish and nuts easily, but so many things have wheat in them."

"I've got some of that roast left over from day before yesterday," Martha mused. "We've got plenty of vegetables, too. Soup stock, barley, a little garlic... I could put together a stew, if you don't mind waiting a bit."

"That sounds fine," Lois said.

"Stew?" Jason said, perking up. "Is it Castleberry? With rice?"

Lois dropped her head into her hands with a groan. They just had to bring up the in-the-can stuff, didn't they? Bless her babies for having perfect timing. "Okay, so I can't *cook*, either! Give me a break, I won a Pulitzer, what more do you want?"

Lana finally got out of the house around dinnertime, making an excuse about needing to stop by the store. First she stopped outside the clothing store; she'd made special arrangements for the small, family-run shop to be able to carry some of her own line of clothing at a reasonable price. It amused her to see L. Lang jeans in the front window of a little shop in Kansas, carrying a price tag that was about half of what they sold for in Macy's New York. If people ever found out about this, Smallville's only women's clothing store would find itself swamped by tourists.

She then visited the diner and had a cup of coffee, visiting with the waitresses. One had gone to school with Lana, and the other was the daughter of a school friend. They were both interested in the gossip about 'that Eastern woman' and Lana wound up answering even more questions about Lois. Fortunately, Richard had mentioned her only as 'a friend of the family' in his article about rescuing Superman, so no one at home knew just how closely involved Lana had been. In telling her mother and retelling the story now, Lana downplayed her role, making it seem as if Clark had called her in merely to offer support during a trying time.

By the time Lana finished her coffee and left, the two waitresses and the short-order cook had a different outlook on Lois Lane. If the reporter would stop by, order breakfast, and make conversation, she might have three more supporters. And Lois would need every ounce of approval she could get - someone was already slandering her name all over town.

The redhead made it to the general store at last, exchanging greetings with the men on the front porch and then visiting with Silas while she picked out a few things to justify her trip. He was her cousin, and had taken over running the store when her father had retired, so they had plenty of family news to catch up on. But in the middle of talking fondly about his oldest daughter's college plans, Silas' expression suddenly changed to one of dismay.

The front door had just opened as another woman walked in, and Silas and Lana could both clearly hear Jane Lutter outside berating her husband. "Don't you *dare* speak that shameless hussy's name in front of me. The nerve of her, parading those kids around..." she was saying.

Lana scowled. She had a good idea who Jane was talking about, and if her suspicion was correct, Jane had talked to *everyone* in town who would listen. That was a sizeable number, considering that she'd taught third grade to most of Lana's generation as well as the next, and was accepted as an authority figure by the younger kids in town who had never had her class. Only a few of her peers didn't put any stock in Jane's opinions, Martha Kent among them.

"Thank you, Silas," Lana said, pretending she hadn't heard Jane. "I'll see you around."

"You do that," he replied. "Take care of yourself, and don't forget to come home now and again."

"I won't," she chuckled, and headed outside.

The friendly smile she'd given Silas stayed fixed by effort of will. Al Lutter had levered himself up out of the rocking chair and was slowly heading down the porch steps, nagged on his way by Jane. The other men weren't defending him; they had known each other all their lives and would never interfere in a marital spat. Still, it irked Lana to see the man cowed.

"I can't believe you'd have a kind word for her," Jane snapped. "Citybred little tramp, coming out here with her flashy car. She even dared to smart off at *me*, Al; I'd think you'd have a little more consideration for your wife than that! And then bringing those kids out here, Martha Kent must be *mortified*, poor woman. Everyone in town knows they're not married, and the Kent boy's in no hurry to make an honest woman of her."

She finally stopped for breath, unaware that Lana had come down the steps behind her and was listening to her diatribe. Everyone else on the street could hear her as well, some of them lingering on their way into or out of another store. Lingered and *listening*, and probably believing the spiteful trash she was spewing.

"Then again, I'm not surprised *you* approve of her," Jane continued as her husband shuffled to their car. "All men have a bit of the dog in them, you more than most, Alfred James Lutter, but *all* men lose their minds when a bitch in heat passes by. Look at the Kent boy, no shame at all, letting her flaunt herself and his bastards all over this town. And *her* - good heavens, she's *proud* of herself! Walking around here like she owns the place!"

Words failed her then, and she could only snort derisively to express her feelings before proclaiming her conclusion. "No wonder you and all the other old farts like her so much. That Lois Lane is no more than a well-dressed whore."

Lana had closed the distance between them while the older woman ranted. Now, from only a few feet behind her, the redhead called out, "Jane!"

Jane turned; the tone was one of pleasant recognition, and Lana was still smiling as she approached. So the older woman smiled back. "Well, Lana Lang, it's a pleasure to..."

Before Jane could even finish whatever platitude she'd planned to murmur, Lana slapped the words out of her mouth.

Absolute silence followed the resounding smack, and Jane stared in open-mouthed shock with Lana's handprint turning bright red on her cheek. "You know nothing about Lois Lane," Lana said, her voice level but pitched to carry. "And you don't know much more about Clark Kent or his mother - or me, for that matter. It's high time someone stopped you from advertising your ignorance so broadly, Jane."

With that, she stepped around the older woman, nodded hello to Al Lutter, and walked on down the street with her head held high. As she headed for her car, Lana couldn't help grinning. Slapping the spiteful words right out of Jane's mouth had been so darned *satisfying*...

She had heard Jane run her mouth before, and Lana had often daydreamed about smacking her like that. Just once, just to knock a little sense into her. Vicious gossip was just so very cruel. And besides, a woman could only overhear so much speculation about the *real* reason for her divorce - not to mention the settlement she'd gotten, no contest - before she started to get angry at the person spreading the rumors.

Hearing Lois and Clark and their twins demeaned was simply the last straw. Lana could tolerate a lot more gossip directed at herself than she could her friends, and to speak of the

twins so coldly infuriated her. Jane had had it coming to her, all right.

The Kents' phone had rung twice during dinner, going to the answering machine both times. Martha didn't believe in interrupting a family meal, and Lois found herself curiously glad of the relaxed pace and casual conversation. The twins used their best table manners, only occasionally giggling at the way Shelby had chosen to lie down right under their feet and snooze.

"They're amazingly well-behaved," Lois said, glancing at the four dogs sleeping under the table. She had one of the younger beagles lying *on* her foot, but none of them begged for scraps. Their laid-back behavior was a huge contrast to Sylvia White's Yorkies, which would practically climb into your lap and snatch food from your plate.

"The girls don't even know they can eat people food," Ben said proudly. "They're mostly kennel dogs, but I bring them inside in turns so they know how to act. I've never given them table scraps and won't let anyone else do it, so they don't even think to beg. Barkley, well, he's been spoiled a bit, but he knows better than to bother us."

"Shelby's smart enough to know what we're eating tastes good," Martha said, glancing at Clark. He grinned sheepishly; Shelby had gotten a few tidbits from him in the past when he thought Ma wasn't looking. Evidently he hadn't been as circumspect as he thought. Martha continued, "He's been told not to make a nuisance of himself, and he obeys. But then, he's a Border collie. They're the most intelligent breed of dog in the world, you know."

Ben huffed. "That's why you see so many crazy ones, then. People buy a working dog like a collie, smart, athletic, and lock it up in the house all the time. They're too smart for their own good. A dog like that needs a job - protecting the chickens and ducks, fetching the paper, fetching in the livestock. If he doesn't have something to do, he'll give *himself* a job, and you won't like it."

"Shelby thought for three years it was his job to take all the doilies off the sofa and chairs and put them under the end table," Martha said, amused. "And I couldn't yell at him because I couldn't *catch* him, sly devil. Then we bought a cow, that little Jersey I used to have, and she kept him busy."

"How did you get so many dogs, Mister Ben?" Kala asked, after the adults were done chuckling.

"Well, I had three," Ben said. "Hunting dogs, two girls and a boy. I used to hunt when I was younger, and I always liked a beagle. They're supposed to hunt rabbits, but they'll track anything - fox, possum, even deer. It's beautiful to be in the woods on a fall afternoon, hearing them come singing through the woods and knowing there's a big buck running in front of them... Anyway, one of the girls had puppies, and I kept one and found homes for the others. Then the other one had puppies, too, and one looked just like the daddy, so I kept her. I bought a dog from North Carolina next, son of the national show champion and a darned good hunter, too. I just needed one that wasn't related to the ones I had, and I thought I'd get the best. Well, all of a sudden people wanted to *buy* dogs from me."

The phone rang again while he explained, but everyone ignored it. "Next thing I knew, I had ten beagles, and every time one of them had puppies, I could sell them for pretty much any price I wanted. Most of them belong to hunters around here, but a few went out of state. Barkley here, he's got a son working for the Department of Agriculture down in Texas, keeping people from bringing fruit across the border. And Sadie's momma, another of Barkley's pups, lives in an old folks' home in Missouri, giving the old people something to look forward to

every day."

"What Ben isn't telling you is that Barkley used to get out all the time," Martha said. "Just about every mutt in this town has a streak of 'champion' beagle in them."

Ben couldn't help laughing. "Yeah, he did do that. He could climb a chain-link fence when he was younger, and slip most any collar I put on him. He'd always come home after a day or so, but I'd hear about him going visiting all the lady dogs. Heck, one time he got all the way across town to that Winters family. They had two German Shepherds, kept them on chains to keep people out of their yard - unfriendly folks. Their male shepherd was supposed to be the biggest, meanest dog in town... But when the female had puppies, there were four little German Shepherds ... and one *Beagle* Shepherd! I swear that big ol' shepherd dog looked embarrassed."

The kids laughed along with the adults, even though they weren't as sure of the joke. Jason looked down at Mathilda, asleep beside his chair, and then looked up at Lois pleadingly. "Mommy...?"

"No," she said. "You have a lizard, you don't need a dog." And to forestall the pitiful looks from both children, she added, "Maybe when you're older."

"I'm not going to stop raising beagles anytime soon," Ben said comfortingly. "Besides, I want to hear about this lizard."

The rest of the meal was accompanied by Jason and Kala talking about their pets. Ignatius' amazing escapes were retold in glorious detail, as was Captain Jack's habit of getting up *inside* the sleeper sofa to take a nap. Lois finally sighed disgustedly while Jason was extolling his iguana's intelligence for the fifth time, and said, "Ben, that lizard is evil. *Evil*. I've had welts on my ankles because it uses its tail like a whip. It bites, too, and it claws..."

"Mommy, Ignatius *likes* you," Jason said earnestly. "He *always* goes to you when he gets out. He just gets scared when you yell."

Lois raised an eyebrow. "Jason, that thing has jumped off a bookcase and landed on my head. He does *not* like me, he wants to *kill* me. He's been listening to Kala call him Gazeera and he thinks I'm Tokyo."

Clark was hunched over with his head in his hands, shoulders shaking, trying not to burst out laughing. Jason pouted at his mother. "Mommy! Ignatius wants t' be your *friend*!"

"Yeah, 'cause it was a *friendly* bite that I had to wash out with iodine," Lois said dryly, finally succeeding in making Martha and Ben laugh along with Clark. "Jason, honey, I know you love Ignatius, but he doesn't love me. And the feeling is mutual."

Kala, seeing an opportunity for more attention, looked at Martha with a broad grin and said, "One time Gazeera got out in the morning while Mommy was getting dressed, and..."

"No, we do not need the story of how Mommy found a lizard in her bra," Lois said quickly. "*Especially* not what I said to Richard about it. That's not dinner-table language."

Kala glanced at her, then shrugged. "Mommy says we can't talk like her until we move out."

"An' even then she better never hear us say it," Jason finished. "Everybody at work is scared of Mommy makin' the air blue when she's mad."

"That's cursing a blue streak, kids, and thanks for sharing," Lois muttered. "Ben, Martha, I swear I don't always talk like a merchant marine, okay?"

"But you make an impression when you do, I bet," Ben said affectionately. "What I wouldn't give to see you turn that language on someone like Jane Lutter..."

"She did it yesterday," Clark said. "Lois, the woman who was staring at you? That's Jane."

"The town loudmouth," Martha said. "And possibly the only person I know who deserved a dressing-down like that."

They were nearly finished eating, and the phone rang again. Martha heaved an irritated sigh. "I suppose it's *very* important," she muttered. "I'll get the messages in a minute."

"You go ahead, Ma," Clark said. "The twins and I will clear the table, if Ben will start some after-dinner coffee."

"Sure thing," Ben said. He caught Lois' eye and said sternly, "*You*, little lady, sit right there. You're the guest in this house."

"Clark and the twins are too..."

"Nah, Clark's lived here, he's no guest," Ben chuckled. "And kids exist to do chores, don't you know that? Why d'ya think farm families are so big?"

Lois' eyebrow arched up, and she turned to the twins. "You heard that, right? Remember it when we get home."

Jason and Kala just giggled as they followed their father, carrying the silverware and cups while he carried the plates. Lois just stretched, listening to Ben starting the coffee and Clark murmuring to the twins...

Martha suddenly burst out laughing in the living room. "Lois! Come here, you *have* to hear this."

That brought everyone into the living room to hear whatever was entertaining Martha so much. The first message she played for them was a breathless younger woman's voice, "You said it, Mrs. Kent, and it finally happened! Someone finally hushed Jane Lutter in mid-sentence, and it didn't take an act of Congress after all. *Lana Lang* slapped her across the face! ... Oh, you must be at dinner. I'll call back. You've *got* to hear about this!"

"Lana?" Ben said, eyebrows rising.

Martha just grinned. "I knew someday she'd lose her patience."

The next message was from an older woman. "Well, Martha, I'm sure you've heard about this already, but I thought you should know it was your son Lana was defending. Jane couldn't keep her mouth off him and those kids and that Eastern woman. We all thought we'd see proof that red hair means a fiery temper back when Jane was talking about Lana's husband, but it took insulting your family for her to finally get her just desserts."

Martha pressed the erase button, still grinning. "That woman has had it coming to her for *years*," she said, a note of satisfaction in her voice.

Jason and Kala were both looking at the answering machine, perplexed. "Miss Lana hit somebody?" Kala asked.

"Mommy says fightin' doesn't solve anything," Jason said.

"Mommy also says you two ought to take a nap after dinner," Lois replied quickly. "Go on, wash up."

"But we're not tired," Kala complained.

"You were up early, you had a long flight and a long drive, and Mommy says it's time for a nap, Kala Josephine," Lois insisted. She crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow, not even noticing the startled look on Martha's face when she heard the whole name. A moment later, the older woman was smiling in recognition.

"Mommy," Jason started to whine, but Clark picked him up.

"Listen to your mother," he chided gently. "C'mon, you two, with the day you've had, be glad you were allowed to stay up this late without a nap. Kala, come on."

Kala scowled at her brother for getting carried, and turn to Lois, holding her arms out

demandingly. Lois picked her up with a chuckle, muttering, "Serve you right if I left your butt right there on the floor, little Miss Spoiled Rotten."

The little girl just grinned and said, "I love you."

"And you're full of it," Lois sighed.

As she headed out of the room, Martha caught her shoulder gently. "Kala Josephine?" she asked.

"Yes," Lois said with a smile. "She was named for him." Glancing toward Ben and seeing that he wasn't paying attention to her, she added softly, "Twice. I knew the secret by then, remember?"

Clark had never had to put a six-year-old to bed. Lois shepherded him through the routine, and the twins were actually tired beneath their bravado, so they didn't offer more than token protests. Especially not after a nice warm bath that made them very drowsy. However, they hit a stumbling block when it came time to actually lie down for the nap.

Kala and Jason refused point blank to sleep in the room Martha had set up for them. Even yawning, Kala's hair smelling of bubblegum-scented shampoo and Jason's of grape, they whined churlishly that they didn't want to go to bed. The bed was too high, there was no nightlight, they wanted a glass of water and a story and...

Lois finally looked up at Clark with an exasperated sigh. "They don't travel very well, I'm afraid. The only way we could ever get them to sleep the first night of vacation was in bed with us."

Clark's mouth twitched up as he tried to force a smile; he knew who 'us' was in that sentence, and the less he thought of Lois and Richard in bed - with or without the twins chaperoning - the better. Lois winced a little, muttering, "Sorry."

"Not your fault," he said.

"I'm not tired," Kala declared, yawning. "I don't wanna go t' bed..."

"C'mon, you two can lay down in my bed," Clark told her. "It's big enough."

"Will you stay with us?" Jason asked plaintively.

"Yes, we'll stay with you," Lois said. "Until you fall asleep."

That ended most of the whining, Kala and Jason perfectly content to curl up on either side of Clark. Lois sat at the desk, grinning at the picture they made. Clark looked up at her with a wistful smile as Kala snuggled into the crook of his arm. "We can budge over, Lois, if you'd rather sit down here."

"That's okay; I'm enjoying the view from here." She smiled slowly. "I never thought you'd be trying to get me into your bed on my second night in Smallville."

Clark chuckled, the movement of his chest provoking a sleepy mutter of protest from the twins. "Lullaby," Jason said, his voice thick with sleep. "Lullaby, Mommy."

"Lullaby," Kala echoed, opening her eyes just enough to meet Lois' startled ones. "Please? Sing 'Once 'pona time'?"

Lois looked almost panicked; *that* song, in front of *this* man? No way. She couldn't ... until she met both drowsy children's gazes, perplexed at her reluctance. "Mommy, please?" Jason added. "Pretty please?"

"All right," Lois sighed, closing her eyes. The only way this would work would be for her to forget that Clark was there. He'd never heard her sing before... *Forget he's there. This is just your kids' favorite lullaby. Quit dithering and sing them to sleep.*

Clark listened, fascinated, as Lois' voice hesitantly began, "Once upon a time ... once

when you were mine... I remember skies ... reflected in your eyes..."

Once upon a time

Once beneath the stars

The universe was ours

Love was all we knew

And all I knew was you

I wonder if you know

I wonder if you think about it

Once upon a time

In your wildest dreams

~The Moody Blues, "Your Wildest Dreams"

Wake-Up Call

"...Once upon a time, in your wildest dreams," Lois sang, her voice gone soft and slow. The twins were sound asleep, cuddled against their father, and Clark lay perfectly still, scarcely breathing for fear of waking them. He had never known that Lois could sing like that, sad and sweet. The original song had a quality of exuberance that her lullaby rendition lacked. Lois sang it slow and wistful, every note hauntingly beautiful, suffused with melancholy and yet with a trace of joy and hope behind it.

Lois noticed him just then, having gotten absorbed in the song, and she looked down with a self-deprecating chuckle. Clark just stared at her, and Lois was acutely aware of the intensity of his gaze. After a moment, he said quietly, "You sing beautifully, Lois. How did I never know that about you?"

She blushed then, thinking of the song and all it meant to her, feeling as if she'd bared her deepest soul to him. "You've never heard me sing before," she replied simply. "It wasn't exactly something I put on a resume. I didn't really have much reason to, until those two came along. When they were little, sometimes that was the only thing that could get them to sleep; they were so fussy as babies, so sick at times, but that song always worked on them."

"Lois, I wish I'd been here," he said, and his voice was full of regret and longing. "You shouldn't have had to raise them alone."

"Kal-El, stop," she said, a small smile on Lois' lips as she gently shook her head. "You didn't know. Stop. Besides, I wasn't all alone. I had my mom and Lucy to help me in the beginning. And I loved having them all to myself." The smile broadened a little more as she thought back on it. "Really, I did. I loved them so fiercely I didn't even dream of sharing them, not until..."

"Until Richard came along," he finished for her, a sad smile on his lips. "You know, sometimes I think he fell in love with the twins first. The way he talks about them, the love and pride in his eyes when he looks at them - it used to hurt, back before I knew they were mine, because I envied him. I thought if I'd stayed here, they might've been mine - and now that I know they really *are* mine, I know how he feels about them. But I still can't deny that they're his, too. I mean, look at tonight - I can lift an island, but I don't know how to give a six-year-old a bath."

Lois snorted in amusement, rolling her eyes. The laughter in her voice was clear. "Oh, come on. You would've figured it out; it's not rocket science. And your mom would've helped if you asked. Hell, *my* mom had to help *me* - didja think I had any idea how to bathe a baby? When she told me little kids get baths in the sink, I bought a case of antibacterial cleanser. And feeding them? Hah! We're not even going *there*."

Clark chuckled, fortunately not disturbing the twins. "I can see that."

They were quiet for a long moment, Clark basking in the twins' presence, Lois watching the three of them with a curious heaviness in her heart. This was every silly romantic dream she'd never allowed herself to have, and so very different from the way she'd first pictured her life with Superman so long ago. Not necessarily worse than the life of adventure she'd imagined as a headstrong young reporter, just different. "How did we get here?" she asked softly, her gaze momentarily distant as it lingered on them.

He caught her meaning; how did Fearless Reporter Lois Lane and the Man of Steel wind up in a Kansas farmhouse, speaking in hushed voices to avoid waking their two children? How did two people whose relationship was so far from everything mundane find themselves in such a normal domestic moment? He wasn't sure how to answer her, so he chose humor.

"Well, once upon a time a man and a woman loved each other very much..."

That seemed to bring her back to herself, her eyes meeting his with such warmth. "Before that," she said, tilting her head as she clarified. "How did we ever get here? How did we ever even fall in love?"

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful and brilliant reporter," Clark began again. "Unfortunately, she drew trouble the way a bug-zapper draws mosquitoes." Lois couldn't help cracking up a little at his remark, and chuckling, he rephrased it. "Okay, trouble was drawn to her the way moths are drawn to a flame."

The comparison provoked an arched brow. "Stick with the bug-zapper," Lois advised, chortling.

"All right then," Clark replied, having caught the twinkle in her eyes. "Anyway, so this amazing reporter was on her way to meet the president when - *zzzt* - the helicopter she was in had a massive mechanical failure." Lois started snickering all over again at the little sound he made to indicate another mosquito of ill-fortune flying into the bug-zapper of her destiny. "Luckily, it got hung up on the roof railing instead of plunging to the ground. Unluckily - *zzzt* - the gorgeous reporter wound up falling out of the helicopter. Fortunately, her good friend happened to have been thinking about making his public debut as a superhero, and she provided him with the perfect opportunity to showcase his abilities. Unfortunately for him - *zzzt* - the whole *world* wanted to know more about him after that, and some people even said he was dangerous. Fate smiled on them both, however, because he arranged for his first official interview with the press to be with that same beautiful and brilliant reporter."

"And hilarity ensued," Lois added, keeping to the same light tone, "because said reporter couldn't keep her mind on her job whenever she looked at him. Couldn't even use proper English. Not to mention the occasional stuttering."

"You weren't the only one," Clark told her. "Lois, you were everything I'd ever wanted, everything I'd ever admired, and a dozen things I didn't know I wanted until I saw them in you. As for how we got *here*, well, it couldn't *all* be romantic honeymoons in Niagara Falls, now could it?"

Oh, the memories that brought back. "As if I could ever forget! Oh, that hideous rug! And that fireplace." Lois collapsed into stifled laughter again, trying desperately not to wake the twins. "And, ugh, the hot tub. It looked as if the interior designer threw up 'stereotypically cute and romantic' all over the room and then seasoned it with 'tacky as hell'."

"And that was when the lovely and very suspicious reporter shot her best friend," Clark finally said in seemingly disapproving tones, when she got her composure back.

"They were blanks!" she protested, grinning at that. He was just reproaching her and she knew it. "The worst that would've happened if I was wrong was Clark fainting in terror, Kal-El."

"Which is a wonderful thing to do to a guy who's trying to make you see him as a serious romantic possibility," he chided. "Anyway, back to the story. The superhero *should've* noticed that he never felt a bullet hit him, but he was too outraged at the gorgeous reporter for trying to kill him. And then she made him feel like a complete idiot by telling him they were blanks."

"Gotcha," Lois said softly, her eyes bright with merriment.

"Yes, well, and then they went to *his* place, and several unexpected things happened, and eventually the reporter learned that the superhero *wasn't* shooting blanks, so to speak. Gotcha, indeed."

Her brows rose at that. Yet another not-so-innocent comment, huh? She tried to hide her

grin. "Yeah, gotcha *pregnant*," Lois snarked right back at him. "Not like either of us knew it was even possible."

"That was another 'gotcha' moment for me, too," was his reply. "I remember you telling me, that day we argued and almost all of the truth came out, that you knew the twins' father about as well as you knew me. That should've been a fairly big clue right there, considering that you've gotten very good at not *quite* lying."

"Learned from the best," she said baldly, her expression saying everything as she shifted a little in the chair.

Clark sighed, not sure what to say. When she continued to seem uncomfortable, he eased his arm around Jason's shoulders, pulling the boy closer to him. "Here, Lois. Lie down next to him; there's just enough room. You look so uncomfortable sitting there."

"I can't," she said. "There's not enough room, and your mother will have hysterics. It's alright, Kal-El. I'm fine."

Cuddling both twins close, he levitated slightly up off the bed and then set the three of them back down again, a few inches more to one side. "Now there's room," he said. "As for Ma, we have the twins to chaperone us. It's fine."

The bed did look so much more restful than this chair ... eventually she'd just have to get up again and actually go to sleep in her own bed across the hall, but at the moment, all Lois wanted to do was snuggle down with her twins and their father. It had been a very long day, and she felt at peace for the first time in a long while.

"Fine, but if your mom has any objections, *you* deal with her," Lois murmured, as she pulled her boots off and stretched out on the edge of the bed, her arm around Jason, her hand catching Kala's. And just as she began to realize just how tired she really was, Clark slipped his arm around her shoulders and began to stroke her hair gently. Sighing in pure contentment, Lois let her eyes fall closed as she spiraled down into sleep.

Richard surveyed the room with a peculiar sort of pride. He'd gotten most of his personal belongings boxed up, leaving only the things that he used every day. And those would get packed, too, as soon as he found an apartment with a short-term lease.

I won't be staying in Metropolis much longer, Richard thought, and it chilled him slightly. It wasn't easy to walk away from the life he'd built here, but the equilibrium he'd found in these past few days would disappear if he was constantly confronted by Lois and Clark together. And he couldn't do that to them, to himself, and especially not to the twins. The only solution was to move, which meant finding a new job in a new city, someplace where he wouldn't feel a pang every time he looked up at the sky.

At least the time alone had taught him that he could cope without Lois. It was amazing, the thousand ways she'd become part of his life, the little things he would miss now that he no longer had them. And the twins - oh, how he already missed Jason and Kala. But they weren't gone for good, and no one would try to keep them from him. Arranging custody would be interesting, especially if he left the city, but with two dads who could fly, transporting the kids back and forth shouldn't be too much of a problem.

There were other loose ends to tie up, too. If he left, who would run International? Richard had a couple of ideas in that direction, but it required more thought. He knew one thing, though - if he ever made it to the Editor in Chief position in a major newspaper, it would seem a cakewalk compared to trying to keep International and City running this past week. Perry was officially the Chief, but he'd been relying on Lois more and more to keep City

ticking smoothly, and Richard found it very trying to take over her responsibilities as well as his own. And with the news lately - the huge chunk of kryptonite orbiting Saturn, the continuing search for Lex Luthor, renewed speculation about Lois Lane and the Man of Steel - the paper was twice as busy trying to cover it all. Richard hoped Lois wasn't following the news right now; she would be furious.

He sat down on the guest bed and sighed, trying to bring his whirling thoughts to a standstill. It was rather pleasant to be alone, to be able to hog the television and eat all the ice cream in the house if he so pleased, but Richard didn't want to live like this. He'd always have the twins in his life - he believed that promise now that Lois and Clark had both made it - but he wanted more. And he even knew who he wanted beside him, if she would have him...

It had happened fast - blindingly fast, compared to his courtship of Lois. It had taken months to wear down the walls Lois had built around her heart and soul enough for a first date, and further months beyond that to really have a relationship. For a long time he'd felt as though he didn't know her at all, absorbed in trying to discover who this woman really was, struggling to decipher all the half-veiled things he sensed in her.

Well, now he knew why the secrets had never really disappeared. But Lana... Lana had never tried to conceal anything from him. She was as open and honest a person as Richard had ever met, with the sole exception of Clark. That didn't mean he automatically understood everything about her, just that he quickly felt an empathetic connection with Lana that had taken a year to develop between him and Lois.

Richard let himself flop backward on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. *I'd really like the chance to get to know her that well*, he thought, an affectionate smile forming. *I feel so close to Lana, I'd love to be able to spend more time with her, get to know all her little idiosyncrasies.*

Lois woke slowly with the sun in her eyes. She rolled over, muttering sleepily, to look at the bedside clock. She'd set the alarm early...

But now the alarm was off, Clark's bed was empty of all save her, and a note lay on top of the clock itself. *Ma says sleep in*, it read in Clark's strong, slanting script. *You looked a little tired yesterday, and she says the twins are impressive enough to buy you a day of rest. We're already up; come find us when you get this.* "Cute," Lois muttered, then yawned and stretched. The house seemed quiet, and she took her time getting showered and dressed, and then wandered downstairs.

The coffee in the pot was still reasonably fresh, so Lois poured herself a cup, dosed it with sugar and cream, and snagged a cookie out of the jar on the counter before heading outside. She found Martha standing on the front porch, Clark nowhere in sight, and a couple of strangers in the driveway looking beneath the hood of Martha's truck.

Not all strangers, though. Wade Carmichael looked up, grinned, and gave her a little wave. "Morning, Ms. Lane," he said.

The man who stood beside him had to be his father, and he glanced up at the porch, too, giving Lois a distracted nod before turning his attention to Martha. "I think it's just the serpentine belt, Mrs. Kent. Were you getting that squeal just when it started up, and then it seemed to quiet down?"

"Yes," Martha told him. "It still doesn't sound quite *right*, but that awful squealing noise stops on its own after a moment."

He nodded, peering under the hood again. "Wade, go look in the trunk and see if we

brought a fan belt for a '57 Ford," he said absently. Only while his son trotted off to fetch the part did he look up again and actually *see* Lois. "Oh, Ms. Lane! Pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I'm sorry, I'd come up there and shake hands, but..." He turned both hands palm up, displaying a generous amount of engine grease. "I'm John Carmichael. I think you've met my boy Wade, and somewhere around here I've got a couple more kids..."

At that moment, Wade came back from the trunk of his dad's car, two younger children following him. One was a brown-haired boy with a cowlick about Jason and Kala's age, the other a pretty little blonde girl of maybe four. They both halted, looking up at Lois with keen interest, as Mr. Carmichael said, "Dustin and Cathy, this is Ms. Lane. Ms. Lane, Dustin and Cathy Carmichael."

"Pleased to meet all of you. Good morning, Wade," Lois said with a smile. She planned to make some remark about mechanics who made house calls, and how wonderful that would be back home, but before she could say anything she heard a loud shriek from the back yard.

Before she could even start to wonder, Kala came pelting around the corner of the house, screaming for Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma all at once. Right on her heels was Jason, slathered in mud and clutching something huge and green and wriggly. At the sight of the strangers, both twins skidded to a halt, momentarily forgetting what had brought them running. "Who're you?" Jason asked, looking curiously at Dustin and Cathy.

Lois' jaw had dropped in shock; he was *filthy*, a hundred times dirtier than he'd ever been before in his life. Jason looked like he was wearing mud-colored gloves and stockings, and the front of his shirt and pants were liberally spattered as well. Worst of all, the muddy thing he carried was *moving*... Company was forgotten as she looked at him with utter disbelief. "Jason Garen Lane, have you *lost your mind*?!" Lois said incredulously.

He turned to her, looking a bit puzzled. "Look, Mommy, I found a froggy!" Jason said cheerfully, holding it up to her.

"An' he was gonna put it on me!" Kala wailed. "It's a yucky *frog*!" She scampered up on the porch and slid her arms around Lois' waist, peering out from behind her in horror.

"Can I keep him?" Jason asked, all pleading cerulean eyes. "His name is Fred." The giant amphibian struggled in the little boy's hands, making alarming *glurping* noises.

"No," Lois said automatically, shaking her head and utterly unaware of her audience. "Absolutely *not*, put it *back* where you found it. One reptile in the house is *more* than enough!"

Jason sniffled, his lip pouting slightly, and Martha intervened. "Jason, honey, he's a country bullfrog," she said gently. "If you take him home, all the city frogs will make fun of his accent. You'd better let him go back in the pond where he can be happy."

Sighing in defeat, Jason hung his head. "Yes, ma'am," he replied with resignation, bowing to the inevitability of Mommy and Grandma united against Fred Frog joining the household. He trudged back around the house, followed by Lois's voice telling him to come inside for a bath when he was done.

It was only then that Lois looked down and saw that Kala's shoes and socks were muddy, too. "And you! What've been doing? Kala, your shoes are filthy!"

"Walkin' by the duck pond," she replied, trying to look and sound innocent. "I slipped, a little."

"That's it, you're both getting baths," Lois growled.

"Nuh-uh! Only my shoes are dirty, an' I had a bath last night! *Jason's* the only one who got really *really* dirty!"

"He's your twin brother, you were with him, you're *both* getting baths," Lois said firmly, glaring at her daughter. "Take your shoes and socks off and leave them here; I'll be inside in a minute. *Good God.*"

The Carmichaels seemed cautiously amused, and Lois turned to them all with a helpless shrug. "I'm sorry, they're city kids, and they don't quite know how to act."

"They're all right," Mr. Carmichael said. "Shoot, every one of these has done somethin' just as silly. I'm surprised they even found a frog. They're usually hibernating when it's this cold."

Lois gave Martha an incredulous glare. "My God, you mean my kids went and dug up a hibernating frog? That poor bugger was sound asleep and got ripped out of his froggy dreams by my psychotic children? *Great.* Now I'm gonna get a therapy bill from some traumatized amphibian."

Wade grinned at his father, muttering, "Told you she was fun."

Clark chose that moment to saunter back into view, arriving casually as if he'd just been in the backyard instead of in South Florida turning aside a hurricane. He took in the Carmichaels in the yard, a harried Lois on the porch, and Ma torn between amusement and pity. "Good morning, Mr. Carmichael, Wade, kids," he said, shaking hands with them before turning to Lois to ask, "What did I miss?"

"Oh, nothing," Lois said airily. "Just your son *excavating* the duck pond to catch the biggest... bloody frog I've ever seen. Freakin' beast was almost bigger than Jason's head! You could feed a family of four off that frog! So of course he wants to *keep* it. Nevermind he got himself absolutely covered in mud..."

Jason came trudging back, even muddier than before because he'd taken the time to cover the frog back up with mud, and then wiped a few tears away with a mud-covered hand. Lois took one look at him, sighed heavily, and dropped her head into her hands. "I was never like this," she muttered to Clark. "That's *your* genetics at work, Kent."

The three Carmichael kids had been staring at Jason while he stared back. Mr. Carmichael cleared his throat slightly. "Wade, I believe we'll get back to work on that serpentine belt." The older boy turned to obey him, leaving the two younger children to continue looking quizzically at Jason.

"I'm so sorry," Lois apologized again. "They're not normally like this, I swear. Jason, *come here.* It was nice meeting you, Mr. Carmichael - I'm sorry I have to run and bathe these little savages of mine."

"Kids will be kids," he replied with a shrug. "You take care, Ms. Lane."

"Clark, take Jason around back and hose him off," Martha said. "Lois, meet him inside with a towel and get those clothes off - leave them in the mud room, that's what it's for. Just get him right into a hot bath and he'll be fine."

"He's lucky I don't hose him down outside in a tin bathtub like a freakin' puppy," Lois commented with an annoyed expression. "Martha, thank you. Jason, *move.*"

Clark took his son's elbow and guided him around the house again, and Ma and the Carmichaels heard him yelp and splutter at the touch of cold water a moment later. Shaking her head, Martha ducked inside and returned with cookies for Dustin and Cathy, leaning against the side of her pickup while Wade and Mr. Carmichael worked on it. "So what do you think of my houseguests?" she asked, chuckling.

"If Mr. Kent breaks up with her, will you give her my number?" Wade said, earning himself a swat on the shoulder from his father.

"Ooooh, Wade likes Ms. Lane!" Dustin crowed. "Wade likes Ms. Lane! Wades likes - ow!"

Wade shoved his little brother's ball cap down over his eyes. "Shuddup, Dustin. I just like her car."

"Then I'm sorry to say it isn't true love," Martha informed him. "Wade, the Mustang's a rental."

"She went draggin' in a *rental*?" Wade said, impressed. "Whoa."

"You been racin' again?" his father asked sternly.

Wade bit his lip, considering a dozen responses. "She started it."

"And you weren't man enough to pass up the challenge," Mr. Carmichael sighed. "Son, I warned you, if you ever get picked up for racing, I'm not posting your bail. And neither is your mother. You're old enough to make your own mistakes, but don't expect us to pull your fat out of the fire."

"Yes, sir," Wade said respectfully. But he glanced over his shoulder at the house with a wistful little grin.

For efficiency's sake, Lois had drawn one bath and dunked both bitterly-complaining twins into it. Jason was still sniveling about the cold hose outside, and Kala was still protesting that she wasn't dirty enough to *need* a bath. Lois and Clark just scrubbed them both - she'd left him to deal with Jason, figuring that if he wanted to know how to give a kid a bath, he might as well start with a thoroughly filthy kid.

"We didn't bring the rubber ducky," Jason suddenly said as Clark tilted his head back and sluiced warm water through his sudsy hair. "We can't take baths without Mr. Quack-Quack!"

"You are outta luck, kiddo," Lois said. "Should've thought of that before you went playing with Mr. Fred the Freakin' Frog. Mr. Quack-Quack or no Mr. Quack-Quack, you're getting clean."

Clark had to stop, succumbing to laughter while the other three stared at him in confusion. When he got his snickering under control, he finally rubbed his eyes and resumed rinsing Jason's hair. To distract him from the absence of - another chuckle - *Mr. Quack-Quack*, Clark said, "I'm amazed you even found a frog in this weather, Jason. They all bury themselves in the mud when it gets cold."

"Told you so," Kala muttered darkly.

"But I found 'im," Jason retorted. "So you were *wrong*, know-it-all!"

"Was not," she began, and Lois quickly intervened as she saw an imminent squabble looming.

"No arguing, or I won't let you use the pumpkin soap Daddy Richard sent along with you," she said, not even noticing how quickly she'd slipped into the twins' nomenclature.

"Pumpkin soap?" Kala asked interestedly.

"Will it turn Kala into a pumpkin?" Jason said under his breath, wrinkling his nose.

"Hey now," Clark said, daubing a splotch of mud off Jason's nose. "If the frog was buried, Jason, how did you find him?"

"Saw him," the little boy replied matter-of-factly. "Saw him down in the cold icky mud. I wanted to bring him home an' give him a bath an' let him live with Gazeera."

"Gazeera doesn't want a roommate," Lois started to reply, but Clark interrupted her.

"You saw him *in* the mud?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," Jason nodded.

Lois had stopped, staring at her son as understanding dawned. *In the mud?* Did that mean...?

"Can you see inside other things?" Clark asked, trying to sound casual.

Jason shrugged innocently. "Didn't try. Kala said there were no froggies in winter, so I looked for one, I looked *real* hard, and I found one."

Clark bit his lip, meeting Lois' eyes, then turned back to his son. "Hmm, that's interesting," was all he said on the topic while they finished bathing the twins, but Lois could tell he was thinking very hard about it. The special soap was an absolute success, both twins loving the pumpkin-pie smell of it. But Lois was full of worried questions, and from the way Clark kept glancing at her, so was he.

Superpowers weren't exactly a topic they wanted to discuss in front of the twins, so once Jason and Kala were out of the bath and dressed, Lois let them go outside and play with the Carmichael kids - with the very strict admonition not to get themselves dirty again. From the delighted laughter that soon reached even Clark's room upstairs, this was a popular decision with everyone involved.

Clark got right down to business. "How long do you think he's had x-ray vision?"

"He didn't have it on their last birthday," Lois said with a touch of worry. "He would've seen through the presents, by accident if not on purpose. I think this was the first time."

"And the strength? How long? What about Kala's hearing?"

Lois bit her lip. "Kala's hearing was always sharp, but again, only this past year has it gotten hard to hide. In spite of his size and his fragility, Jason's *always* been stronger than I expected. He didn't start breaking his toys until this year, though. And Kal-El ... when Luthor had them, he left them alone in the gallery on the yacht. One of his men tried to hurt Kala, and Jason threw a piano at him."

At the mention of Lex's thug and what he'd tried to do - not even the full horror of it, she spared him that - Lois saw flat murder in Clark's blue eyes. But when she finished the sentence and it sunk in, his expression became astonished. "He threw a *piano*? Holy... Wow. And..."

"He killed the guy," Lois whispered. "I don't think he knows that, though. But yes, he actually picked up a piano that was bolted to the floor and *threw* it across a room."

"Amazing," Clark muttered, pacing the room, his brows knitted. "So he's got enough strength to worry about, and now the vision. Kala's hearing could get stronger, too, something else we have to think about... What about a second power? Do you think she's getting one?"

Lois started to say no, then remembered how quickly Kala had run to hide behind her. Now that she really thought about it, her daughter had shown that she was capable of darting faster than most kids on occasion... "Maybe speed. Nothing totally untoward yet, but she's quick."

"We have to figure out how to talk to them," Clark said. "Convince them to keep this a secret. If they show my powers publicly, the game's up for all of us."

"They've kept it hidden so far," Lois pointed out. "They've even kept secrets from *us*. I think if we just tell them why they have to hide it, they will."

He looked at her then, giving her a relieved grin. "You have a point. But in the meantime, I think I won't take them up for any more sunbaths. The sunlight that high up isn't as filtered, and it might be bringing on their powers early."

"Speaking of their powers," Lois said, again that worried tone creeping in, "do you think they'll get them all? And when?"

Clark shrugged. "No telling. We have no way of knowing if Kryptonian genes are

dominant to human ones. I'm guessing, since they're showing powers at all, that my genes are dominant. They could inherit the whole package, or just some of it. No one ever hypothesized a Kryptonian-human hybrid - or if Jor-El did, he didn't mention it to me."

"I guess we just have to take each day as it comes and deal with whatever happens," Lois said with a sigh, making her own shrug look more casual than it felt. "I just wish we had some concrete *answers* about some of this. Any of it, really. What always scared me the most, once I figured out you were their father, was all the things I just didn't know. Whether they'd get your powers and when, if they'd even survive, if they'd ever get over their allergies, whether kryptonite could hurt them..."

"The twins are more resistant to it than I am," Clark told her. "They get that from the human half. If it hadn't been for you, Lois, your human immunity to kryptonite, all three of us would've died on that island. Kala had the strength to attack Luthor to protect me. If she'd been as weakened as I was..."

Lois shivered, hugging him to her and promising herself once again that she'd kill Luthor if she got a chance, and damn the consequences.

The twins were exhausted but happy (and reasonably clean) when they came in from playing with the Carmichael kids. Lois watched them carefully, but she didn't see any more signs of superpowers manifesting - they could've been any ordinary pair of kids hanging around the kitchen, trying to wheedle a cookie out of their grandmother.

"Cookies will spoil your lunch," Martha told them gently.

Jason suddenly looked worried. "Grandma, do crackers spoil your lunch too?"

"Sometimes," she said. "Why?"

"Dustin shared his cracker sandwiches," Kala said. "They were yummy."

Lois felt her spine turn to ice. "Cracker sandwiches?" she said softly. The only cracker sandwiches she'd ever heard of were the kind with peanut butter in the middle... "What did they have in them?"

Kala shrugged. "Dunno. It was good."

"Lois?" Martha asked as the younger woman started to back away.

"It could've been peanut butter," Lois said with real fear, running into the living room. She grabbed her purse, shook out the Benadryl and the inhaler and the Epi-pen, and raced back into the kitchen. The crackers themselves were made of wheat - that wasn't as severe as the allergy to nuts, but it would make them nauseous...

Clark was kneeling beside the twins, looking at both of them with a scowl of concentration. Before Lois could reach them, he said, "They're fine... There's no immune response, Lois. No inflammation of the bronchial tubes, no gastritis, none of that. Their breathing and heart rates are normal."

She blinked at him in confusion. "But allergies don't just go away. If anything they get worse with time."

He looked up at her and shrugged. "Who knows, with these two? Maybe the sunbath cured them of it, along with the other side effects."

While Lois was digesting that thought, Ben arrived at the door with his beagles - a different group, but with Barkley still leading it - and the family got too wrapped up in preparing lunch to discuss things further. There was so much they couldn't say in front of Ben, but Lois caught the serious looks going back and forth between Clark and Martha, and figured he would find a way to share their conversation from earlier without seeming suspicious.

She picked at her salad, wondering. Was it worth the risk of the twins developing full-blown superpowers to cure them? Could the sun itself *really* cure all the various conditions Jason and Kala had? It would be such a relief to never hear that terrifying asthmatic wheeze again, to never watch them fight for breath. And it would ease her heart to let them eat all the things she'd had to forbid them. They would finally be able to have a real birthday cake, with eggs and milk...

Her preoccupied manner during the meal didn't cause comment, and after lunch the twins started asking questions of Ben. Lois basically ignored the conversation until she heard Jason and Kala squeal with delight. "You have a *horse*?!"

"Two," he replied. "Mules, actually. A mule's smarter than a horse; he won't work himself to death for a person like a horse will. They're cheaper to keep, too, because they eat less and stay healthier. I got one to keep up with the beagles when I'm training them to track - I'm not as young as I used to be, and I can't walk around the woods all day. Once I had one mule, I figured he'd be lonely, so I got another. Martha and I go riding sometimes."

"Fishing in Montana, Scrabble tournaments in Illinois, mule-riding all over Kansas - Ma, what *haven't* you been doing?" Clark said, half exasperated and half amused. "I'm not going to get a postcard that says you've been windsurfing in California, am I?"

"No," she laughed, but Jason and Kala were completely focused on Ben.

"Can we..." Kala began, but paused and started over. "If Mommy and Daddy say okay, can we please-pretty-please go riding? Please?"

Ben smiled. "If your parents don't mind leading you around, I think you'll do just fine. They're real gentle mules."

"Sounds fine to me," Lois said. There was no use standing between Kala and anything with hooves; she was going through that common little-girl phase of being obsessed with horses. A gentle old mule was probably as safe as the ponies she sometimes got to ride at the fair.

Kala squealed in delight, so overcome with joy that she actually hugged Jason in spite of her vow never ever to be nice to him again after the frog incident. Chuckling, Clark said, "I'll go you one better. Ben, do the Langs still have horses?"

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Two or three, at least. They're a little more high-strung than my mules..."

"Do you think they have one calm enough for Lois to ride?" Clark asked, and looked at her in surprise when Lois snorted derisively.

"Kent, please," she said, crossing her arms. "I may be a city girl, but I'm also an Army brat. One of our main recreations in Fort Hood was sneaking off base and 'borrowing' a couple of cow ponies from one of the ranches. That was joy-riding Texas style - my father tanned my backside a couple of times for getting caught, but I learned how to ride. If I could ride a half-broke mustang bareback with just a rope around the jaw when I was fifteen, I can ride a horse now."

"I think she'll be fine," Ben opined, grinning.

"In that case, I'll call Lana and see if I can't set us up to go riding tomorrow morning," Clark said, getting up.

"Tell that girl I owe her a great big hug when I see her next," Martha said, grinning. "She ought to get a medal for slapping some sense into Jane Lutter."

Amid chuckles, he went into the kitchen to set things up.

After dinner, the twins cautiously sipped milk and nibbled scrambled eggs until Lois was satisfied that their allergies were gone for good. Jason and Kala were incredibly excited, wanting to sample all the goodies they'd missed. Martha offered to take them out for some ice cream. A local shop stayed open into the early evening, and if she hurried she could get them their first taste of the sweet dessert before the place closed.

That left Lois and Clark alone again; apparently Martha trusted them now. Clark sat down on the sofa and turned on the news, seeing more coverage of his intervention with the hurricane that morning. Normally he didn't mess around with weather systems, but he was haunted by the memory of the articles he'd read about the hurricanes that devastated New Orleans and many miles all around it while he was gone. Blowing the powerful storm off course had seemed like the only safe option, but he'd have to monitor it and make sure it didn't head up the coast.

Lois came back into the room and sat beside him, sipping iced tea. She seemed distant, and he supposed that the events of the day were probably a bit much for even a hardboiled reporter to handle. Discovering that the twins weren't allergic any longer - who knew how long they'd actually been safe - and that Jason had x-ray vision was enough to overwhelm anyone, even Lois.

"You okay?" he asked, and those amazing hazel eyes blinked at him.

"Yeah, just ... tired. And I slept in today." Lois yawned as if to prove her point, then put her glass down and leaned sideways against his chest.

"You've been running on nerves and caffeine for so long, you don't remember what relaxation feels like," Clark chided. He lifted her off him gently and turned to face her, propping one leg on the couch and leaning against the arm of the sofa.

Lois sighed and snuggled back up to him gladly, her back against his chest and his chin resting atop her head. She let her arms rest along his legs, and leaned her head back with a purr of delight as he stroked her neck. For the moment, there was no mad rush of passion, no desperate need. Right now, for this moment, they both just wanted the pleasure of having each other near. "Feels good," she murmured.

Clark kissed her hair, gently rubbing her shoulders, feeling the tension drain from her. He switched to caressing her face with the lightest touch possible, and Lois's expression relaxed into a soft smile. "I love you," he told her.

She was quiet for so long that he thought she'd fallen asleep. But then she let out a long sigh of contentment and whispered back, "I love you, too, Kal-El."

They were still sitting like that, nestled into each other, his hand resting over her heart, when Martha and the twins came back and found them asleep in front of the news broadcast.

Don't be such a coward, Lana scolded herself, and pressed the *Send* button on her phone. She bit her lip while she listened to it ring, half hoping the call would be answered, and half glad it hadn't been picked up yet...

A click cut off the ringing, and his voice seemed to reach right across the miles separating them and wrap itself around her. "Lana?"

"Hello, Richard," she said, feeling like a fool for the butterflies in her stomach. *You're not in high school anymore - and you weren't this silly even then!* "I was just wondering... how you've been. You know."

"Better for having heard from you," he replied. "It's kinda lonely in Metropolis at the moment, especially since I'm covering her department and mine. But it's not all that much of a

hardship. How are you?"

"Pretty good," she replied, absently twisting a lock of her auburn hair. "I heard from Clark tonight - only a last-minute intervention kept Gazeera from having a giant Kansas bullfrog for a roommate."

"Dear God," Richard groaned. "I'm never letting them visit the Southern states again; now that he's old enough to know what one is, Jason will bring home an alligator. At least Kala likes cute furry things."

"Yes, well, I also understand that he got monumentally filthy in the process of catching the thing," Lana said. "You'll hear about the adventures of Fred the Frog when the twins call tonight, so I wanted you to be prepared."

"Thank you," he replied. Silence reigned between them for a moment, and then Richard asked very quietly, "Are you planning to come back to Metropolis anytime soon?"

Lana bit her lip again, adjusting the strap over her shoulder. "Soon, but not right away. I have a lot going on at the moment." That sounded too casual and disaffected, so she added, "I'm looking forward to coming back, though."

"I miss you." Such simple words, so softly spoken, but Lana shivered with the sudden desire to fly back to Metropolis that night. She could be in his arms before morning...

No, she told herself sternly, taking a deep breath. *You wanted time away from him, time to think without getting drunk on his nearness. Well, now you have it. Don't squander it by running right back and diving into this headfirst.* "I miss you too," she admitted, voice shaking a little. "I won't be away longer than I need to. And you won't be all that lonely, either - Lois and the twins are coming home tomorrow. They're borrowing my parents' horses to take Jason and Kala riding in the morning, but they should be on a plane that afternoon. She'll probably give you all the details when she calls."

"She will," Richard confirmed. "And it'll be good to have the munchkins back. But I think it's time the three of us sat them down for a long talk, and they probably won't be happy with us when they find out they can't have both daddies living with them."

"They'll never doubt you love them," Lana said. "I know they'll figure out that no one's leaving them forever; once Jason and Kala understand that, you'll be okay."

"We're shaking their world apart, and I can't blame them for being ticked off," Richard muttered.

Lana sighed exasperatedly, tucking the phone against her shoulder as she pulled back her sleeve to check her watch. "Don't go borrowing trouble, Richard. You don't know for a fact how the twins will behave, so don't worry so much about it, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," he teased.

"I have to run," Lana said, regret clear in her tone. "Richard, I wish I could talk longer..."

"I understand," he said. "I'll talk to you later, Lana... I love you."

"I love you too." She could say it more easily now, though she still blushed in spite of not having to face him to admit how she felt. "Good night, Richard."

"Good night," came the soft reply, and after a moment they both hung up.

Lana tipped her head back, breathing deeply. It was so hard to fight the part of herself that wanted to run to him, to forget about taking things slow and not being a rebound, just aching to have his arms around her again. But she could fight it, and did; she'd made a lifestyle out of forcing her heart to obey her mind. It was only now, with Richard, that her control threatened to break...

Pushing those thoughts aside, Lana adjusted the carryon bag over her shoulder and

headed for the international terminal alone. She hadn't even told Lois or Clark that she was leaving just yet. "Milan, here I come," she sighed under her breath. "Forgive me if I'd rather be back in Metropolis."

Best of Intentions

It was the last day of the Lanes' visit to Smallville and all members of the family had awakened early, Lois included. As she and Clark moved around the farmhouse to get their preparations in order, Martha sat down on the sofa and sipped her tea, feeling rather melancholy. It seemed as though Jason and Kala had just arrived, and now they were leaving again. *Don't be a foolish old woman*, she told herself sternly. *It's not as if Clark can't fly them down for a weekend. And they've had so much fun here; they're bound to want to come back. You'll see them again.*

But her heart wasn't listening. They were both so delightful, a mix of sweetness and mischief that reminded her of their father. And their amazement at the simplest things - milking a cow, feeding chickens - brought wonder back into Martha's life. Their loud and free laughter, when delighted or startled by a new experience, was a balm against those years without them. The few days she'd spent with Jason and Kala seemed like mere moments, time flying past while they came to know and love each other. And now they were leaving.

While she lingered on such thoughts, the twins came into the room, bouncy and bright-eyed as usual. They were such tiny bundles of limitless energy. Jason and Kala immediately noticed that Grandma looked sad, though, and toned down their rambunctious behavior to climb up onto the couch with her, one child on each side peering up at her curiously. Before Martha could do more than look surprised, Kala and Jason leaned against her and, without a word, hugged her.

The sudden show of affection startled a laugh out of Martha, and she returned the hugs. It was amazing how such a small gesture could be felt so deeply. "I'm gonna miss you two," Martha whispered against their hair. She was so focused on the pair of them that she didn't see Clark start to walk into the room. He stopped in the doorway, just watching with a small smile.

Kala cocked her head and gave her a smile. "We won't be gone long," she said confidently.

"We see our Nana almost ev'ry weekend," Jason added, explaining, "She's Mommy's momma. She lives in Metrop'lis, too. Nana makes the best 'talian food in the whole world, but she doesn't have a goat."

"Or chickens," Kala said with a grin. "Grandma, d'ya think Mommy would let me have a chicken?"

"Your stupid weasel would eat it," Jason said, mirroring that toothy smile.

His sister glared at him, then sighed. "I guess you're right, Jason. I guess I can't have a chicken," she said sadly, shrugging her shoulders.

His jaw fell open, and even Martha looked at her in surprise. She'd only known the twins three days, and even she knew that such an admission from Kala heralded the end of the world. The next moment, however, Kala's hazel eyes sparkled with devilment, and she added, "If I got a chicken, it'd probably look at your dumb ol' lizard and drop dead 'cuz Gazeera's so ugly!"

Jason was so outraged that he couldn't speak, his mouth working and his eyes wide with shocked affront. It was all Martha could do not to burst out laughing, and even then it took her a moment before she could speak without chuckling.

"Now, both of you," she said, mildly scolding. "You have to behave if you want to go on trips to the farm. No more making fun of each other's pets."

The twins heaved identical sighs, and chorused, "Yes, Grandma." They knew that no-nonsense tone very well, having heard it from Lois, and knew that protesting about which

one of them started the fight was useless.

"Very good," Martha told them, giving each child a kiss on the forehead. "Now, let's stay out from underfoot while your parents are packing. We've got *just* enough time left to make a batch of cookies before you go."

It was just like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Play the right tune and... "YAY!" Jason and Kala exclaimed, following her to the kitchen excitedly. "What kind?"

Clark watched them go with a smile; he would have to find a way to bring the twins out here frequently. Ma clearly adored them, and they just as clearly showed the feeling was mutual. His fond reflections were interrupted by Lois yanking his sleeve, an expression of intense exasperation on her features. "Honey?" he asked.

"Clark, did you tell Richard I bought the twins' plane tickets?" she asked irritably, her cell phone pressed to her ear as she rolled her hazel eyes heavenward.

"No," he said. "I thought you bought them, but I didn't say I knew for sure."

"I thought *he* did," Lois snapped, making it obvious that she and Richard had been arguing this point for a while now.

Clark could clearly hear Richard respond, "Well, Clark said he had it all worked out, so I thought *you* bought them." He sounded frazzled and frustrated, and they could hear the normal newsroom sounds in the background of the call.

"So who the hell paid for their tickets?" Lois growled, throwing her hands up in defeat. "Well, they weren't free, you know. And Lana didn't exactly check them as baggage..."

Richard, Clark, and Lois realized it at the same time: "Lana."

"She bought them each a new book in the airport, *and* lunch," Lois muttered, groaning. "No wonder she looked at me like I was nuts when I said something about that, considering she paid for two tickets!"

"She never said a word to me about it," Richard said incredulously. "Hell, I didn't even know she was the one taking them until she turned up here!"

Clark just shook his head. "I never thought to ask either of you who was going to buy tickets. I would've offered to pay, but everything just fell into place so fast..."

"I'm paying her back," Lois declared. "*Geez*. I know the woman's a millionaire, but who just randomly buys plane tickets for your kids without *even telling* you?"

"Better yet, who's going to buy their return tickets?" Richard asked.

"Aw, *crap*," Lois groaned louder this time. That really did present a problem. "I bought a round-trip ticket because the return was half-off; I don't even know if there's space on the flight for the twins. And my freakin' ticket is non-refundable... Why didn't I think of that? *Stupid*, Lane."

"I'll take them," Clark said quietly.

Lois blinked at him, the thought never having occurred to her, and Richard cursed suddenly in the background. "Lois, I've got a call coming in on another line," he said. "I'll be damned glad when you get back here, I'll tell you that. Call me and let me know what's up, please?"

"I will, as soon as I'm sure," Lois said with a sigh. It was too damned *early*. "Take care."

A pause in which, not so long ago, Richard would've said he loved her, and she would've replied the same. "You too," he said simply, and hung up.

She frowned at the phone once she hung up, trying to ignore the uneasy feeling she got during those awkward moments between herself and her former fiancé. Hopefully, one day... Shaking it off, Lois looked askance at Clark. "You'd fly them? Both of them, all the way to

Metropolis?"

"It wouldn't take long," he said. "I'd stay in the cloud layer; we want them exposed to measured doses of sunlight, not the unfiltered stuff higher up. Two superpowers per child are enough to deal with at six."

"Yeah," Lois agreed shakily. "More than enough, actually. You're sure you don't mind flying them back?"

"Not at all," he replied. "We'll leave a little later than you do so all of us get back around the same time. In fact, if you give me your keys I can bring your car up to the airport and the kids and I can meet your flight."

Lois blinked at him with a dubious light in her eyes. "Clark, do you even have a driver's license?"

"Yes," he replied, chuckling. "I don't drive much, but I do have one. And I know how to drive it. I can even parallel-park."

"All right, just this once," Lois said, not mentioning that it had taken her three weeks of continuous work to learn that particular skill. "And only because it's inconvenient as hell to take a cab."

Clark laughed and kissed her forehead. "You're doing me a favor by letting me pick you up, then?"

"Of course, hero," Lois teased. They hugged for a long moment, the dark-haired woman breathing in deep with contentment before they pulled back, both of them smiling. "Even with that taken care of, we still have a lot to do," Lois said reluctantly.

"We'll get it done," Clark replied. "If you've got some of the bags packed, I'll take them to the car. Oh, and I need you to take the twins' luggage with you."

"Will do," she said with a salute, grinning cheekily. "Kal-El Air doesn't take cargo, huh?"

"No," he replied before they broke apart to attend to their separate tasks, chuckling. "Passengers only."

As the hour of Lois' departure neared, their efforts at packing intensified. Even though Lois hadn't been in Smallville very long, her things had managed to infiltrate every corner of the house. Clark managed to find her coat on the rack by the door, her boots under the coffee table in the living room, and her purse hanging from the back of a chair in the kitchen.

Jason and Kala, once they found out that they would be flying back with Daddy, were so ecstatic that they got underfoot and in everyone's way. Martha was pleased to learn she had a few more hours with them, but rather frazzled by the nuisances they made of themselves while Lois was trying to get ready to leave. Ben dropped by to say farewell, giving Lois a fond hug and admonishing her to come back soon.

"Well, it wouldn't do to leave the other 'Outlaw' out here by himself, now would it?" she murmured against the older man's ear. "She's a lucky woman, Ben. Find some way to convince her."

They shared a smile at that as they stepped back. "Him, too. And don't forget it." Lois only winked.

At last it was time to leave, and Lois made herself nearly ten minutes late hugging and kissing the twins and trying to extract promises of good behavior. Clark hugged and kissed her as well, and after a moment of looking at each other awkwardly, Lois and Martha even hugged each other goodbye. As Lois drove off, the other four stood in the dooryard waving.

Clark hugged the twins as he watched her leave. "All right, you two, we have a couple of hours. What do you want to do before we leave?"

"Help Grandma finish making more cookies!" Kala said excitedly, her eyes bright with the prospect of more chocolate chips.

"I have all the cookies I need, darling," Martha told her, and both twins' faces fell in disappointment. "But I could always make an apple pie..."

The suggestion met with enthusiastic approval.

Clark landed at the riverside house and started looking through Lois' key ring. There was no easy way to figure out which was the house key, and he wasn't delighted by the prospect of trying each one in the door. She had at least twenty keys on there, some for the office, some for the house, probably keys to Lucy's house and her mother's as well. Several of them had different colors and patterns, and maybe the twins would know which of those identified the key he needed...

Before he could ask, the back door opened, revealing a very startled Richard. Both men just froze. The twins ran to him, yelling delightedly, and almost knocked him over in their affection. Clark followed them up to the door, wincing a little. *Well, if this isn't the very definition of awkward...*

"An' I got to pet a chicken, and meet our Grandma, and play with nice doggies, and milk a goat!" Kala reported with a huge grin of excitement.

"I caught a *biiiiig* froggy, but Mommy made me put it back," Jason added, not to be outdone. "And we met lots of people, too."

"Sounds like you had fun," Richard said, and only Clark could hear the hint of strain in his voice.

"We missed you," Jason replied, hugging him again. Their excitement would have been contagious, if the situation hadn't been so problematic. "Can you come with us next time, Daddy?"

Richard looked up at Clark, not knowing what to say. The two men looked at each other, both at a loss for words and feeling a sense of impending doom. The same thought ran through both their minds: *these kids are going to be furious when they figure out they can't have both of us all the time.* "Um, maybe," Richard finally said.

Clark glanced down; he'd changed clothes at super-speed behind a tree seconds after landing, so he could tug nervously on his shirt collar as well. "I guess I'll head out," he said diffidently.

Jason whipped around and stared at him, eyes wide. "Daddy, you just got here!" he protested.

"No, it's fine," Richard said. "I just wasn't expecting you this soon, or I wouldn't have been here. I'll head back to Uncle Perry's."

"No, Daddy!" Kala said suddenly, shaking her head at him, hanging on to his arm tightly. She looked back and forth between the two men, seeming to know what they were thinking, growing more upset by the second. "Daddy Richard, I missed you!"

Richard flinched at the new name, but he wasn't alone. The next second, Jason turned to Clark and asked, "How come you wanna leave, Daddy Clark?"

They looked at each other helplessly as the twins stared at them, growing wild-eyed. "I thought you were friends!" Kala said, her voice rising. "You don't like each other anymore?"

"Why's somebody gotta leave?" Jason demanded.

"Kids, we should wait until your mother gets here to explain..." Richard began, but Jason cut him off.

Usually the sweeter and more manageable of the twins, Jason *did* have a temper, and when it boiled over, it was worse than Kala's customary crankiness. "NO!" he yelled, stamping his foot. Richard's eyes widened to see the imprint he left in the grass. "You tell me what's wrong! *Now!*"

"Nothing's wrong," Clark said, trying desperately to seem casual.

Kala picked up on her brother's distress, though, and glared at Clark with her mother's pout. "Grown-ups aren't s'posed to tell fibs," she said, her voice on the verge of breaking. She reached out for Jason at the same moment he reached for her, and they held each other's hands for dear life.

"Kids," Richard said softly. "C'mon, my little monsters. Come inside. We have a lot to talk about, and Gazeera and Captain Jack missed you."

Cajoling wasn't working, though. "Only if Daddy Clark comes too," Jason said truculently. "I don' wanna lose him *or* you."

"You're not losing anyone," Clark said gently as Richard managed to shepherd them all inside. "Jason, haven't we *all* told you we love you and we're not going to leave?"

Blue eyes so like his own turned an angry glare in his direction. "Grownups aren't supposed to tell fibs," Jason said, "but sometimes they don't tell the truth, either."

"Not about stuff like this," Richard said. The twins had halted in the kitchen, still gripping each other's hands, their gazes swiveling from one father to the other.

"What's wrong?" Kala asked worriedly. "What's happenin'? How come you're actin' funny?"

Richard pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat down, Clark mirroring his example. That brought both of them down to a level where Jason and Kala didn't have to crane their heads back and look up. "Listen, you two know your mommy and I have been arguing a lot," Richard began.

"You're leaving," Jason said dully, his gaze accusatory. "You're gonna leave like Bethany's daddy and never come back. Mister Clark's gonna be our new daddy."

"No," Clark said. "I'm not trying to take Richard's place, and he's not going to go away and never come back. That will *never* happen. We both love your mother, and we both love you two. Very much. It's just..."

"Mommy can't be in love with both of us at the same time," Richard finished for him.

"Why not? You're always tellin' *us* to share," Jason muttered darkly.

Richard and Clark looked at each other, struck by the sheer absurd hilarity of the remark. Share Lois? Not likely. They both loved her fiercely, and only putting the twins' well-being first had been enough to convince Richard to let her go.

"Yeah," Kala said in a small voice. "Share." She was upset enough to have gotten quiet, leaving the arguing to Jason.

"That isn't fair to either of us," Clark said gently. "Besides, where does that leave Lana?"

"Miss Lana can move in too," Jason said, his expression a stubborn scowl. "We've got lotsa room. Everybody can live together and nobody has to go away."

Richard scrubbed his hands over his face. *My kids are trying to get me to start a free-love commune*, he thought. *This is so damned surreal.*

"It wouldn't be fair," Clark protested. "Listen. If I had a bowl of ice cream, only *one* bowl, and one spoon, and I told you two to take turns eating the ice cream, what would happen?"

"You'd fight like rabid pit bulls," Richard muttered under his breath.

"You'd argue," Clark continued. "And you'd both be upset. You'd be upset when it was your turn with the ice cream, because you'd know you'd have to give it up. And you'd be upset when the other one had the ice cream, because you'd want some and you'd have to watch the other eat it. It wouldn't work."

"And a person isn't a bowl of ice cream," Richard said. "Your mommy has feelings, too, guys. She wouldn't want to make me and Clark fight. We wouldn't want to, but we would at some point. She loves us both, and it would hurt her to see us upset."

"I don't think Miss Lana would like it, either," Clark said. "She wouldn't want to share Richard with your mommy."

"So Daddy's goin' away with Miss Lana," Jason muttered unhappily, and he frowned.

"Lana doesn't mind if I'm friends with Mommy," Richard said. "Neither does Clark. I just can't be Mommy's boyfriend anymore. But I'll always be your daddy as long as you want me to be."

"And I won't try to stop that," Clark said. "Kids can have two daddies, you know. I'm your father because you get ... certain things ... from me, and because I love you. But Richard will always be your daddy because you grew up with him, and he loves you like a daddy should."

Kala was absolutely silent, her hazel eyes filling with tears. She turned away from the two men she loved and buried her face in her brother's shoulder. Jason hugged her tight and glared at both adults. The little boy had heard enough. And none of it was anything he liked. "I wanna go to Nana's," he demanded.

"Jason..." Richard began, but the boy cut him off again.

"I wanna go to Nana's house," he said stubbornly, showing a surliness that even Richard had rarely seen. "And Kala's goin' with me. You won't split *us* up. You *promised* that. Not *ever*."

A threat lurked behind his words as he stared at them. Jason had never behaved like this - Richard had never seen him so defiant before. Or as angry. Or wounded. He felt as helpless as Clark looked, neither of them able to give a satisfactory answer to the boy they both called *son*. "No one will separate you two," Clark said after a moment, his voice fraught with pain.

"All right, you can go to Nana's house," Richard said finally. "Together. Mommy will be home later, and she'll pick you up..."

Jason shook his head violently. "Nuh-uh. Stayin' at Nana's."

For once it was Kala who clung to him worriedly, peeking around his shoulder with a hurt and frightened expression. Ever the strong one, the mouthpiece for the both of them, Kala was for once silent. The look on her face as her gaze moved back and forth between he and Clark pained Richard more than Jason's anger, and he gave in. "Okay, come on. Let's go. Clark..."

"I've got to pick Lois up from the airport," he replied. "I've got her car keys..."

"I'll go with you when I get back from taking them," Richard said, watching as Jason went to stand by the door and glare at him. "She's not gonna be happy..."

She had been through both bookstores with nothing to show for it, browsed the duty-free shops, bought a few items at Lush, and drank two Pumpkin Spice Frappuccinos before wandering back to her terminal. Well, that left another forty-two minutes and sixteen seconds before her flight arrived, Lois thought as she glanced for the millionth time at her wristwatch.

With her layover in Chicago seeming to go on forever, Lois spent more time in her own thoughts than she was comfortable with. Remembering that Martha had told her that Lana had

slipped out last night without warning, she flipped her phone open and dialed a number that was rapidly growing familiar. The least she could do was check up on her... What would it hurt? The phone was answered on the second ring by a pleasant voice saying, "Hello, Lois."

"Hi, Lana," Lois said just as good-humoredly. "Listen, I was just calling to thank you for buying the twins' plane tickets. Clark and Richard and I all thought one of us had already bought them."

"It wasn't any trouble," Lana told her, her tone a trifle sheepish. "I figured out that all of you were caught up in planning how to get them out to Kansas, and I thought I'd make at least one thing easier for you."

"And the gesture is much appreciated," Lois said sincerely. "But those plane tickets are just too expensive. Send me the bill and I'll reimburse you."

"Lois..."

"I'm serious, Lana. It was bad enough that you had to pay to bribe them with books and lunch, but buying the tickets was too much."

"It was my pleasure," Lana said, sounding slightly exasperated. "Lois, I don't have children of my own, and the twins are a delight. And I know how much you cherish them. That you'd trust me to spend six hours with your kids is an honor worth far more than two first-class tickets."

"You flew them *first class*?" Lois exclaimed. "*Lana!* They're *six!*"

"What?" Lana asked, honestly bewildered. "Have you seen the seats in coach? You might as well sit in the lap of the person next to you. And the food is awful, too."

"Lana, it's *first class*," Lois said. "That's really expensive. Besides, I fly coach all the time, and it hasn't killed me yet."

"Yes, well, I prefer a little more space and comfort when I fly," Lana's voice was just a tad defensive. A loud public address system briefly drowned out her last few words.

Lois' attention shifted the moment she heard the amplified voice. That sounded awfully familiar... "Lana, where are you?" she asked, one brow arched as she concentrated on the background noises.

The other woman paused, Lois heard a sigh, then Lana answered in the fewest words possible. "The airport."

Unfortunately for her, Lois was a reporter and a damn good one. "*Which* airport, Lana?"

That same reluctant pause before the answer: "Charles de Gaulle."

"I *knew* that announcement sounded French," Lois muttered. Well, that answered the question of why she had slipped out in the middle of the night. "Okay, why are you in Paris?"

"I'm on a layover," Lana said, and then sighed. Lois wouldn't give up trying to pry information out of her, so she gave up trying to conceal it instead. "I'm on my way to Milan, Lois. If you read your own gossip column you'd know I was due there several days ago."

"Yes, I do read my own paper," Lois replied, "and our three closest competitors as well. The real question is, does *Richard* know you're going to Milan? Because the last time I talked to him it sounded an awful lot like he thought you were coming back to Metropolis."

"I told him I would be back in Metropolis eventually," Lana said quickly. There was that defensive posturing again. "I never said I was coming back right away. And if he read the same article he knows I'm due in Milan."

"You do know you're running away, right?" Lois asked, keeping her tone light. When only silence answered her, she prodded a little more. "I never figured you for a coward, Lana."

The words were calculated to make Lana just a bit angry, maybe irritate her enough that

she would stop being so reticent. "Lois, I am not running away," Lana replied hotly. "I'm doing my job - I put off going to Milan long enough, and all because of him."

"That's justification," Lois responded, almost lazily. "You *did* put off going to Italy before; you're just using it as an excuse now. Is it me?" The flippant question hid a very real worry. Lois could see, even if they couldn't, that Richard and Lana would be perfect for each other. The last thing she wanted was for Lana to shy away from that chance at happiness simply because Richard had so recently belonged to someone else.

"No, it isn't you," Lana replied, sounding a little testy. "Although it makes my head hurt to think that the only person who wants us together as much as my mom does, is his very-recently-ex fiancé. This is almost surreal, but I've gotten the message loud and clear from you, Lois."

"So why are you leaving now?" the reporter asked quickly. "And why haven't you told him? If it's common knowledge, then why...?"

"Forgive me if I need a little time to get my head together about all of this," Lana snapped. She reined in her temper and continued more calmly, "Lois, I'm not you. I need some time alone to think things through - I'm not as good at making decisions under pressure as you are."

"What kind of decision do you actually need to make?" Lois asked, glancing at the departures board. "Has he already up and proposed marriage or something?"

Lana laughed ironically. "No. The question is, do I really want to get involved with him? Lois, I barely know Richard..."

"So get to know him," Lois interrupted. "You have to quit running if you want to do that, though. It's hard to know someone if they spend all their time an ocean away."

An irritated sigh met Lois' ear. "It's not just that," Lana said. "And I need to get going if I want to catch my flight. Lois, trust me, I'm not running away. Is that good enough?"

"I'll trust you for now," Lois replied. "And when you do get back to Metropolis, remember to bring me the receipt for those plane tickets!"

At least the conversation ended on a high note, both women laughing. "Lois, forget about the tickets," Lana said. "I'll talk to you later - and I'll remember what you said, all right?"

"You'd better," Lois replied, surprised by the almost-affectionate tone in her own voice. "Because if you find some other reason to stay gone, Lana, I'll come find you myself."

Lois came down the concourse with her head up, shoulders back, her carryon bag thrown over her shoulder. She walked, as always, with confidence and a little sway in her stride, capturing the attention of everyone who glanced at her. Clark and Richard could see her ignoring all of the interested looks, however, and scanning the crowd for them.

One of them, anyway. Clark was supposed to meet her here and bring the car to her, but she wasn't expecting Richard. She saw Clark first, his height making him easy to spot, and they both saw a smile begin to curve her lips. Then she saw Richard, and stopped abruptly.

Richard had known she would realize something was wrong the moment she saw him and Clark waiting for her together. But he felt responsible for screwing up with the twins, and didn't want Clark to face the brunt of Lois' anger alone. And she would surely be angry - they had all talked about how they wanted to avoid this very outcome, how they had to be careful about the way they told the twins what was going on. How could she not be furious when she found out how badly they'd mismanaged it?

Lois was frozen, her eyes wide, looking for the twins and not finding them. If Clark and

Richard were here, the kids had to be here... She couldn't make herself move, feeling panic rise in her chest, and at last the two men had to come to her.

"Lois," Clark said softly.

"What's wrong?" she asked with sudden panic, and Clark could hear her heart racing. He could only guess the possibilities that were teeming through her mind. "What happened? Are the twins...?"

She sounded almost like Jason and Kala, and Richard felt a leaden pain roll through his gut. *Not this again*, he thought. *I barely got through getting the twins to her mother's house, and now Lois is going to blow up just like they did.* "We miscalculated," Richard told her. "I didn't know exactly when you were getting in, or that the kids were arriving separately. So I was at the house when Clark and the twins got there."

"And like an idiot, I immediately turned to leave," Clark said miserably.

"It was a noble gesture, trying not to interfere with my time with them," Richard interrupted. "But Jason and Kala kind of freaked out when they heard him say he was going, and they begged him to stay. So then I went to leave, and they panicked even worse."

"And we pretty much had to tell them because they were already figuring it out," Clark said. He couldn't meet Lois' eyes, staring down at his shoes. "They know Richard's not going to be living with them anymore."

"Yeah, Jason sort of expected Lana to move in and we'd all be one big happy family," Richard added with dark humor. "We tried to do as much damage control as we could, but Jason insisted on going to your mother's house and wouldn't even talk to me the whole way over..."

Lois' gaze had flicked back and forth between them, her eyes widening as they talked. The two of them had been hurrying to speak, almost stepping on the ends of each other's sentences. Richard realized then why they hadn't let her get a word in edgewise; they were both afraid of what Lois would say. In that moment, he felt closer to Clark than he ever had before. Both of them waited to weather the storm of Lois' anger, united in their anticipation of her fury.

But the explosion of wrath they expected failed to happen. Lois just stared as they fell silent, her expression slowly fading from shock to something else. Something a lot like absolute heartbreak...

Clark and Richard were stunned to see tears well up in Lois' eyes, and she choked on a sob, covering her face as she turned her back on them. "Oh God, I'm a horrible mother," she whispered, shoulders shaking as she fought the urge to weep. "I knew I'd screw this up. How can I do this to them? I always said that I'd never..." The misery in her voice struck both of them like a knife. "I promised myself that I'd never hurt them. They missed out on so much because of me. Now I'm making them change their world because Mommy can't make up her mind. They'll hate me; they'll think it's all my fault ... and they're right."

"No, Lois," Richard and Clark said at the same time. Clark slid his arm around her shoulders as he added, "You're not a bad mother, not by a long shot. They're just angry because they can't have what they want. That's life; changes happen."

"It's only because they're young," Richard said. His first reaction to seeing Lois break down was to put his arm around her waist, utterly unconscious of Clark on the other side of her. "They don't understand. When they get used to the idea, it'll be all right."

Both men supported her as she struggled to keep her composure. Lois shivered, wracked by guilt and shame; in spite of all of her good intentions, she'd managed to hurt the twins

anyway. To see her in such pain wounded Clark deeply, and he looked across at Richard with desperation and raw agony in his eyes.

Trying to cajole her out of that awful feeling, Richard hugged her tight, glancing across her at Clark with a wan smile. "C'mon, Lois, you're a wonderful mom. But even the best mom has to make choices her kids don't like - otherwise they'd never go to the doctor and eat only burritos and candy."

Lois half-laughed, half-sobbed, holding on to them both for dear life. "A week ago they couldn't even eat regular candy," she said with a snuffle.

"We should've reminded them of that. Change *can* be a good thing," Clark said softly, holding her to his shoulder. Between him and Richard, Lois could have fainted and not fallen; both of them were holding her up, and neither would let go at that moment. For that moment, the three just stood there on the concourse, united in grief.

A Line in the Sand

Lois pulled herself together, sniffing a little but strangely proud that she hadn't burst into tears. "I'm sorry," she murmured before clearing her throat, brusquely rubbing her cheeks. "I've made a mess of everything. God, I've ruined their lives *and* both of yours..."

"Oh, come on now," Richard said, knowing that cajoling would be the only way to break her from this. "That's pure melodrama there, Lois; it's not all about *you*, you know."

"The twins are only upset because they don't understand," Clark commented quietly. "And you sure didn't ruin my life; you *saved* it."

"Didn't *ruin* mine, either," Richard said bravely. "I mean, hell, *fate* has managed to screw with my life, but it's not your fault and it isn't ruined. If you wanted to ruin my life, you'd have to let me find out about all of this by catching you two in our bed. *That* would've ruined my life."

Lois and Clark both looked horror-struck by those words. His former fiancée's expression told him all he needed to know on her thoughts. After a moment, Clark said in a small, pained voice, "Richard, neither of us would *ever*..."

"I know," Richard said, holding up a hand to stop him. "I know that now. Weird though it is, you both care too much about me to hurt me like that. Freakish, isn't it? That the guy who finally gets the woman I wanted so much turns out to be a damn good friend of mine? Strangest of all, I can't manage to be mad at either of you."

Lois could hardly bear to look at him, her heart still wounded that he could think that of them. "I never meant to hurt you," she whispered.

"I know," Richard said soothingly, and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, conscious of Clark's presence. "It was just an example, Lois. It's funny, now that I've lost you, I'm even more sure that you care about me than I was the last few months before we broke up. I guess love is blind - but 'just friends' can see clearly."

That got a weak chuckle from Lois. "Yeah, well, I wasn't the best for you," she said, and there was a hint of sadness in her voice. "I'm glad we broke it off before I screwed up your life even more."

Richard looked at Clark then and scowled slightly. "I think she's catching your guilt complex, 'hero'. Didn't we both just tell her she didn't ruin our lives?" Turning his attention back to Lois, he nudged her arm with his elbow. "C'mon. I know what your problem is - not enough caffeine on the flight. Have some Starbucks and you'll feel better."

"To go," Clark said, and they both looked at him. "We do need to talk, all three of us, and the airport coffee shop isn't the best place to do it."

Stanford tapped the stack of papers on Luthor's desk to align the edges perfectly. That fussy little habit was his way of dealing with anxiety, and he was fairly sure that Luthor knew exactly what it meant, but he couldn't stop. The bald man waited patiently for him to finish arranging the reports, which he finally placed on Luthor's desk.

Lex picked them up and glanced through them while Stanford sat there nervously wishing he had something he could do with his hands. Even twiddling a pen was better than just waiting for Lex to finish reading...

"Good progress on deciphering the language," Lex said. Stanford just nodded; a lot of the simpler information stored on the crystals was in English, but most of the technical stuff was in Kryptonian, which used an entirely different alphabet. There was no utility to simply *translate* the information they wanted; they had to actually learn the language itself. And that was

turning out to be quite tedious; only a few members of the research team had any skill in linguistics, so any progress in that area was highly praised.

"Well done on the resonance tests," Lex muttered, paging through summaries. "And the replication studies are coming along rather slowly..."

"The replication team is complaining about the small sample they've been allotted," Stanford said. "I tried to explain to them that we simply don't have enough crystals for destructive testing, but they're tightly focused."

"And probably worried that I'll be displeased by their lack of progress," Lex mused. "Tell them I'm willing to be patient - we have a full complement of crystals. Once we know precisely what's stored on each of them, we'll be able to commit several of the less-important crystals over to the replication testing team. What about applications?"

"If we can learn how the information was originally encoded, we'll revolutionize the computer industry," Stanford said. The group seeking applications of the new technology were practically ecstatic, and he tried to make his own report more sober. "We could hold patents on computer monitors and television displays, cell phones, media recording and playback devices of all kinds. That's just the process for encoding the crystals themselves - we don't even understand half of the technical information we have access to. But even without the technology described, just knowing how to write such crystals would be extremely profitable. All of that is contingent on learning how all of this was actually done. And that seems to be the last thing the program is set up to show us."

"Reasonable, but annoying," Lex said. "Any progress in circumventing the protocols?"

"No," Stanford sighed in frustration. Certain sections of data were only accessible after they had finished with others. Apparently, the Kryptonians didn't want their fabled Last Son to learn about any of the dangerous technology until he had proved he had the discipline to learn the language. Certainly they had been unable to access any of the files on weapons or space propulsion technology so far. And no one had managed to get around that system yet.

"I suppose we'll have to find a few linguistics experts," Luthor mused. They discussed a few other things until Lex finally asked, "And these last pages... what's this about disciplinary problems?"

This particular situation made Stanford's gut ache, and he longed for the peace and quiet of his lab and a few Tums. "Well, one of the chemists we brought in got into a fight with a couple of the security guys."

"A *chemist*?" Lex's eyebrows rose. "And why was he fighting with the security staff?"

"She," Stanford corrected. "Mercedes Graves. And I'm fairly certain the security people started the fight. Although they probably weren't expecting one. Look at her profile."

Lex perused it, his expression growing more intrigued the more he read. "Very interesting. Leader in her field, convicted of illegally testing certain chemical compounds on human subjects without their knowledge or consent, blackballed by every major university and pharmaceuticals company in the United States... Very interesting. And this photograph is current?"

Stanford knew which one he was looking at. It showed a delicate-featured blonde, somewhere in her late twenties, quite pretty in an aloof way. "Yes, that shot's accurate," he said. The security staff was still mostly culled from violent offenders recently released from prison and needing a job. A girl like Mercy seemed like a target to them.

"What was the outcome?" Lex asked.

"One of the two men is dead," Stanford reported. "The other will probably never walk

again. She was unarmed, Mr. Luthor. Apparently she's a highly-trained martial artist."

"Oh, now that is intriguing," Lex said absently. "What have you done with her?"

"She's sequestered," Stanford said. "I didn't know what you wanted to do about her..."

"Send her in," Lex said. "I need someone to oversee the security boys, someone who won't get involved in all of the macho power-playing nonsense. If she can kill or maim two of them, they'll have to respect her."

"Sir..." Stanford began, but Lex cut him off.

"Send her in," he said. "She's captured my interest."

"Of course, Mr. Luthor," Stanford said.

Lois bit her bottom lip and glanced into the backseat of her car for what felt like the hundredth time. The two carriers sitting there weren't moving ... either the weasel and the lizard had gone to sleep, or her worst fear had come true, and one or both of them were out of the cage and getting ready to attack her.

The afternoon sun slanted through the windshield, making her wince. She had been up late the previous night, packing... And what fun *that* had been. The drive back from the airport yesterday had been incredibly awkward, just being in the relatively small car with Richard and Clark. They'd talked while they drove, filling Richard in on the twins' emerging powers and their vanishing allergies. The conversation had gotten more serious as they discussed who would get Jason and Kala on which holidays, how to cope with the current situation, and how they would further reassure the twins that this change in their lives wasn't as bad as it seemed.

Richard had been the first to bring up the office. He hadn't said anything to anyone - not difficult, given the workload he'd taken on - but rumors were already flying. Several conversations had stopped abruptly when Richard walked into the room, a sure sign that he and Lois were being discussed. So far, he'd been absolutely silent on the topic of his former fiancée's whereabouts, simply saying that she was out of town recuperating.

They'd started to plan what they would say to their coworkers - most of whom had no idea that Lois and Richard had broken up, much less that Lois and *Clark* were now an item - but got sidetracked when they arrived at the Riverside house. The first thing Lois saw walking through the doors was a stack of cardboard boxes, and she turned to Richard with surprise and hurt in her eyes.

Even now, a day later, Lois' lips tightened at the memory. They hadn't quite argued, but she and Richard both wanted the other to keep the house. Richard was adamant that she needed the space for the kids; Lois was just as insistent that Richard deserved the place in the suburbs with the convenient dock built just for his seaplane. In the end, Clark had ventured his own opinion, noting that neither of them seemed comfortable in the house anymore - and frankly, neither was he.

That gave Richard and Lois enough leeway to admit he was right - neither of them wanted to live with the ghosts of their past. Besides, Lois had always been a city girl; she'd moved to the 'burbs only because Richard wanted to. He had mostly finished packing up and moving his belongings out; she agreed to do the same, leaving only the items necessary to live there day to day. Lois and the kids would live there while they found a realtor and put the house on the market.

Another brief debate had ensued over who would get the larger share of the equity in the house; Richard insisted that Lois take sixty percent, because she would need it more while searching for an apartment for herself and the twins. She, in turn, reminded him that he had put

more money into the original down payment, and that she would also have Clark's income to consider when apartment-hunting. Richard countered that he might very well have a second income, too, and Lana had more money than any of them. Clark had finally groaned in frustration and told them to split it fifty-fifty and *please* stop squabbling so politely!

In shared laughter, Richard had departed, hugging Lois once more and swatting Clark on the shoulder in a friendly manner. Lois had invited Clark to stay for dinner and to help her pack the heavier stuff, which he readily agreed to. He'd gone out for take-out while Lois fed the twins' pets - the animals seemed agitated with their owners gone so long.

Seeing Captain Jack pressing his nose hard against the bars of his cage, then run in frantic circles, Lois had decided on her present course of action: bringing the pets to her mother's house as a peace offering to the twins. She had decided, with input from Richard and Clark, to let the twins stay at Ella's for now. Time was the best cure for them, and although it set a bad precedent to give them their way as Richard and Clark had, Lois doubted a situation like this would occur again. Jason had never shown such anger and defiance in the previous six years of his life, and she had no reason to think that he would decide 'have a tantrum and run to Nana's' was a good tactic in the future. Even if he did, well, he got his determination from Lois herself - she could out-stubborn him and Kala both if necessary.

She parked at her mother's house and got out of the car warily, alert for a darting black-furred ferret or the sudden lash of a green lizard tail. Gazeera and Captain Jack seemed to be resting quietly in their travel cages, but Lois took no chances, double-checking the latches before she carried them up to the front door.

Ella met her there, taking Captain Jack's carrier. "Hello, sweetheart," she said, looking at Lois curiously.

"Hi, Momma," Lois replied, making her expression bland. She still hadn't told her mother where she'd been the last few days; the last time they'd spoken before today had been a hurried phone call from the airport as Lois was on her way to Kansas. She didn't know *what* to tell Ella; there seemed no easy way to explain her actions of late, especially not when Ella knew that the twins' father was Superman, but didn't know that Superman and Clark Kent were the same person.

Oh, this is going to be a huge headache, Lois thought, seeing the rest of her life as a series of half-truths and evasions to keep his secret. And to have to lie to her *mother... Oh well, Lois, suck it up and deal. This is the price you have to pay for having your dream come true.*

They set the cages down in the utility room, Lois quickly hooking up Gazeera's heat lamp and daylight-simulating light bulb. Ella opened Captain Jack's cage to give him some food, accidentally letting him out and yelping in surprise when he tried to run up the leg of her slacks and then decided to try squeezing under the door instead. "Get back here, you hairy little psycho," Lois growled, grabbing the ferret by the back of the neck and tossing him back into the travel cage.

Watching her, Ella arched an eyebrow and said, "The way you take care of pets is supposed to be an indication of your parenting skills. Congratulations, Lois, at least your children are still alive."

"My cat wasn't *insane*," Lois muttered. "Elroy and I did perfectly fine for two years before my landlord found him. Now he's living the fat life at Lucy's."

"Don't you mean the good life?" Ella asked mildly.

"No, the *fat* life," Lois said. "I know how to *speak* even if I can't *spell* worth a ... darn."

The last time I saw *my* cat, Lucy was hand-feeding him salmon. Whenever he lays down, he just kinda spreads into a puddle of greasy tabby-striped fur."

Ella laughed, shaking her head. "I knew you should've named him Garfield."

Lois poked a bit of kale into Gazeera's cage and stood up, facing her mother seriously. "Just how mad are they, Momma?" She asked the question knowing that she was dreading the answer.

The older woman sighed. "They're barely speaking to *me*, and they didn't say a word to Richard when he dropped them off. By the way, are you planning to tell me what exactly is going on? Richard gave me some story about the twins being upset because they found out he wouldn't be living with you anymore. He also said he was the one who drove them over because they were angrier at you than at him." Ella crossed her arms and looked at Lois steadily, waiting for an explanation.

Unfortunately, Lois had no plans to give her one. "Well, that's basically it," she said with a sigh, trying to be casual.

Ella's white brow crept a little higher, but she knew her daughter and recognized the Lane stubbornness. "I suppose I can wait," she said after a moment of silence. "You do realize I'll find out eventually, don't you? I *am* your mother, and you've never kept a secret from me for long."

"Yes, mother," Lois muttered as she rolled her eyes. "I know, mother. Give me some time to get everything sorted out, mother."

"So, how long are Jason and Kala going to be staying with me?" Ella said. "The rest of the week?"

"Probably," was Lois' somewhat embarrassed reply. "Unless they cool off and decide they want to come home before Thanksgiving."

"They're *your* kids," Ella said. "I doubt it. But you are planning to be here for Thanksgiving, right?"

"Of course, Momma," Lois sighed. "Even if my own children aren't talking to me, I'd come to see you and Lucy and Ron and their brood."

"That's my girl," Ella said.

Lois had to summon all her courage to go and see the twins. Jason just glared at her, pouting, when she told him she'd brought Gazeera, but Kala brightened when Lois said she'd brought the weasel, too. Neither of them spoke to her, though Kala looked longingly at her mother, and they wouldn't let go of each other's hands, either. That disturbed Lois; she had only seen them cling to each other like that in moments of extreme stress. It pained her to think that her presence upset them so much, and she cut the visit short, heading home to finish packing. Clark would be there, probably with dinner, and his presence would soothe the ache in her heart at leaving the twins behind, however temporarily.

It had been a long and exhausting day, despite their having spent it together. Pushing back several fallen tendrils of hair, Lois arched sweat off her brow and grumbled as she surveyed their dawn-to-dusk project while moving to snatch up the last of the boxes from her study. Almost immediately, she started to list to the left and struggle to hold onto her burden, surprised at its weight. "Dammit. I knew I shouldn't have packed this box so heavy..."

Clark reached around her and easily lifted the large box of books. In spite of feeling dusty and annoyed and tired and generally unattractive, his arm brushing hers made the hair at the nape of her neck rise. As had been the case ever since she had seen his eyes that night just

over a week ago when she had gone into his arms on the front porch of his mother's Kansas farmhouse, the attraction was now undeniably electric. Closing her eyes, Lois growled in frustration before sighing, wrapping her arms around her shoulders. She couldn't help shivering just a little.

"Are you cold?" Clark asked solicitously, having noticed the gesture. "We can turn up the heat..." And realizing what he'd said, he blushed.

My God, how can he be so immune to it? Why isn't it killing him like this? "No, I'm not cold, Kal-El. Far from it," she replied under her breath as she tried to look away and pin her attention on something else. *Oh, that's right. He's made himself an expert at denial, whereas you've always been a glutton. Grow up, Lane.*

"Then why..." Clark was saying, but stopped in mid-sentence when she turned a trying-to-be-furious glare on him, and took in the heat in her glance. "Sorry. I didn't mean to... well. You know."

Lois sighed again, a mix of melancholy and amusement in her tone. "I know," she replied softly. Other than a few heated kisses stolen at the Kent farm while Mrs. Kent's back had been turned and the twins were keeping her busy, they hadn't been close to each other since that night in the hotel, just before Luthor trapped her on the yacht, and she had remembered all over again just how much she had missed him. Missed his arms around her badly enough for that faint contact to ignite her nerves and make her shiver with sudden craving a thousand times worse than quitting cigarettes.

He set the box down and came to her, pulling her close and wrapping her up in the warmth of his embrace. His cheek rested against her pulled-up hair, and Lois sighed and leaned against him, forgetting then that they had been packing and moving stuff around for the last several hours, forgetting the low ache in her back and the dust smeared on her forehead. For a moment, the entire world narrowed down to the two of them.

But when her heart began to beat faster, and she felt his breathing hasten, she pulled away gently. They had both been trying to be good, to not jump back into this as boldly as they had the first time, but she would never have dreamed it would be so difficult. "We said we were going to behave, and I promised you that I wouldn't try to tempt you on it," Lois murmured with a clear tone of regret. "Besides, I'm absolutely filthy. I don't know how you can even stand being that close."

"You are not filthy," he argued, trailing his fingertips down her spine. Unfortunately, it only made Lois aware of the sweat sticking her shirt to her back, and she made a disgusted noise as she pulled away. Even now, it bothered her to look even slightly unattractive around him.

"Yuck, I can't stand this anymore," she grouched, brushing bits of cardboard off her jeans and pulling down her ponytail. Shaking out the disarrayed locks, she made a face. "Okay, that's it; I'm going for a shower. Enough moving stuff for one day. If I have to deal with myself a minute longer... Eww, gross."

Clark let her go only reluctantly. "I guess I'll go, then."

She had turned and started toward the stairs when his words stopped her. It hadn't even occurred to her that he wouldn't stay with her, something she had somehow foolishly taken for granted. It had just felt so natural today to have him here. They had been starting to pack up the house for the last two days and he had gone home alone last night, despite her unspoken want of his presence. What had made her think tonight was any different? Nevertheless, her hazel eyes were hurt when she met his gaze again. "No, Kal-El ... it's not even dark yet. I

mean, you haven't been over here just as my personal box packer. Just because we're done working doesn't mean that I'm banishing you. I mean, we could..."

"Lois... I shouldn't stay. Not here." Richard's voice was in his mind, and this was Richard's house.

Her dark brow furrowed. This house had seemed like home to her for the longest time, except for now. Without the twins... At least it gave Ella precious time with her grandchildren; Lex's scheme had made her all the more in need of keeping them in her sight. The only problem was, it left Lois feeling more alone than she had been since their birth. Things were quiet. Too quiet.

Much as she hated to admit this weakness, Lois couldn't stop herself. "Please... I didn't sleep at all last night. The house seems so different when I'm the only one in it, so big - even Gazeera and Captain Jack are at my mom's tonight. I think I've gotten out of the habit of being content alone." Her expression was faintly wheedling, "Please? Just stay with me for a little while longer? I'll most likely only be up an hour or so more, after a day like today. And we said we wanted to get a start on the garage tomorrow. I'll be sure to drop out if you're here with me."

"Well..." The temptation was terrible, but Clark took a deep breath and reminded himself of Martha's stern looks whenever they had been too familiar in her presence. "I'll stay until you fall asleep, okay?"

Lois smiled brightly at him then, that rare open smile that made his heart ache just as strongly as it had in the old days, and kissed his cheek gently. "Thanks, love. I'll be in and out before you know it. And you know I always feel safer with you around."

"Wonder why," he teased, and she smirked over her shoulder at him as she headed upstairs to shower, one sardonic eyebrow raised at him.

Clark paced the rooms, feeling out of place. Upstairs, water was running, and his mind treacherously presented him with images of Lois nude, her hair sleeked by the shower, water running down of the curves of shoulders, breasts, hips, thighs... He shook his head mutely, trying not to think about it. *Stop it*, he told himself sternly, moving through the darkened dining room; it had been one of the first rooms packed, a stack of boxes along one wall. *Stop thinking like this. It's only torturing the both of you. If you really love her, if this is more than lust - and we both know it is - we should be able to wait.*

But most of him didn't want to wait; most of his mind and heart wanted to simply head upstairs and let this exquisite tension between them have its natural end. Clark could envision it all too easily; Lois probably wouldn't be surprised to see him in the doorway for more than a moment, and she would most likely welcome him with open arms, soaking his shirt with the hot water or just peeling it off...

In his pacing, his eye happened to chance on the edge of a silver picture frame sticking out of one of the boxes. Clark's mouth turned down; he knew that the photo within the frame was of Richard. It had been one of the first packed, Lois trying to get Richard's face off the walls before she began to imagine an accusatory expression. But it was now a reminder of why he shouldn't be thinking like this, not now. Not here, in Richard's house. *Just stop it.*

But oh, the thought of her, turning with that slow smile and reaching out to him, pulling him into the shower and kissing him hard, the sweet taste of her lips and her body pressed to his... *No, I can't think like this, I just need to quit before I do something insane... Can I be dreaming once again?*

*I'm reaching helpless
I descend
You're leading deeper
Through this maze
I'm not afraid*

*I'm lost in you
Everywhere I run
I'm finding something new
I'm lost in you
Something I can't fight
I cannot escape
I can spend my whole life
Lost in you...
~Red, Lost*

Whisper of a Thrill

*Find me here
Speak to me
I want to feel you
I need to hear you
You are the light
That's leading me
To the place
Where I find peace
Again*

*You are the strength
That keeps me walking
You are the hope
That keeps me trusting
You are the light
To my soul
You are my purpose
You're everything...*

*~ Lifehouse, *Everything**

Lois leaned her face into the hot water, her eyes tightly shut against the spray. It seemed as if the warmth was sinking into her very bones. It was almost as good as heating her up as Kal-El's touch had been...

She had to laugh at herself with faint disgust, groaning with incredulous mirth at the track her mind had taken. *Oh my God, I'd be better off using cold water despite it being something like fifty degrees outside*, she thought sardonically, raking her fingers through her hair to get the shampoo out. *What the hell is wrong with me? I was ready to climb into his lap there for a minute, regardless of what was going on... Earth to Lane, reality check. Because you know, a woman's never sexier than when she's filthy and sweaty and covered in dust. And after six years, I'm sure he's fantasized about me jumping him in jeans and a faded t-shirt when we're in the middle of moving all my stuff out of my house. That's almost as bad as the damned chiffon evening gown, you moron!*

But after all this time, I just... Look what spending a few days in a Kansas farmhouse with a sharp-eyed mother-in-law will do to me, especially since at first we had to sneak around to even talk alone, which is something I haven't had to do in years. And with the twins' father, at that!

Although God knows that twenty minutes in the hayloft made me remember how much fun covert necking could be...

That all-too-brief memory had the effect of lightning, only enhancing her already tense state. She couldn't deny the heat in her veins, the way her skin craved his touch. Especially now that they had been trying to avoid it, despite the torture of their memories. Even now she could still feel his arm around her, still feel the lightest touch of his fingers brushing her back.

If only he were here with her, rubbing the tension out of her shoulders, kissing her neck... Lois sighed, stretching like a cat to loosen her muscles, her lips curving up in a small wicked smile at the thought of Kal-El's arms sliding around her waist, his perfectly muscled chest against her back. His breath against her neck, his hair wet and tousled... The image made her

almost purr with desire.

And if he were here, she could lean back against him, rest her head on his shoulder and let him press amorous kisses upon her neck, nuzzle down to her shoulder, his hands rising to cup her breasts, his touch so tender and so fraught with desire. Or perhaps his hands would slip down instead, over the curve of her stomach, and lower...

"Kal-El," Lois murmured, her back arching at the thoughts that flickered through her mind like lightning through storm clouds. "Oh, my God, Kal-El... Please..."

When Lois came downstairs later, she felt much better. Her long hair was twisted up into a knot with a hair stick through it, and she was wearing her least-suggestive pajamas. Unfortunately, though the outfit covered her from wrists to ankles, it was deep crimson velvet, imminently touchable. *Hell, this is warm, and it's better than a camisole...*

She thought her expression was controlled, but when she walked up to Clark in the kitchen, the way he glanced at her seemed to hint that he knew what she had been doing. Lois tried to look wide-eyed and innocent, then remembered how well he knew her and just tried not to look flushed and hot-blooded.

Clark was studiously avoiding her gaze, sweeping up fragments of something ceramic from the tiled floor. "Sorry, Lois," he murmured. "I broke one of your mugs..."

What on earth...? "I have lots," she replied, brow furrowing. She had thought they had stopped packing for the evening. And he wasn't really *that* clumsy...

Clark kept his eyes firmly on the broken mug. He hadn't meant to listen in, but he was always attuned to her heartbeat, and when it began to race he'd checked to see what was going on. *That was a mistake*, Clark thought, trying to swallow past the dryness in his throat. He'd shattered the mug without thinking, hearing his name on her lips and remembering all too clearly how much he loved the needy tone.

Now Lois was standing near him, the deeply-colored velvet accenting her pale skin and raven hair. Didn't she know how lovely she looked, how utterly delectable? Didn't she realize how much he wanted to stroke the rough velvet cloaking her slim body? *Stop it!* he told himself, but his mind wouldn't listen. Now he could smell her shampoo, the warm sandalwood scent intoxicating, and beneath that the dampness of her skin fresh from the shower ... he could smell *her*...

The dustpan cracked in his hands, and Clark looked at them mutely, feeling an embarrassed blush creep up the sides of his neck. *Crap*.

For a moment, both of them stared at it before she looked down at him worriedly. "Kal-El, are you okay?" Lois asked in a tentative tone. *God, it's me. I'm making him nervous. Although I have no idea how. He can't read minds; is it really that obvious what I'm thinking?*

"Yeah ... fine," he muttered, his voice strained. He didn't dare look at her, knowing only too well how close she was, his hands aching to touch her and his heart pounding in his throat.

Lois' lips tightened. *I'm making him feel guilty with all of this. How could I have had everything right in Smallville only to mess it up now? What's wrong with me, other than the fact that my self-control is hanging by a thread? Actually, forget that; make it a thread on fire*, she thought, and came closer, reaching to touch his shoulder despite her worries. "Are you sure?" she asked softly, her hand lightly resting on the tense muscle. "It wasn't something I said earlier, was it?"

Kal-El drew a deep shuddery breath, closing his eyes. "No... I mean yes, I'm okay. It ... wasn't something you said..." She was so close, her hip almost brushing his shoulder, surely

unconscious of the effect she had on him. He looked up at her, need and torment in his eyes. *Oh, my dear God, and all the saints in Heaven ... how am I going to resist this?*

The connection between them was magnetic as always, both of them craving each other's touch. Lois' traitorous mind presented her with an image of Kal-El sliding an arm around her as he stood up, lifting her so that she would wrap her legs around his waist, supporting her so easily while he kissed her. She shivered slightly at the thought, feeling her pulse flutter.

Kal-El drew in a shaky breath, and then he did stand up, but to Lois' disappointment he was careful not to touch her. "I'll ... I'll hang out on the couch, Lois," he murmured huskily.

"I'll be upstairs," she replied softly. "I... I've been sleeping on the couch, myself. It's a sleeper sofa. Pretty comfortable."

The image of her lying beside him flashed across Kal-El's mind. "Lois, are you sure this is a good idea?" he asked gently.

"I'm sure it's the only way I'll get any sleep," Lois said ruefully. "This house is too damned quiet." *Not to mention, I can't even lie down in the bed that Richard and I shared for so long. It just feels wrong. I've never slept in the guest bedroom, but maybe I'll be able to finally fall asleep there.*

"I'll stay, Lois. Just until you fall asleep," he told her.

"Just until then," she whispered back, irked by the neediness in her voice but unable to deny it.

Upstairs, sleep deserted Lois. She lay staring at the guest bedroom ceiling, memories and fantasies chasing each other across her mind. Her loneliness tore at her as well - it had been years since she'd been this alone for more than a few hours.

Utter silence. The furnace came on, and warm air stirred the drapes. Lois watched the movement, feeling both exhausted and wide awake. *A few years of living with someone else gets you used to having them at your back. And I'm trying to think of the last time a bed felt this lonely... God, why does it feel as if we're just wasting time like this? Being 'good', avoiding each other, it's just making this worse.*

She turned, feeling a low ache in her back from moving all those boxes. Lois felt exhausted, but as far from sleep as she'd ever been. The bed seemed cold and twice as large as it needed to be. Clark could fill that empty space beside her so well...

Stop it! Lois yanked the pillow out from under her own head, letting her face whap against the mattress, and pulled the pillow over her head with a groan. *God, I need to just stop thinking like this... It's not gonna happen, Lane, get over yourself. He's a good Midwestern boy, he's not just gonna jump in bed with you **again**. Look what happened last time...*

Wait, now. You fell asleep beside him twice in Smallville. Once on the couch, once in his bed with the twins beside you. It was comforting both times - yeah, lying back against him on the couch with his arms around you was very sensual, a real delight, but nothing happened. Maybe...

Lois shut down that train of thought. It could only lead to one place, and she had to prove she was stronger than that. Never mind that she had only managed a few thin snatches of sleep last night, brief moments of oblivion between lying awake and staring at the ceiling. Never mind that she craved him beside her worse than she'd ever wanted a cigarette.

*I can do this. Dammit, I'm not a child; I don't need someone to stay with me in the dark. I can fall asleep without a man beside me. I did it for **how** many years...?*

Two hours later, Lois was downstairs, feeling foolish. *I hate being wrong*, she thought irritably. But as things turned out, she *couldn't* sleep alone, not knowing that Clark was so near, not remembering how safe she'd felt in his arms. She made her way to the living room in the dark, not needing lights in this house she knew so well.

"Lois?"

His voice startled her, coming out of the darkness, and she gasped, flinching back against the wall. "Dammit! Don't scare me like that!"

"Sorry," he said, and now she could see him sitting up in the faint light that filtered through the curtains. "What are you doing up?"

"I can't sleep," she said peevishly. "I've never slept in that guest bedroom before. On that couch a couple times, but for some reason never the guest bedroom. And I can't sleep there now."

"I'll switch with you," he offered.

"No..." Lois said, and trailed off, unable to speak aloud what she wanted.

"Want me to sing you a lullaby?" Clark's voice was softly amused, not mocking, and the thought of him singing *Wildest Dreams* made her smile and relax a little.

"No," Lois said, moving toward him again. It galled her to need anything this badly, made her flush with embarrassment to even consider asking him for what she wanted ... and if he refused, she would burn with shame. "Kal-El, I... I shouldn't even ask. But I haven't slept since we got back from Kansas. I'm so exhausted; I just want to sleep... Can I stay here with you? Just until I fall asleep?"

He looked at her for a long moment, studying her face, his own expression unreadable. "Lois, we really shouldn't."

That wasn't quite *no*. "Just to sleep," Lois promised quickly. "The only times I've slept well at all in the last *month* were those times I fell asleep beside you back in Smallville. I *have* to get some rest, Kal-El. This is killing me, not sleeping. I'm *cold*, I'm *exhausted*, I *need* to sleep, but I *can't*. I don't even have any more sleeping pills - I have to go to the doctor to get a new prescription, and I haven't had time for that with everything *else* going on." She could already imagine snuggling down beside him, his warmth soothing her, listening to his steady breathing and the slow beat of his great heart. Almost against her will, she heard herself add, "Please..."

"Come here," he said softly, patting the pillow beside him. "We're adults, we can behave."

It sounded like justification even to Lois, but she didn't care. At that moment she craved sleep even more than his touch, and crawled under the covers gratefully. The sofa bed was much warmer than the guestroom, thanks to Kal-El's body heat, and Lois sighed in unexpected comfort.

She was careful, even then, not to get too close to him. The attraction between them was as powerful as ever, and considering what Richard had said to them at the airport, Kal-El wouldn't want to be too forward here. So Lois lay down a little distance from him, near enough to feel his warmth, but not actually touching.

"Thank you ... good night, Kal-El," Lois murmured.

"Good night, Lois." The darkness of the house seemed to wrap them up in a warm, comforting cocoon. It was tempting to believe that only the two of them existed, only the gently slowing beat of her heart breaking the quiet for him.

At first, she thought that his nearness might be a distraction; she could feel her pulse start

to race, the sense of him beside her filling her drowsy mind with images from the distant past. But Lois quickly realized that his presence was more soothing than arousing, at least when she'd been up almost forty-eight hours. She sighed, eyes drifting closed.

He watched her, feeling his own eyelids grow heavy. What would it hurt to sleep beside her for a while? Lois was lying on her stomach, facing slightly away from him, her breathing growing deeper and more even as she eased into sleep. Amazing how easy it was for her now, when he'd listened to her lying awake and fretting earlier...

Kal-El slid down from where he'd been sitting up braced against the arm of the sofa. He lay watching her, listening to her breathe, hearing her heart slow into its sleepy rhythm. As always, the fact that she was beside him, not a dream, not a half-hopeful wish, but really there, astounded him. She was a marvel, and he felt as though he could simply lie there and watch her sleep all night... Just as soon as he rested his eyes for a while...

Deeply asleep, Lois' nose began to grow cold, and she burrowed deeper into the pillow. That made it hard to breathe, and she shifted around until she faced the opposite direction. Ah, much warmer, and she unconsciously cuddled toward the source of the heat. Just like that one time in Germany when her mother had put the space heater next to her bed to keep her warm at night...

Lois slowly crept across the bed, blindly seeking more warmth, and after an hour of those formless sleep-stirrings she finally found it. Sighing contentedly, she curled up against the source of heat, finally warm all the way through and perfectly comfortable. Even her cold nose felt better nuzzled between the mattress and Kal-El's shoulder... At some level, she knew who she was cuddling against, because she didn't put her arm around him. Even fast asleep she didn't want to be presumptuous.

Kal-El was dreaming, a sweet dream of being in bed with Lois. No worries, no distractions, no reason not to put his arm around her shoulders and sigh softly when she burrowed against his side. So peaceful, so relaxing, this dream, so real he could feel her warm breath against his chest. Smiling in his sleep, he gathered her close.

For a long time they simply lay together in the shelter of each other's arms, the rhythms of their breath becoming synchronized. But then he nuzzled her hair, and Lois whimpered softly and snuggled closer to him. Kal-El slid his hand down her back, caressing her, and he was still more asleep than awake when he began to kiss her.

At first, the kisses were sweet and slow, gentle and loving. He stroked her back and her sides lightly, adoringly, and his lips were tender. But gradually that familiar need began to build between them, and his touch grew surer as his mouth grew bolder. As it had begun, Kal-El had been asleep enough to think it wouldn't matter if he kissed her. They could always stop, the way they'd stopped in Kansas. But here there were no inquisitive twins calling for them, no Ma Kent watching them amusedly.

Now he was asleep enough not to care about consequences, awake enough to do more than just kiss her. Lois was soft and warm and smelled of shampoo and her lips tasted sweet. He wanted her, and even with her eyes still closed her desire answered his, her body shifting to meld against his.

Kal-El pulled her more tightly against him, still gentle, but a certain hungry insistence flared in the way he caressed her side, all the way down past her hip, and up again almost to her breast. There he hesitated, and even after she'd opened her mouth to him with a soft moan he stopped the glide of his fingers just short of where she wanted them, watching her through

lidded eyes.

Lois' eyes opened slowly then and she caught his hand, bringing it up and across, cupping his strong warm fingers around the curve of her breast. She gazed up at him with a sultry smoldering look, and neither of them could pretend anymore that this was some kind of accident, merely a dream.

No more hesitation; his thumb found her nipple and brushed it to instant hardness, Lois gasping as her eyes flew open wide. The velvet pajama top was just so slightly rough on the inside, and as he began to stroke and knead her breast she shuddered with sensation, her cheeks flushing with the thought that he *had* to know how this affected her.

Kal-El murmured something husky and wordless, kissing her neck and her shoulder, his face buried in her hair. Lois drew her leg up slowly, curling around the back of his knee, and arched her body against him. She whimpered to feel him rising for her, aching with need and an emptiness of heart and body only he could fill. Soon she was shaking, her body tensing with each slightest movement of his hand, her breath coming in short gasps as he rolled her nipple between his fingertips. "Please," she hissed, her hands raking through his hair.

In answer to her plea, he took his hand away, making her moan wantonly with loss. But then he'd slipped under the edge of the pajama top, and the velvet rubbed against her tantalizingly as Kal-El pulled it up, swift and hungry. Lois yelped as the cold air in the room struck her skin, and then cried out again, deeper, as his warm mouth engulfed her nipple.

Just that, his tongue circling, made her hips buck against him. And when he began to suckle her, she shivered in exquisite torment, hands clenching in his hair as she tried to stifle her wanton cries. Lois pressed her lips fiercely against his forehead, trembling as he lapped softly at her breast, trying not to scream even though she felt she might shatter from sheer overwhelming lust...

And then he rolled her back and pinned her beneath him, that movement so fluid and sure and so very much the embodiment of her most secret fantasies of him. Lois drew in a gasping breath, her hazel eyes so wide she looked shocked, and then he thrust against her once, not even totally aware that he did so or that his teeth closed so slightly on her nipple as his tongue flicked over it.

Lois *did* shatter then, flinging her head back as a swift sharp climax broke over her, every muscle tensed as she arched hard against him. Her cry was loud in the silent house, shockingly lustful and full of surprise at the unexpected pleasure. Had she been coherent enough to speak, the word she called out would have been *Yes!*

But he froze, backing away from her quickly, eyes wide with panic. It had been so very long since they'd lain together, and though Kal-El's memories were perfect, he had never heard her sound like that. The sharpness of her cry and the sudden arc of her body seemed like pain to him, not pleasure, and the old fear swarmed up over him then.

Suddenly bereft of his warm weight upon her, craving more, wanting all of it, *now*, Lois gave a pained little whimper, her eyes pleading with him even as she shuddered in the aftermath of that brief, brittle pleasure. He looked utterly terrified, and at first the roaring of her pulse was too loud for her to hear what he was whispering.

"Oh God, I'm sorry, Lois, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you..." Afraid to touch her, afraid to look closely; he could've shattered her pelvis with that one thoughtless act, could've snapped her spine...

Lois was panting with the effort of catching her breath, not yet able to speak, trying to tell him with her gaze what she wanted. *Oh, please, more, finish it, I can't stand this much longer,*

please, her mind seethed, but as his voice penetrated the insatiable lust fogging her mind, she forced herself to calm down. Even though it left her so frustrated she wanted to scream, to knock him back and *make* him give her what she had craved for so long. Enough of this stopping and starting, enough hesitating on the brink of fulfillment... Lois forced all of those whirling thoughts deep down inside, and her voice was only thick with desire when she murmured, "Kal-El, that didn't hurt me... Trust me, that wasn't pain you heard. Don't you remember...?"

"I remember," he whispered. "But you never ... never sounded quite so... You're sure I didn't hurt you?"

She grinned slowly, sexily, hips rising slightly toward him. "Very... sure," Lois breathed, her gaze so smoldering it seemed as if she'd acquired his heat vision and was bathing him in flame.

Still he hesitated, throbbing with need of her, and the fear of harming her let another icy thought into his head: *let me find out about all of this by catching you two in our bed. That would've ruined my life...* Clark winced to remember Richard's voice, the joking tone overlaid on something all too true.

"Lois, we shouldn't," Clark murmured.

"Why not?" she purred.

"Not on Richard's couch," he whispered, flinching slightly.

"This happens to be my couch," Lois said, her tone losing its warmth. "Brought from my apartment. In fact, most of this is *my* furniture. What isn't mine, we bought together."

"It's still his house," he said, and corrected himself before Lois could leap to the defensive. "*Half* his. Not here, Lois, not where you lived with Richard, not with things the two of you bought together around us, not with his picture in a box in the next room. It's not right."

Her eyes slipped closed, her lips tightening against a whimper of pain. She needed him so much, wanted him even more, felt as though she would burst out of her skin in sheer frustration ... but he had a point. "All right," she whispered, her voice tiny and tightly controlled. "I ... I'd better go upstairs. I'm sorry, Kal-El."

"For what?" he asked, reaching to touch her hand.

Lois pulled away; to touch him when she couldn't have him would ruin her self-control, and she might wind up cursing his morality to his face. For a few moments, she wouldn't have cared where they were, she just wanted to feel loved and needed and wanted again. Oh, she might've regretted their choice of location - she and Richard had kissed on this very couch, not three months ago, and kissed passionately before the twins saw them and started making gagging sounds - but Lois would have gone ahead with it anyway. "I'm sorry for starting this again," she said softly, getting up awkwardly with her knees still shaky. "We said we were going to behave, and I didn't. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Kal-El said, watching her sadly. It wounded him to see her hurt and blaming herself. "I was the one who started it, Lois, and I shouldn't have done that. It doesn't matter that I was half-asleep and not thinking about where we were. I still shouldn't have..."

"Hush, Kal-El," Lois said. "I'm going to go upstairs and try to pass out. I'll see you in the morning?"

"Yes," he replied.

She was aware of his eyes on her, following her out of the room. Maybe she was just fooling herself, but it seemed that he watched her all the way upstairs and into the guest bedroom, tracking her through the walls and ceiling as she walked slowly, cupping her face in

her hands. Once she was in the bedroom, however, Lois stopped caring if Kal-El was watching, and simply collapsed face-first onto the bed in utter frustration. *I don't know how much longer I can take this*, she railed in the privacy of her own mind. *It's driving me absolutely freakin' crazy!*

After a few minutes, she curled up on her side, feeling cold and lonely and half-mad with disappointment. Lois stared at the radiator, thinking that it was a long time 'til dawn and wishing she had a book. Or had installed a television in this room. Maybe there was some NyQuil in the upstairs medicine cabinet, but she really didn't want to get up again and go looking for it. Her legs were still trembling from that blazing instant of pleasure...

Barely twenty minutes after she'd gone upstairs, Clark knocked at the door. Lois groaned; did he want to torture her with his nearness? *I swear, if he's come to ask me something inane like whether he can watch late-night movies on pay-per-view, I'll strangle him with my bare hands.* But she got up and opened the door anyway. "What is it?" she asked wearily.

"Neither one of us can sleep here," Clark told her quietly. The shadows under her eyes pained him, and he'd thought long and hard about his next words, but this seemed the best solution. "Let's go to my place."

"We're going all the way up north?" Lois asked plaintively. "Where there are no heaters at the moment?"

"No, we're going downtown," Clark told her with the ghost of a chuckle. "About ten minutes' walk from the *Planet*. C'mon, get dressed. We're going to my apartment."

You calm the storms

And you give me rest

You hold me

In your arms

You won't let me fall

You steal my heart

And you take my breath away

Would you take me in?

Take me deeper now?

How can I stand here with you

And not be moved by you?

Would you tell me

How could it be

Any better than this...

Finally

Lois slipped the long trench coat off her shoulders and hung it on a coat rack located conveniently beside the balcony door. Behind her, Kal-El drew in a swift breath, and she turned to look at him as she slipped her pumps off. "I, um, didn't realize you were just, um, wearing the pajamas," he said hesitantly. To distract himself, he took his own shoes off and set them neatly beneath the coat rack. The floors were warm enough that he took off his socks as well, which left both of them padding barefoot around the apartment.

She lifted an eyebrow as she adjusted her hair, still damp and held up with a single hair stick. "They're warm."

"They're velvet," he replied, thinking of how delightful the fabric had felt under his hands. And how even more amazing it felt against his knuckles as his hands slid beneath it, stroking Lois' warm skin...

Some of that showed on his face, and Lois had the grace to blush a little. "Anyway ... so give me the tour. I've never been in your apartment before. Never been in any personal space of yours - the Fortress doesn't count."

"No, you haven't." His mind was still reeling. This was the first time he'd ever brought a woman home - as often as he'd imagined Lois here, he'd never thought it would happen. Or been prepared for how alluring she would look with her hair down, padding around barefoot and wearing red velvet pajamas. *Only* red velvet pajamas, as he knew... The memory of pulling up the pajama top and bending to kiss her breast still blazed in his mind.

Shaking his head slightly, Kal-El said, "Well, this is the living room. I, um, haven't finished unpacking..."

"In two months?" Lois said, looking around. The furnishings were minimal - no television, even. No radio either, but he could tune into stations at will.

"I do work two jobs, you know," he replied. "Besides, I unpacked the rooms I actually use first."

"Oh? And which are those?" Lois' journalistic curiosity was roused, her eyes flicking over every inch of her surroundings, and Kal-El smiled at her as he led her to the kitchen.

The typical bachelor's kitchenette, it had a microwave, stovetop, refrigerator, and a few cabinets. Very short on space, but Lois immediately looked up to frown at the assortment of pots and pans hanging from a rack mounted in the ceiling. This wasn't the usual random assemblage of cooking utensils; this was a pricey matched set, with only one item out of place - an old cast iron skillet. "You cook?" Lois asked. "I mean, you actually *cook* cook?"

"Well, yes," he replied. "Not fancy stuff like soufflé, but I can cook. I like it, actually. That's one of Ma's skillets - it makes perfect pancakes every single time."

Lois nodded absently. *At least one of us can cook. We won't have to survive on take-out and fancy desserts.* She looked around a little more before heading back out into the hall.

"That door on the right is the bathroom," Kal-El told her, and smiled impishly. "There's nothing in the medicine cabinets, Lois, so you don't have to snoop."

"And what if I want to know what brand of shampoo you use for a future article?" she teased.

"People will ask how you found out. And 'I went spying through his shower' isn't going to satisfy their curiosity. No one believes Superman lives in an apartment in the city."

"No, they're going to wonder what I was doing in your shower," Lois said archly, and walked on smiling.

Kal-El clenched his fists briefly to fight down the sudden images that flooded through his

mind, his fantasy earlier that evening given life. Controlling himself, he followed her down the hall to his study, trying to ignore the way her hips swayed with each step.

It had been awkward for Lois as well in the beginning, acutely aware that she was probably the first woman under the age of sixty to wander around these rooms. The more she saw of his apartment, however, the more comfortable she became. It wasn't that she was unwelcome here, merely that these rooms had never known another's sense of style. For the most part, the apartment was ascetic, but the study was much like Clark's desk at the office. Some sense of order imposed itself on the chaos - papers were neatly stacked, supplies arranged conveniently to hand - yet the space wasn't sterile like some of the more neatness-obsessed *Planet* employees. Lois murmured approvingly as a group of framed pictures caught her eye.

Various shots of the *Daily Planet* team, taken by Jimmy at parties and meetings and, in a few cases, when unsuspecting employees were just walking down the hall. There were Lois and Perry arguing in the bullpen; Clark holding up his first front page headline - with Lois in the background scowling at being scooped; Lois curled up at her infamously messy desk clutching a cup of coffee; Jimmy holding his first front page photo with Lois and Clark beside him; Ron, Lucy, and Lois over in International, oblivious of the camera; Perry bellowing during the Monday Morning Massacre, and Lois rolling her eyes and drumming her fingers on the table. The raven-haired reporter chuckled as she remembered the Chief catching her in the act moments later, stopping everything else to bawl her out in front of the entire city room. She'd just grinned perkily at him...

The next picture was familiar. It sat on the edge of the desk here, and a similar one hung on Lois' own living room wall. "You've got the family portrait?" she asked, leaning in for a closer look.

But this wasn't the exact same photo she had at home. In that one, Lois, Clark, and Jimmy were lined up in the Chief's office after receiving an award for their teamwork. Perry stood with them, holding the award and smiling awkwardly at the camera, his cigar tilted at a rakish angle.

Kal-El's copy of the photo had been taken a few seconds later. Jimmy had been working with a new camera that day, and had accidentally set it to take multiple shots when the timer went off. The first had been the photo that all four of them displayed around the office, and which Lois had at home also. The second time the camera flashed, they'd been startled; Lois had seen negatives showing various looks of surprise and disgruntlement. The third and fourth pictures showed surprise turning to laughter, and here on Clark's desk was the fifth and final shot.

Jimmy was looking at his camera, perplexed. Perry scowled at him. But Lois was laughing, her shoulder tilted back against Clark's arm as she looked up at him with sparkling eyes. Clark was grinning down at her, a hint of possessive joy in his expression, delighted that she leaned against *him*. Lois wondered if he'd looked at that picture and thought of them as a couple, even so many years ago. It certainly looked that way to her now, seeing the photo, seeing how familiarly she leaned against him.

Only then did Lois see the common thread among the pictures Kal-El chose to display. *She* was in every single photo. Lois shot him a sly grin as he stood beside her, looking over the pictures with fond remembrance. Then she eased past him, back into the hallway without a word.

Beginning in the spartan living room, the tour had taken her into more personal living

spaces, with the office bearing the strongest hint so far of its occupant's personality. Only one room was left, and Lois presumed it would be the most intimate of all. She walked through the partially-open door with impunity, finding the light switch easily. Lois flipped the switch, and a lamp cast a warm glow over the room before her.

Kal-El's bedroom. The man himself was not far behind her, but he hesitated on the threshold and watched as she slowly took in the details. Here was warmth and comfort; a thick quilt on the bed, handmade furniture, the muted colors and humble furnishings a sharp contrast to the grandiose décor at the Fortress. The sole luxury was a California king-sized mattress, and his height made it nearly a necessity. This, then, was where the man she loved actually lived - where he was most himself, away from prying eyes.

He could barely breathe. Kal-El had never planned to bring Lois here - well, of course he'd planned to let her stay the night in his bed while he slept on the couch. *Oh really?* his traitor mind chuckled, and he ignored the thought. While Ma had stayed with him, he'd done the same - but when Ma was here, he'd gone through the room first and removed a few things. One of which had just caught Lois' eye...

She had walked around the edge of the bed, seeing the photograph of a teenaged Clark with both parents hanging on the wall, and examined the top of his dresser. But when she turned to look at Kal-El, her gaze happened on the picture on his nightstand. Most of the other snapshots had simple wood frames, but this one was framed in expensive, carefully-wrought silver. And it was of Lois herself.

Lois made her way back to that side of the room and lifted the photo. It was a close-up of the one taken at that damned Christmas party, when she had worn the red dress that garnered so much attention. She'd been leaning back in a chair, very relaxed, slightly tipsy. Jimmy's camera had captured a sleepy, sultry smile on her lips, her eyes shuttered. The way the shot had been cropped, her face dominated the frame, seeming to gaze out at the viewer, and a hint of her cleavage shadowed the bottom of the photo.

He sees this every night before he falls asleep, Lois told herself wonderingly. And my face greets him every morning when he wakes. Oh, my God. I never realized quite how much he loved me - or for how long.

Lois looked up to him, standing so very still in the doorway. His pulse beat swiftly in his throat, and his hands hung stiffly at his sides, balled up into tense fists. But his expression wasn't angry; on the contrary, it was fear and wonder and need rolled into a tumultuous mixture of emotions.

For once she saw herself as he saw her: the archetypal woman, the embodiment of desire. And also a fragile human, one he was terrified to touch lest she shatter. Lois went to him silently, her eyes never leaving his face as she ran her hands up to his neck and kissed him long and searchingly.

Just the press of his lips on hers woke her passion for him, her pulse pounding as it had during those all too brief moments on the couch at the Riverside house. But the tension didn't leave him; his shoulders were still knotted with anxiety under her hands. Sighing softly, Lois started rubbing the taut muscles soothingly.

A slight measure of success emboldened her, and Lois started to unbutton his shirt. Kal-El's breathing hastened as she uncovered bare skin, and he shivered at her light touch. Lois pushed the shirt back, running her palms slowly over the sculpted muscles of his chest, feeling his warmth and the rhythm of his breath.

She burned for him, yearning for him to take her in his arms and lay her down across the

bed, wanting to feel him moving above her as she cried out wantonly. But that wouldn't happen yet, and Lois knew it. He would panic at the thought of possessing her so utterly so soon, terrified of harming her even while he tried to love her. This time it had to be slow and gentle to convince him of what Lois knew to the depths of her soul: he would never hurt her.

Lois stood close to him, feeling the heat of his skin seeping through her pajamas. She stroked her palms over his chest in slow, soothing circles, gradually working downward to the waistband of his pants, then up again. Tracing the ridges of muscle at his abdomen, her right hand encountered slightly roughened skin at his side. The scar left by Luthor's shiv. Her face briefly hardened in anger, but she stroked the mark with her fingertips and composed herself. There would be time for revenge on Luthor later.

So thinking, Lois bent to kiss the other scar on his chest, close to his collarbone. Kal-El almost gasped as her lips touched his skin, and she lightly kissed him again and again until his shivers subsided. He was finally starting to relax, to trust her; it was so much like that first time in the Fortress, all those years ago, except that now he had even more reason to fear. Now he had his powers in full, the strength to crush coal into diamonds. Which was why he wouldn't touch her, Lois realized.

Nudging the shirt completely off him, Lois draped it over a chair and took Kal-El's right hand, bringing it to her lips gently. His amazing blue eyes were fixed on her face, hunger warring with anxiety in his expression. Watching his eyes, letting her own show her trust in him as well as her ever-increasing ardor, Lois kissed the inside of his wrist gently.

She never looked away as she kissed his palm, feeling him sigh with recognition. Lois had done that before, but now she meant to take it further. Still holding his gaze, she brushed her lips across his fingers, kissing the inside of the knuckles and the tip of his index finger. Kal-El's eyes were wide now, thinking of another time she'd used her mouth with such consummate skill to inflame him...

Lois kissed his fingertips again, letting her tongue touch his skin very lightly, and then rubbed her cheek against his palm like a purring cat. "I love you," she murmured in a low voice, still nuzzling his hand and pressing kisses against his palm.

At last she had the satisfaction of feeling Kal-El's free hand slid around her waist, drawing her close with exquisite gentleness. Lois sighed as she leaned against him, kissing the curve of his jaw, her hands tracing the perfect contours of his chest again. He slowly slid his own hands up under her pajama top, fingertips tracing lightly up her spine and making her shiver.

Murmuring wordless encouragement, Lois began to unbutton her crimson velvet top, seeing his gaze drawn inexorably to the shadow of her cleavage. She undid each button slowly, hearing his breath catch as he was reminded that she wore nothing under it. Further down, parting the fabric just slightly with every button, revealing glimpses of pale skin. Kal-El's eyes tracked downward to the valley between her breasts, slightly fuller now. Her belly was softer, more rounded than the flat tautness he remembered. Lois' hips were more flared as well, her body changed by having borne the twins, but no less desirable. His glance halted at the waistband, not daring to go any lower.

As if Kal-El had just realized he was staring hungrily at her, those blue eyes flicked up to hers almost guiltily, now dark with passion. Lois smiled wickedly, a hint of amber in her hazel eyes. She slid the top off her shoulders with exquisite slowness, her gaze never leaving his face as he glanced down and drew in a sharp breath. The tips of her breasts were already rising in the slightly cool air - though it probably had more to do with her insatiable attraction to the man in front of her. The velvet slid over his hands as she tossed the top onto the chair nearby.

Lois took advantage of his distraction to start unbuckling his belt. Kal-El shivered at her touch, his hands sliding down to her hips, and Lois felt the hair on the back of her neck begin to rise. Part of her longed to simply slide her pajama bottoms off and lay back on the bed, offering herself to him utterly. She wanted to be taken... The images that thought brought to mind made her shiver, but Lois bit her lip and concentrated on the present. He needed reassurance now as much as he'd needed it almost seven years ago. Surrendering to him would come later, and it would be sweet indeed...

Her hands trembling with desire, Lois slid the tongue of the belt out of its buckle and began unbuttoning his pants. She'd had to look down to do it, and Kal-El kissed her forehead, running his fingertips lightly up and down her sides. Those soft touches made her shiver again, even worse as he kissed down her cheek to her neck. He knew perfectly well what he was doing, making her eyes roll back with need, and Lois decided to return the favor. She brushed the back of her hand over the front of his pants as she unzipped them, then turned her wrist and slid her palm up the rising bulge there.

Kal-El gasped, his shoulders tensing, and Lois looked up at him from under her dark eyelashes with a crooked smile. She caressed him there for a moment, every slight motion of her hand making his breath catch. Kal-El leaned his forehead against hers, losing himself in sensation. His hands cupped the sides of her breasts, but he dared no more than that.

Lois purred at the touch, tilting her face up to his. The kiss was full of trembling intensity, her hand never moving, his pulse strong enough there for her to feel it even through the cloth. It never failed to amaze her how much she affected him. This man could lift an entire *island*, but her touch made his knees weak. And of the thousands - millions - of women on the planet who would have welcomed him to their beds, he wanted only her. Seven years after the first time they'd been together, with hundreds of younger women seeking his attention right here in Metropolis, Kal-El still wanted her.

And she still wanted him. Lois had had other lovers, but none like him. No one else had turned her into a starry-eyed romantic before the first kiss - with no one else had the intimacy between them been so intense that tears blurred her vision at the end. Kissing him, lips greedy on his, his tongue touching hers, Lois arched her body against him before pulling back slightly.

Sliding her thumbs under the waistband of his pants and his boxers, Lois eased them down off his hips, seeing the muscles of his stomach tense. But he didn't back away, no matter how nervous he still was. She couldn't help the naughty little smile that curved her mouth as she slid the pants further down, seeing him so eager for her. Lois didn't even realize that her tongue had flicked over her suddenly dry lips until she heard Kal-El gasp.

He stepped out of the last of the clothing, and Lois drew back from him slightly, admiring his perfectly sculpted body. Even in the softer light from the bedside lamp, Kal-El was glorious. Her heated glance returned to his eyes, locking gazes for a moment, and then Lois began slowly removing her pajama bottoms. She slid them down an inch at a time, pausing when they were just past her hips, barely covering the part of her he waited to see. Kal-El was staring now, his interest very obvious, his lips parted and his breath coming quickly as he watched her every move.

Lois had hooked her thumbs under her own waistband just as she had his a moment ago, and now she waited an excruciating moment, feeling his desire pulling at her as a compass feels the call of the north. Then she took a deep breath and slid the crimson velvet all the way down, letting it puddle on the floor at her feet.

Naked in his sight at last, she kicked the pajama bottoms off to one side and stepped

toward him. *Now*, absurdly, she was nervous and grateful for the lower light. This wasn't the same trim figure he'd known before. Her legs were just as long, and she'd lost all of the weight she'd gained carrying the twins, but the distribution had changed, leaving her curvier. Lois held her breath, hoping he wouldn't turn away, hoping he still wanted her...

Kal-El was staring, his eyes greedy on her bare skin. His gaze was almost as intense as a touch, and Lois felt his eyes run over every inch. No, no slackening of desire there; his wordless little murmur of need told her more than a thousand sonnets praising her beauty. She took his hands, kissing the backs of his knuckles as she looked up at him, and then gently tugged him toward the bed.

For an instant Kal-El hesitated, then reached up to stroke her cheek. Lois sighed, expected him to say something very sweet and very frustrating... but he simply pulled the hair stick out of the loose knot she'd gathered her hair into, and let her raven waves tumble down around her shoulders. Smiling the slow, sensual smile that had haunted her dreams for years, he ran his fingers through her hair for a moment. But then he brushed against the back of her neck and felt her shiver suddenly.

He stepped away slightly to pull back the quilt, and Lois touched his chest, nudging him down onto the white sheets. No words had passed between them since she'd told him she loved him - no words necessary, nothing spoken aloud could convey their emotions at this moment. Kal-El lay back as Lois knelt on the bed beside him, watching her intently, his gaze never leaving her eyes for more than a moment. Desire darkened the clear blue of his eyes, but he was still tense.

Lois herself was almost as nervous. What she wanted, what she craved, was for him to hold her and prove to her how much he still wanted her. It was he who had left her, not the other way around. Her desire had never been in question; even in that hotel while they were searching for the twins, Lois had been the one to slide into his lap, to take control and push them both almost over the edge. She wanted him to do that to her now...

Stop being a fool, she told herself as she lay beside him, stroking his chest lightly. He was ready, she was more than ready, but she drew the moment out to give him a chance to relax a little again. *Kal-El has always been afraid of hurting me. Now, with his powers, he's even more terrified than he was the first time. The only times he's ever been aggressive were when we both knew it couldn't go very far, or when it started by accident. I have to be the one to lead this dance, just like I was back in the beginning.* Smiling wickedly, she ran her hand down his stomach to stroke him, feeling his sharp intake of breath and the sudden jump in his pulse. Hard as steel, smooth as silk under her touch... *And if I ever needed proof of his desire, I have it here.*

Leaving off the teasing caress, Lois slid her hand back up to his shoulder, balancing herself as she leaned up to kiss him. Kal-El stroked her side lightly, fingertips running from her hip to her shoulder as if he couldn't bear to stop touching her. Her body craved him, every nerve singing with wanton lust, and the heat of his skin under her hands drove her wild.

She rose up, leaning across him, and her nipples grazed his chest. Lois hissed with the sensation, so sharply arousing it nearly hurt. Kal-El's hand tightened on her waist and she heard a low groan of need in the back of his throat. Deliberately, Lois leaned back, and brushed her breasts across his chest again. That time both of them gasped, and he ran his hand down the front of her thigh.

Enough waiting, enough taunting. Lois straddled his waist, her breath quickening, staring down into his eyes. The last trace of nervousness vanished from Kal-El's expression, replaced

by need, by the desire only she had ever seen. Holding that hungry look with her own, Lois eased down onto him, moaning softly as he entered her. The intensity of that moment was such that she expected it to short-circuit her entire system, the sensations electrifying.

For several heartbeats, they remained perfectly still, his hands clenched in the sheets while Lois fought to control her sudden shivering, the quickness of her breath. After all this time, after all the flirting and teasing they'd been doing, having him inside her again was almost enough to send Lois over the edge. That moment on the sofa bed earlier that evening, pinned under Kal-El with his weight coming down on her just so, had only left her wanting more. Lois couldn't resist rocking her hips against him, shuddering at the feeling of him arching up off the bed to meet her. They had always fit together so perfectly...

Kal-El's breathing had grown rough, and Lois forced herself to slow down. *Not so fast*, she told herself. This was a moment to savor, and Lois kept the pace leisurely as she began to move again. She watched his eyes, smiling knowingly at the sapphire-dark blue of them, the wildness that came into their depths with desire.

After the first shock of pleasure, sensation so intense it blotted out all thought, Kal-El managed to win back some control of his breathing and his mind. He let himself get lost in Lois' rhythm, familiar to him after all these years. The past was as close as a thought, their last time together as clear in his memory as if it had been an hour ago, not more than six years. He could hear her heart beating in time with his own, and let their joined pulse keep him grounded. It would be so easy to lose himself in the incredible feeling of being inside Lois' warmth as she moved slowly and seductively. Each time she rose up slightly and then slid down onto him again, fresh ecstasy raced along his nerves. After wanting this so much - and fearing it too, fearing the loss of his control - to actually have her atop him, to hear her little gasps and whimpers of pleasure, to see her eyes fixed on his own with hungry intensity, was nearly overwhelming.

And yet, it wasn't overwhelming - he hadn't lost his mind with passion, he hadn't hurt her. Gradually Kal-El realized what Lois seemed to have always known; even when his lust for her was at its strongest, his love was more powerful. Even sheathed inside her, he could be tender. There was nothing to fear...

Kal-El slid his hands up to Lois' hips, thrusting up to meet her. She cried out in astonishment, tossing her head back and closing her eyes against the unexpected pleasure. It was almost enough to send her over the edge right then, answering her craving. He wanted her so much; he was guiding her now, quickening the pace, deeper inside her. Lois bucked her hips against him harder, making her hair fall forward into her face as she looked down at him again. Those hazel eyes met his, full of lust and challenge, and she tightened around him as he thrust into her again.

His hands slid up her back, the palms unbelievably warm against her bare skin, and before Lois had a chance to wonder what he was doing, Kal-El had rolled her under him. One wanton cry, as much surprise as lust, broke from Lois' throat as he held her pinned there, both of them trembling. If she had been able to speak, she would've begged him for more, but her mind was too far gone in pleasure to be that coherent. The look in her eyes would have to be enough ... and it was.

Bracing his arms on either side of her to keep most of his weight off her delicate frame, Kal-El eased almost all the way out. Lois whimpered, her nails catching his shoulders, her eyes pleading. And then he thrust all the way in, whispering huskily into her ear, "Lois..." Her own name, spoken with such need and passion, accompanied by such a deeply satisfying sensation,

made her teeth clench on a scream of pleasure. Lois' world went white-hot, her back arching completely off the bed as she flung her head back, her legs locked around his waist.

It was only the beginning. At first he moved slowly over her, the trembling aftershocks of her first ecstasy only intensified by the exquisitely drawn-out sensations. Lois found herself whimpering helplessly in need, writhing under him while he kissed her neck, her shoulder, her breast... His mouth on the stiffened peak made her shudder, the intensity of passion greater than she'd ever known.

And still less than it was to be. Growing surer of himself, driven by his own desire, Kal-El quickened his rhythm. No words existed for this, how it felt to be within her, to hear her moan softly with each thrust, to know that she wanted him, only him... No hesitation now, no fear, only their love for each other given and received. They had denied themselves this for far too long, but it would be balked no longer.

So close; after so long without her, the pleasure of having her was almost too much to bear. Kal-El kissed Lois' throat once, feeling her legs tighten around his waist, knowing by the pleading note in her voice that she was close, too. One more moment, and still one more, each more impossibly perfect than the last, both of them approaching the pinnacle together...

Electric sensations seemed to leap through his veins, every muscle tensing. Kal-El slid one arm under her then, supporting Lois' body as he lifted her up to his final thrust, his life spilling into her. Hazel eyes shot open, looking right into his as she gasped in surprise. To be held like that, suddenly almost weightless, seemed an echo of all of their flights. It felt like her body existed only where he touched her, his arm under her back, her legs around his waist, sensation intensifying until it was too much to bear. Lois' nails raked his shoulders as pleasure stormed through her, crying out almost as if in pain.

Suddenly weak, they both tumbled to the bed, panting with exertion. Kal-El managed to brace his weight off her slightly, not wanting to smother her, and Lois wrapped her arms around him with an exhausted little whimper. For a very long time they simply lay like that, both of them still shaking in the aftermath of such intense lovemaking. He had collapsed atop her, his head resting against her chest, and Lois held him tight, protective in his moment of vulnerability. She nuzzled her face into his hair, her eyes closed, savoring the feel of being surrounded by him.

At last Kal-El caught his breath and kissed Lois' throat. "I love you, Lois," he whispered.

She kissed his forehead and purred in reply, "I love you, Kal-El. Always and forever."

"Always and forever," he answered, levering himself up enough to kiss her lips. She whimpered in protest when he moved, but Kal-El only chuckled and lay across her, keeping most of his weight on his elbows while he looked up at her face.

Lois raked a hand through his hair, tousling it, and stretched slightly beneath him, her legs still twined around him. "And what are you staring at?" she murmured affectionately.

"The closest I've been to heaven," he answered, and kissed her again.

"Flatterer," Lois whispered against his lips.

Kal-El merely rolled onto his side, bringing her with him so they lay face to face in a tangle of sheets and limbs, the lamplight gleaming on their skin and shadowing the hollows between them. "I'll never leave you again," he told her quietly.

"I'll hold you to that, Kal-El," Lois replied, very serious, a trace of warning in her tone.

His only answer was to kiss her again, lips tracing her beloved features, until exhaustion crept up on them both. That night, for the first time since the confrontation with Luthor, Kal-El slept deep and dreamless, safe in Lois' arms.

*I am colorblind
Coffee black and egg white
Pull me out from inside
I am ready
I am...
Taffy-stuck and tongue-tied
Stutter-shook and uptight
Pull me out from inside
I am ready
I am fine...
I am covered in skin
No one gets to come in
Pull me out from inside
I am folded
And unfolded
And unfolding...
I am colorblind
Coffee black and egg white
Pull me out from inside
I am ready
I am ready
I am ready...
I am fine...
~Counting Crows, *Colorblind**

Return Again to You

*Yes I know it's going to happen
I can feel you getting near
And soon we'll be returning
To the fountain of our youth
And if you wake up wondering
In the darkness I'll be there
My arms will close around you
And protect you with the truth*

*I know you're out there somewhere
Somewhere, somewhere
I know you're out there somewhere
Somewhere you can hear my voice
I know I'll find you somehow
Somehow, somehow
I know I'll find you somehow
And somehow I'll return again to you*

~Moody Blues, I Know You're Out There Somewhere

He woke up slowly, perfectly content to lie in bed. For some reason he was more tired than usual, and he would've liked to simply fall back into slumber. The bed was warm, his eyelids were heavy, and Clark awakened with the feeling that all was right and well with the world... But duty called to him, and he couldn't turn his back on it. No matter how reluctant he was to get out of bed, he had always begun each day with a quick flight around the globe.

Clark opened his eyes with a sigh, expecting to see the silver-framed photograph of Lois that had greeted him every morning since he returned to the planet. His gaze met something unexpected: the other side of the bed. That was odd; no matter what position he fell asleep in, he normally woke up facing the nightstand. Lois' smile drew him even in sleep, and every morning he awoke to see her picture watching over him. Clark blinked and sat up slightly, realizing he was also nude, another departure from normality. The covers were bunched up on the other side of the bed in a strange way...

...and between the top of the quilt and the pillow, a lock of Lois' raven hair was just barely visible. The memory of the last night suddenly returned, and Clark's eyes widened. *Now* he was awake.

All of that was real, he thought, gently nudging the quilt down so he could see Lois' face. Her hair was a tumbled mass of black waves, some of it falling forward to obscure her features, and he chuckled as he stroked the errant curls back behind her ear.

The touch seemed to wake Lois slightly, and she whimpered softly, burrowing back under the covers. Clark chuckled again, feeling his heart swell, leaning to kiss the top of her head. For some time he simply lay there using his x-ray vision to watch her, taking in the grumpy expression that faded again to sleepy content. Lois slept on her stomach, curled up slightly, the pillow dragged down under her cheek and the covers pulled up over her head. She looked so fragile like that, huddling against the blankets to protect herself, her pale skin bared to his sight as if he'd pulled the blankets from her nude body...

The curve of her hip tantalized him, and Clark blinked, cutting off the x-ray vision. It felt like an invasion of privacy in spite of last night, when he'd feasted his eyes on her. And that

ended the moment; much as he would've liked to spend the day simply watching Lois, duty beckoned.

With another kiss to her forehead, Clark got up and headed for the shower.

If this was a painting, it would be called 'Afternoon in Milan', Lana thought, standing on the balcony of her hotel room. The street below her was full of movement, cars and pedestrians and bicycles weaving through the throng. It was colorful, lively, full of new and exciting sights, a city one could fall in love with.

Much to her own surprise, Lana wasn't enjoying her stay. She felt lonely in spite of rarely being alone, and several times a day she caught herself thinking, *I wish Richard could see that or Richard would love this restaurant*. It seemed that not even having an ocean between them could stop her from thinking of him.

Calling him every day didn't exactly help keep him off her mind, Lana had to admit. She'd called him from Smallville, from the airport, and at least once a day from Milan, although she had never actually told him she was in Italy. That made her feel oddly guilty, but at the same time she was reluctant to say anything now.

"How awkward is that?" the redhead murmured to herself. "It's not like I can casually slip it into conversation. 'Hi Richard, how's work, by the way, I'm in Europe.' Yeah, right."

"Talking to yourself is the first sign of insanity," Kay's voice called to her from inside the room. Lana smiled slightly as her assistant came out onto the balcony with a mug of tea and the day planner.

"Thanks, Kay. Sometimes it's the only way to hear a familiar accent," Lana replied with a slight smile as she took the mug and sipped it.

"You don't have that much of an accent," Kay told her. "So, do you want to review the expenses for the week?"

"I trust you," Lana said. "Just *please* tell me we got that indigo silk."

"Finally, yes," Kay said. "And at a substantial discount for all our trouble. What did you do to that supplier?"

"Thanked him for doing everything he could to rectify the mistake," Lana replied. "Anything else interesting?"

"Not much," the younger woman replied, flipping through the receipts tucked into the planner. "Oh, the gentleman who owns this place would like to know if you're free for a late dinner...?"

Kay was looking at her speculatively, and Lana just sighed. "Not this evening, Kay. I've got to make a call at ten."

The younger woman's eyebrows went up. "Hmm. That's what, four o'clock Metropolis time? Mind if I ask who you're calling?"

"Yes," Lana said. "I do mind. Tell the owner we would *all* be glad to have lunch tomorrow, though."

Kay sighed and wrote a note in the planner.

Back from his rounds - an enterprising gang of burglars would no longer be hitting middle-class homes while the occupants were at work or school, and an oil spill in the Pacific had been contained before it could wreak havoc on the environment - Clark changed into regular clothes and stopped by the coffee shop Lois frequented. He got her usual drink and added a bagel with hazelnut cream cheese, then headed back to his apartment.

Lois had moved to his side of the bed and retreated even further under the covers. He grinned and set the coffee and bagel down on the nightstand next to her photo, lying down beside her. Now, how was he supposed to wake her up? Lois had a reputation for being particularly surly first thing in the morning...

The smell of the coffee filled the room, and he heard Lois breathe deeply, then sniffed a couple of times. After a long moment, her hand appeared at the edge of the quilt, reaching out to the nightstand and feeling around blindly. She encountered the cup, gripped it, and started pulling it back under the covers with her as she sat up on one elbow, all without opening her eyes.

Clark laughed as he got under the covers and snuggled up to her back, listening to her irritable whining when he touched her followed by the faint sound of coffee being sipped. "You're so funny," he murmured, rubbing her back gently.

"Lea' me 'lone," Lois snarled in a still-sleepy tone, revealing exactly where the twins got their tendency to lie abed. She hunched down even further over the coffee, covers over her like a shield, muttering savagely, "Don' touch m' coffee."

"Lois, I brought the coffee for *you*," Clark said gently, kissing her shoulder and snickering in spite of himself when she growled. At least she was *coherent*... "There's also a bagel. With hazelnut spread..."

"Bagel? Hazelnut?" Lois perked up a bit, reaching out from under the covers and retrieving the bagel. Her speech still wasn't the speech of the awake, but she was getting there, it seemed. She still had her back to Clark, and now the slurping of coffee was accompanied by munching.

"You know, you're getting crumbs all over my side of the bed," he said conversationally.

"Shuddup," Lois retorted around a mouthful of bagel, nonetheless sounding a little more awake and articulate.

Clark decided to try and untangle her hair - it was rumped into a bird's nest of snarls as ferocious as its owner's. His fingers running through her hair and the caffeine percolating through her system began to thaw her early-morning grumpiness, and Clark felt a little safer slipping one arm around her waist. At least, now she seemed less likely to try and bite his hand off for approaching her coffee.

Lois chased the last bite of bagel with the last swallow of coffee, purring with contentment as she relaxed back into Clark's embrace. "Got more than crumbs on your bed last night," she said after a moment, not even attempting to hide her wicked and self-satisfied grin. *A lot more than crumbs. Oh my God.*

He laughed, that low, rich, knowing laugh that sent shivers down her spine, and kissed her bare shoulder again. Lois cuddled back against him, wiggling her hips up against him with a sigh.

"We'll have to change the sheets sometime today," Clark mused, stroking her belly in slow circles. It was a wonder just to have her here, lying naked in bed with him and absolutely open to his touch.

"Before work..." Lois began, and trailed off, realizing that neither of them was expected in the office today. As a matter of fact, there was nothing she absolutely *had* to do at all today. Just that was a revelation; that and the fact that she was perfectly content with that. She could just sleep and hang around the apartment with Kal-El...

"No work, beautiful," he told her, nuzzling the back of her neck. "I guess that explains why you woke up so grouchy this morning, thinking we had to go to work." He kissed her

gently, up by her hairline, and added, "You weren't this grumpy that morning in the Fortress."

"That's because you didn't get up and leave the bed cold," Lois muttered in a fond tone, stretching luxuriously under his caresses.

"Ah, so you were awake this morning," he replied with a smile, trailing kisses across the back of her neck and down her shoulder.

"No, I only woke up 'cause I felt my solar heater leave." Lois shivered a little, remembering how she'd rolled over onto his side and buried her face in his pillow because it still held a trace of his warmth and his scent. That in itself had been a luxury. After being allowed so little time together before, after having been separated for years, just having him with her now was like a dream. Amazing how much just being in his arms meant... An instantaneous longing suffused her then, something she could now indulge in that had been denied for so long. Her voice was low when she added half-distractedly, "You were up and out there ... how cold is it?"

"Pretty chilly," Kal-El replied, and mouthed the back of neck lightly. He smiled as he felt her body tense and heard her give a soft, lazy moan.

"Better stay in here where it's warm then, hmm?" Lois murmured, rolling over at last to sit up from the blankets, baring openly what he had stolen glimpses of via his powers, looking down at him with sultry eyes.

Before Kal-El could begin to make a reply in the same taunting tone, Lois leaned down and caught his lips for a hungry kiss. The next thing he knew, she was nudging him over onto his back, unbuttoning his shirt and pressing her warm lips to his skin.

"I've got to remember to bring you coffee and bagels in bed every morning," he whispered. The surprise, the wonder at her sudden actions was clear in his face, although there was no denying the way his eyes were already darkening and the need she saw in them.

Lois looked up at him with a utterly sinful grin and murmured, "This is just for coming back home to me. Although the coffee doesn't hurt, either," before starting on his belt.

The next time Lois woke, the sun was slanting into her eyes. *Noon already? It was only supposed to be a catnap. Geez.* Fighting off a yawn, she flicked a lock of black hair out of her face and tried to get her head together. *All I've done so far today is sleep.* A slow smile curved her lips, sighing with real languid pleasure. *Well, a little more than that. But I haven't even gotten out of bed yet...*

She stretched with a soft groan. Kal-El wasn't in bed with her, and calling his name revealed that he wasn't anywhere else in the apartment. He had left for some reason; that fact sent a tiny little thread of unease through her mind. He hadn't said anything about going back out... "Don't be a idiot, Lane," Lois scolded herself aloud, but the worry remained. If he was going to have regrets, now would be the time. And she deeply doubted that she could handle him backing off.

Shaking her head to clear it of those thoughts, Lois got out of bed and started looking for her pajamas. They were nowhere to be found, but one of Clark's button-down shirts fell nearly to knees, so she wore that as she went exploring.

Last night's tour had been brief and supervised. Now she was alone, and the instincts of a reporter came to the forefront. After turning the heater up just a notch, Lois looked through Clark's dresser, flipping through an album of family photos she found in the top drawer. She didn't need the labels in Martha's careful script to tell her that little black-haired boy in so many shots was Clark. She knew it, by the shape of his face so like Jason's, the sweep of his

hair across his forehead exactly like Kala's. A dozen expressions, from pouting disappointment to a moment of pure delight, mirrored her children's faces, and Lois caught her breath anew with each revelation. Kala's laugh, Jason's serious frown, and that intently curious expression both of them wore so often, all here in photographs more than thirty years old.

Captivated, Lois flipped the pages to look ahead. Would Jason have that same abstracted look Clark wore so often in his high school years, reading a book or gazing off at the horizon thoughtfully? Would Kala display the same ferociously happy grin Clark did when he'd had his picture taken with his driver's license and the keys to the old family truck in his hand?

Only the insistent rumbling of her stomach pulled Lois out of those fascinating thoughts. Feeling a little guilty for snooping - only a little, since he was a reporter too and had probably done the same - she put the album back and headed for the kitchen.

Now her worries were back. She hadn't seen or heard from Clark since she woke up. Sure, he might be simply tending to his duties, but somewhere in the back of her brain doubt whispered to her. Was he feeling guilty for what they had done? Had he remembered all those reasons he'd given her years ago, all the very rational justifications for why they simply couldn't be together? It seemed so right when they were in each other's arms, whispered declarations of undying love as their bodies entwined, but now in the cold light of day, the empty apartment mocked her with his absence as she moved quietly down the hall.

In the kitchen, though, her fears proved groundless. He'd left her a note on the refrigerator door, its tone making her worries dry up and blow away.

Lois,

Don't eat the cheesecake sampler; it's for dessert, and you'll spoil the lunch I'm bringing back.

When you're done eating the cheesecake (I know you), please pull the sheets off the bed and toss them in the washer. Fresh linens are in the bottom drawer of my dresser, if you feel inclined. Otherwise I'll take care of it when I get back.

I'll be home soon. Feel free to borrow something of mine until we can run by the house and get you some clothes. If you want to do some more research for your next article, you can borrow my shampoo and soap, too. I don't mind the world knowing that Superman uses organic shampoo - or that it'll probably work great on your hair, too.

Love you,

Me

P.S. At least don't eat more than one slice. And when you do, don't eat both the raspberry ones, please? I like those.

Lois grinned to read it, amazed and delighted to discover he had no intention of dropping her off at the house yet. "Hot damn," she muttered, blushing a little and feeling foolish for doubting him.

Not to mention, it was still sometimes a shock to see how very normal Kal-El could be. Here was a man from another star, with all of his fantastic powers, leaving her little notes on the fridge about not ruining her appetite. Once again, she realized she had the best of both worlds, and shivered in sheer delight.

After a few moments of feeling like a silly fangirl, she headed back to the bedroom to pull the sheets, eating a piece of raspberry cheesecake on her way.

Elinore Lane had faced many trials in her life; as the wife of an Army general, she had learned how to cope with all sorts of opposition. But the stony silence of her grandchildren

unnerved her. Kala, normally so voluble, was subdued and almost meek, constantly looking at her twin, a shadow of her normal bossy, bubbly self. Jason was stubbornly angry, but refused to talk about what was obviously eating at him.

This afternoon, finally, they seemed a bit more talkative. Their day at school had been fun; Jason's finger-painting of Gazeera hung on Ella's fridge door. Kala had painted a very passable horse, and Ella congratulated her on it only to be corrected.

"S not a horse," Kala said self-importantly. "He's a mule, an' his name is Bob, and he likes carrots but only if they're cut up first."

Ella's eyebrows went up at that remark. It seemed entirely too specific to be made up, especially since the twins had never seen a mule before. "Really? And how do you know Bob the mule?"

"Mister Ben has mules, and he let Mommy and Daddy borrow them so we could all go horseback ridin'," Jason informed her, walking up to them. Ella was surprised that he would enter the conversation, given his stubborn refusal to really talk about anything for the past few days. He was just as cuddly and affectionate as ever, perhaps more so, but he had been unusually quiet. She had suspected it was all of these mixed-up feelings about his parents breaking up. His upset with his mother, who he'd always been so close with. But now...

Daddy? Ella thought. Richard hadn't gone with them... "Really? That sounds like lots of fun."

"Yeah," Jason sighed, and Kala echoed him.

"Where did you go horseback riding?" Ella asked, still admiring the drawing even though she was listening keenly for the answer.

The twins glanced at each other, conferring silently, and then Kala replied, "At Grandma's house."

"Oh?" Ella said, trying to sound nonchalant. They weren't talking about Richard's mother, either - Sylvia hadn't spent enough time around the twins to be considered their grandmother. "And where does Grandma live?"

"Kansas," Jason said. It seemed that once his silence was broken, he couldn't quite stop talking. "It's named after some Indians who lived there a long time ago. Grandma has chickens an' a goat an' a pond with a biiiiiig froggy in it, but Mommy said I couldn't keep the froggy."

"It was all yucky and muddy," Kala complained. "Jason woke it up - Grandma said the froggy was hibernatin'."

"Grandma sounds like a very nice lady," Ella said, striving to keep the frost out of her voice. She had been the twins' only grandparent for so long that hearing about this woman automatically made her suspicious. "Who is she?"

"Daddy Clark's mommy," Jason replied.

Ella's eyes widened in surprise. *Daddy Clark?* As in *Clark Kent*? They had to be joking...

Jason saw her expression, and muttered, "Uh-oh."

Kala was just staring at him in horrified disbelief, her hand over her mouth. She moved it just enough to whisper, "I don't think we were supposed to tell!"

After that, no matter what Ella asked them, the twins refused point-blank to discuss their trip. Or Clark.

Clark was perfectly happy to stand in line, entirely too content for the crowded state of the sub shop. He was actually humming, smiling at anyone who looked his way, aware that Lois was awake at last.

The woman in front of him looked up, seeing a very tall man humming absently to himself with an expression of pure bliss on his handsome features in spite of the fact that he was still three people away from being able to place his order, and thought, *I wish they'd keep these psychos locked up instead of medicatin' 'em and turning 'em loose. Nobody's that cheerful without drugs.*

Clark's cell phone rang, disturbing his pleasant contemplation of Lois, and he fumbled it from his pocket. "Clark Kent," he said into the receiver.

"Hi, Clark," Jimmy replied. "Boy, I'm glad to hear your voice! How've you been? Everyone around the office was starting to worry about you."

Guilt washed over Clark. He'd been so absorbed in Lois that he had forgotten about his coworkers. The last they'd heard, he had been trapped by the earthquake and given personal leave to deal with the effects of that traumatic experience. *True, I did come very close to dying, but except for the nightmares I've been pretty normal this last week. And then last night I didn't even have that dream about the island. Maybe I'm recovering - or maybe Lois is my own personal dreamcatcher.*

"Well, um," he said, and decided to tell part of the truth. "I'm ... I'm pretty much okay. I went back home for a while, Jimmy. No earthquakes in Kansas, you know."

"Yeah," the younger man chuckled. "Glad to hear you're feeling better, anyway. Are you going to come back to work soon? Things are kinda dull around here with you and Ms. Lane both on leave."

"Uh, sure," Clark said. "I think Richard told me to be back tomorrow, actually. I'll have to check. I'm back in town, but I have some things to take care of..."

"Hey, as long as we know you're okay, right?" Jimmy sounded almost pathetically glad to hear from him. "Ron's been worried sick, and I know the Chief is worried about you too because he keeps griping at everyone else..."

It was Clark's turn to order, and he said, "Excuse me a sec, Jimmy, I'm picking up lunch." Clark smiled at the cashier, holding the phone away from his ear as he glanced at the menu. "Let's see ... I'll have the large meatball sub, extra parmesan, provolone cheese, nothing else on it ... and I also need a large turkey sub with Swiss, extra mushrooms, and black olives. Oh, and I'll take two cookies - oatmeal raisin and a macadamia nut white chocolate." He heard a faint sound from the phone as he finished the transaction and paid, easing aside to wait while his sandwiches were made. "Still there, Jimmy?"

"Sure," the photographer said, sounding slightly strained. But then he seemed to recover. "Listen, Clark, I gotta run - Mr. White just walked by. But I'll hear from you soon, right?"

"Yeah," Clark said, then thought about it. "I, uh, I might be busy, but I'll try to call you, Jimmy."

"Okay - see you when you get back to work!"

Clark hung up, thinking that he'd missed something. Jimmy seemed terribly excited all of a sudden, for no reason Clark could think of...

"Ron! Psst! Ron!" The International reporter looked from his work to see Jimmy Olsen standing at the door, looking so keyed up he was practically bouncing in place.

Ron glanced over at Richard's desk; the editor was engrossed in a phone call, facing away from the office. He probably wouldn't notice... The tall, dark-skinned man got up and headed out into the bullpen. "What's up?" he asked Jimmy quietly.

"Big news," the younger man hissed, looking to see if the Chief was watching before he

headed outside. "Not here, though."

"Jimmy, I don't want to get yelled at today," Ron protested.

The redhead grinned back at him. "I know where your sister-in-law is," he replied, and dashed off. With an exit line like that, Ron had to follow.

Only when the two men were huddled in a disused maintenance corridor would Jimmy finally relax a bit. "Dish," Ron said. "Last I heard she was at home. The kids are at Ella's for some reason, and she's back from that trip she took."

"She might be staying there, but right now she's going to lunch," Jimmy said confidently. "Or actually, lunch is being brought to her. She's got a date ... with *Clark!*"

"No way," Ron said, eyes wide. He'd heard from Lucy that Lois and Richard had broken up, but she was dating already? That didn't sound like the Lois he knew ... especially since the breakup was supposed to be hush-hush (which of course meant half the office was already whispering about it). "What the heck, Jimmy? Where are you getting this crazy story?"

"From Clark," Jimmy said succinctly, rocked back on his heels with a smug expression.

"Clark told you he was taking Lois on a date?" Ron questioned. "That doesn't sound like him..."

"Well, he didn't *know* he was telling me," Jimmy said. "But I called him when he was getting lunch, and he bought *two* subs."

"So the man was hungry," Ron said in exasperation. "Or maybe someone else is with him - his mom was in town for a while, wasn't she? Damn, Jimmy, that's a pretty big leap from two subs to a date with Lois..."

"One of those two subs was turkey with Swiss and extra mushrooms," Jimmy said triumphantly. "And *black olives*. Plus a macadamia nut cookie."

"Holy crap," Ron said. All the men in Lois' life had at some point or another brought her lunch, and that was her order all right. And they both knew from having had lunch with Clark that *he* never ate black olives. He even fastidiously picked them off of pizza.

Jimmy savored the poleaxed expression on Ron's face. "Isn't it great?"

"Hell yeah," Ron replied, giving him a high five. And then he remembered where they were and who was in the International Editor's office right now. "I mean, I like Richard a lot, he's great to work for, but..."

"Clark was here first," Jimmy replied staunchly. "He was crazy in love with her before Richard ever met her. Besides, it's just a date. He deserves a chance with her."

"Yeah, he does," Ron mused. "You know, Richard's been on the phone a *lot*. And they don't all sound like business calls..."

Clark followed Lois into the Riverside house, grinning at the sight of her in pajama bottoms, one of his shirts, and her long coat. She'd been wearing just the shirt up until the moment they decided to go out for dinner, and he could get very used to seeing her wander around his apartment like that. The view of her legs was amazing...

"Holy crap," Lois said in tones of complete amazement, coming to a halt in the living room, her eyebrows high.

"What's wrong?" Clark asked as he hurried to her side.

"Nothing, just..." *I can't believe he did all of this. Unasked, even.* She looked around, then back at him. Her expression was full of amusement and disbelief. "When did you get a chance to come over and work on the packing?"

"While you were asleep," he replied, almost apologetic. "I only boxed up the stuff you

said you wanted to pack..."

"No, it's fine," Lois said as she surveyed the mountains of boxes. *All of this without a peep as to what he was doing and without a word from me. This man is too good to be true. Just like I always thought.* Shaking her head at him in affectionate disbelief, she could only smile. "I just didn't expect you to, that's all. You were out doing rescues and getting my lunch. Where the heck do you find the time?"

Clark shrugged, looking almost embarrassed. "I don't have to sleep - not much, anyway. And *you've* been sleeping a lot more than usual."

That devilish smile of hers made itself apparent at those words. She chuckled and leaned up to kiss his cheek, murmuring into his ear, "Yeah, I know - I just I'm just getting a lot more exercise than I'm used to, you know? Not that I mind the workout..."

He caught her around the waist and kissed her. "I'm glad you don't mind," Clark told her. "Because I quite enjoy it - and I was under the impression you did, too."

"Oh, I enjoy it," Lois purred with a smirk, eyes alight. "I've enjoyed it seven times in the last twenty-four hours."

"Who else has been in the apartment, then?" Clark asked, only partly teasing. "It's only been three times..."

Oh, you really do have so much to learn on that topic, Kal-El. Not that I'd dream of complaining in the slightest. "Three for you," Lois said, her grin widening. "I was up to three before you had the first. And I'm counting last night on the couch as one."

That made him blush, and Lois laughed, kissing him again. God, she loved to make him turn red. "Try not to get *too* embarrassed while I go grab some clothes, okay, handsome? I love you."

"I love you too," he told her, kissing the bridge of her nose.

Clark waited in the living room while Lois hurried upstairs. They were planning something fairly casual, whatever looked good and wasn't too terribly crowded. While she rummaged around in the upstairs closet, he nonchalantly walked over to the stereo system.

Making sure that Lois was thoroughly occupied and not about to come downstairs, Clark slipped a CD case out of his jacket pocket. Time to reveal the whole reason for his going out this afternoon, other than that landslide in Malaysia, and maybe slay one more of Lois' hidden dragons. He'd seen Lois set up the stereo system yesterday and the day before, playing a selection of her favorite CDs to accompany the often dull work of packing boxes. He queued up the last track and paused it, listening carefully to Lois as she moved around the bedroom upstairs. And waiting.

Several minutes later, as Lois headed for the stairs, she heard a few bars of instrumental music playing in the living room. She frowned, wondering if Clark had accidentally switched on the radio; she hadn't taken long enough for him to get bored... The raven-haired reporter hurried down the first few stairs, then came to an abrupt halt as the music began in earnest.

"I know you're out there somewhere, somewhere, somewhere," a man's voice sang. She knew that voice, but couldn't place it immediately. The song continued, *"I know I'll find you somehow, somehow, somehow. And somehow I'll return again to you..."*

The Moody Blues. Lois stood listening with a puzzled and intent expression; she had never heard this song before, but she recognized the band that had sung the twins' lullaby. Slowly, she came downstairs, a look of surprise and wonder on her face. What on earth was Clark up to?

"And the strength of the emotion is like thunder in the air. 'Cos the promise that we

made each other haunts me to the end..."

He was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs, smiling a bit nervously as he waited to see her reaction. Lois walked down to him, a question in her eyes, and he took the clothes from her and hung them over the banister as he answered, "It's the sister song to *Wildest Dreams*, Lois. The twin, you might say. And I think it applies."

With that, she let him draw her in and Clark held her for a moment before leading her out into the living room. He had moved the sofa and chairs back to clear a space in the middle of the floor, and Lois went into his arms easily, still listening. Neither spoke as the song started to unweave Kal-El's own version of their tale, the two of them swaying gently to the music. The lyrics seemed to soothe parts of Lois' heart that she hadn't realized were still bruised.

"From the words that I remember, from my childhood still are true. That there's none so blind as those who will not see. And to those who lack the courage and say it's dangerous to try. Well they just don't know that love eternal will not be denied..."

Lois just held him tighter, starting to laugh even with tears in her eyes. Forever now. No intentions of taking it back. Ever. He was hers. Always had been. Even when he hadn't been by her side. Her lover's arms - Clark Kent's, Superman's, *Kal-El's* - tightened around her, his lips pressing against her hair.

"Yes I know it's going to happen. I can feel you getting near. And soon we'll be returning to the fountain of our youth. And if you wake up wondering, in the darkness I'll be there. My arms will close around you and protect you with the truth."

Her shining hazel eyes raising to meet his, her expression made it was clear that Lois understood the message he had been trying to give her. She had never been off his mind, had never ceased to exist to him in his absence. As much as she had missed him and longed for him, he had never stopped loving her; she had always been in his heart during his long absence.

Kal-El smiled down at her, no words necessary. He tightened his arms around Lois' waist, lifting her off the ground slightly as he spun them gently to the music. He closed his eyes with a sigh, nuzzling his face into hers. There was still much to be done - the twins were never far from his mind, and the office would want an explanation, too - but these few days had seemed to be outside of time, a chance for him and Lois to reconnect. They would deal with the real world and its complications later; for now it was just the two of them, and the only thing that mattered was finding their way back to each other after all of the misunderstandings and mistakes. One perfect moment like this...

Opening his eyes again, he saw that Lois had closed hers as well, leaning against him trustingly. And then, as he leaned back from her slightly and those hazel eyes came open to gaze back at him, Kal-El realized that the pair of them were revolving slowly in the air, floating as if the song had lifted them up. Lois realized it at the same moment, and she gave a little gasp of surprise before both of them laughed softly in shared delight.

I know you're out there somewhere

Somewhere, somewhere

I know you're out there somewhere

Somewhere you can hear my voice

I know I'll find you somehow

Somehow, somehow

I know I'll find you somehow

And somehow I'll return again to you...

Richard's phone rang at four o'clock sharp, as it had for the past two days. Today, however, he was out of the office. He'd left the door open, though, and Ron could hear the ringing from his desk.

The reporter hesitated for only a moment before picking up his own desk phone and punching in Richard's extension. This *was* a business line, there could be no harm in taking Richard's call for him... "Richard White's office, this is Ron Troupe speaking," he said in his most professional voice.

"Oh," a startled female voice replied. "I'm sorry... Is Rich - I mean, is Mr. White in?"

"I apologize, ma'am, he's out of the office at the moment," Ron replied smoothly, starting to smile. He knew that voice, even though he'd only heard it twice. "May I take a message?"

"Sure, um, tell him..." She trailed off again, then chuckled. "It's not important, I'll just, um, I'll call back later. Thank you very much, Mr. Troupe."

"You're welcome," Ron said, replacing the phone in its cradle. Only after he was sure the caller couldn't hear him did he add softly, "Ms. Lang."

Grinning, Ron picked up the phone again and dialed an extension in the City room. "Meet me in the break room, Jimmy," he said when the photographer picked up. "I found out who's been calling Richard."

The twins' bedroom at Nana's house had east-facing windows, so the first light of dawn trickled in to wake them. Kala opened her eyes first, yawning hugely and rubbing her eyes. "Gerrup, Jason," she muttered in a sleep-thick voice, shoving her brother's shoulder. "School."

He grunted something unintelligible, and Kala hit him again, a little harder. "We gotta go t' school."

"Thanksgivin'," he grumbled, elbowing her. "No school."

She blinked, scowling. "Thanksgiving's tomorrow."

Jason shoved the covers back and rolled over to glare at his sister. "Thanksgiving *vacation*, dillyweed," he said exasperatedly. "Today, tomorrow, an' Friday. Mrs. Mosley *said*."

"Oh," Kala replied. "Yeah. Right." She laid back down and cuddled into her pillow.

Jason stared at her, his expression mirroring his mother's early-morning grumpiness, and then heaved a sigh. "Girls," he muttered, and thumped his pillow a few times to fluff it before lying down again.

Several minutes passed before Kala said quietly, "Jason? You awake?"

"Cos of *you*," he replied.

"I'm sorry!"

"Whatever."

Another few minutes went by before Kala spoke again. "Jason?"

He sighed exaggeratedly. "What?"

"Do you miss Mommy?"

"No," he said sharply, turning over onto his side, facing away from her. His face was drawn, his brows furrowed, and he bit his lower lip until it hurt. In spite of that, a tear started to trickle down his cheek, and Jason's breath hitched before he whispered, "Yeah."

"Me too," Kala said. "I miss her a lot. I miss Daddy too. Both daddies."

"I don't want our family to get messed up," Jason whimpered.

Kala rolled over and hugged him. "Me neither," she said. "Grownups make everything so *hard*."

"They all said it was all gonna be okay," Jason said. "But Daddy Richard's goin' away already. We're never ever gonna see him again..."

"That's not what Mommy and Daddy Richard said," Kala replied. "Everybody loves us, nobody's going away. Daddy Clark said so too. He *promised*."

That seemed to calm Jason for a moment. They knew a few children whose parents were divorced, and it seemed normal for the daddies to leave and the mommies to bring new daddies home. But Daddy Clark wasn't like other daddies - he was special. He was *Superman*. Superman couldn't tell fibs. That thought gave Jason hope, and his bleak outlook began to lift slightly as the light in the room grew stronger.

That same morning, Richard had barely made it in the door when Perry called him. He leaned in the door of his uncle's office and said, "Yes?"

"Have you seen Lois lately?" Perry asked.

"Not since the weekend," Richard said cautiously. "Why?"

"She's not gonna be in today," Perry told him.

"Well, you did tell her it didn't make any sense for her to come in the day before Thanksgiving," Richard replied. "I remember her arguing about wanting to come in, and you telling her she might as well have the whole week off if she's only gonna work two days."

"Yeah, and you remember how much she argued that she didn't need any time off? That work was the best thing for her?" Perry's voice had an odd tone to it, somewhere between annoyance and disbelief.

"What're you getting at?" Richard asked. He was still standing in the doorway, not wanting to step all the way into his uncle's office and possibly be dragged into some kind of argument. Unfortunately, that meant that the early-arriving employees behind him could hear the conversation. The International editor sighed and shook his head slightly. "Look, Uncle Perry, if Lois decides she needs a little more time off, don't give her a hard time about it, okay? She's been through enough..."

"That's just it," Perry interrupted. "*She* didn't decide. I haven't heard from Lois at all. *Kent* called her in."

"*Kent*?" Richard repeated, momentarily stunned. Jealousy roared up in his chest; Lois was already with Clark. She couldn't even wait until they'd worked out what they were going to do with the house, or what they would tell their coworkers. No, she was so eager to get back with her One True Love that she had already dived into bed with him, and not only that, she was *calling in sick* to spend more time with him!

Wait, Richard's common sense commanded. *Don't be a jackass. First of all, Lois might actually be sick. Second, what right do you have to get jealous? You're talking Lana every day, and you kissed her before you ever broke up with Lois. If she was that kind of girl - and in the same country - you'd be trying to get her in bed right now.*

Mastering his instantaneous reaction, Richard had to remind himself that Lois wasn't his anymore. He had no right to be jealous of Lois and Clark - hadn't he wished both of them the best? Hadn't he seen during that moment on his plane what they meant to each other, and known that he could never hope to compete with a love like that? And most important of all, wasn't he falling in love with Lana? The answer to all three questions was a sheepish 'yes', and Richard forced himself to look nonchalant when he answered Perry.

"Well, she probably picked up a cold on vacation," Richard said. "She did go out of town, and you know Lois and cold weather. As long as Clark's looking after her, though, she'll be all

right."

Perry's eyes narrowed. "You know where she went, don't you?"

Damn. Richard shrugged. "I might - but if Lois doesn't want it publicly known, who am I to share information?"

Brows furrowing, Perry gave him a long, thoughtful look. "*Did* she?" he asked.

"Did she what?" Richard replied blankly. He was all too certain that Perry meant 'did she go to Kent', and he refused to answer that one.

Perry just nodded. So his nephew knew something and was trying to hide it. Fine - no one kept secrets around this office for very long. Not with an old newshound in the editor-in-chief's office. He'd find out what was up eventually, probably from Lois herself. "All right, son. Go get to work - what're you standing around for anyway?"

Richard sighed, shook his head, and went back to his own office. He'd just sat down when the phone rang. "Richard White, *Daily Planet*," he said into the receiver, smiling and putting a little extra warmth into his tone just in case Lana had decided to call early. He'd missed her yesterday...

"Richard, this is Ella. Have you seen my daughter?"

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Ella, could you find out who declared me her keeper and let them know she's a free woman now?"

"Richard, you *are* the man her kids call Daddy," Ella said, a hint of reprimand in her voice. "I would expect you to know where the mother of my grandchildren is."

"Ella, I'm not sure," Richard said. "The kids haven't been speaking to either of us, and I haven't seen her since shortly after I dropped them at your house. I do know she's off work sick today."

"Lois has never called in sick in her life," Ella informed him. "She once tried to go in with a broken wrist and Peregrine had to insist that she stayed home."

"Well, she called in sick today," Richard sighed. "Or at least, she's going to stay out another day like Perry told her to. I'm not surprised she needs some time off." Before Ella could comment further, he redirected the conversation by saying, "How are the twins? Are they at least talking to anyone?"

"They're still pretty upset, but they're talking to me," Ella said. "I've been hearing all about their trip to Kansas."

When in doubt, play stupid. "Is that where Lois went?" Richard asked innocently.

"I assumed you'd know, since you took them to the airport," Ella replied. "And since they flew there with Miss Lang, who likes you. Kala's getting very good at spotting relationships, Richard - so much for not being the one who's cheating, hmm?"

"Ella, we broke up," Richard said exasperatedly.

She cut him off. "I'm not interested in your pursuit of this woman as much as I'm interested in the twins' Grandma, who lives in Kansas. On a farm. And best of all, she was discussed in the same conversation as 'Daddy Clark'. Do you know anything about that, Richard?"

His jaw dropped - Ella wasn't supposed to know. They'd have to tell her something eventually, but it wasn't his place to inform her. And the way she asked the question made it seem like she thought someone else was the twins' father. He'd never suspected that she believed the story about Garen Lamoureux in Paris...

"Um, Ella," Richard began, and then mercifully his phone beeped. "Aw, hell. I've got another call. I'll get back to you, okay?"

"Sure. A piece of advice, Richard - don't try to sound disappointed when you're obviously relieved, okay? You're not good at it."

"All right..."

"And if you *don't* get back to me today, Richard, I expect you to be here tomorrow. Just because you and Lois split up doesn't mean you're not still invited to Thanksgiving dinner. You're still part of the family as far as I'm concerned."

"And considering who my blood relatives are, I'm very glad of that," Richard said with a chuckle. "I'll be there." Then, gratefully, he hung up with her and picked up the other call. "Richard White, *Daily Planet*."

"Hello," Lana said, sounding just as relieved as Richard felt.

"Thank God it's you," he sighed. "You just saved me from having to explain the facts of the twins' parentage to Lois' mom."

"Ouch," Lana said. "I take it Lois hasn't made an announcement yet?"

"She's home sick today," Richard replied. "I'm under the impression she's been out of touch since she came back from Kansas."

"And Clark? Do you think..."

"I'm trying not to think, actually," Richard replied. "Especially since he's the one who called her in."

"Oh." There was a long, awkward pause before Lana changed the topic. "I'm so sorry I missed you yesterday. Someone else picked up your phone, and I didn't want to leave a message."

"Really?" Richard said. "We had breaking news at four and I had to run out for a few minutes. It should've gone to my voicemail. Do you remember who answered?"

She hesitated, then said, "No, I don't. I'm sure whoever it was just wanted to do you a favor."

"Oh well, at least I get to talk to you now." Richard leaned back in his chair and grinned wickedly. He knew from talking to Lois that Lana was in Milan. But Lana herself had not divulged that information, so he decided to give her a bit of grief over it. Just a little friendly teasing. "How are things in Smallville?" he asked innocently.

"Um," Lana said hesitantly, and Richard had to suppress a chuckle. "Well, Smallville doesn't change much. I'm sure you don't want to hear about a little town in the middle of nowhere."

"No, really, I do," Richard replied. He recognized Lana's brand of creative misrepresentative from having worked with Clark - neither of them would actually *lie*, but they could dance around the truth for days.

"Richard, nothing really happens in Smallville," Lana said. "It's the same as it ever was - the same families, the same gossip, even. I haven't been listening, but they're probably still talking about the Eastern woman with the red Mustang."

"I bet," Richard said. "But *something* interesting has to happen in Smallville. I mean, *you* came from there."

"Yes, and I left," Lana replied. "Which should tell you something. I'm not the thrill-seeker Lois is, and Smallville was too boring for me."

"Do you realize you mention Lois whenever you want me to stop asking about something?" Richard said. "Why are you so antsy about Smallville, anyway? Got a boyfriend back home I should know about?"

"*Richard!*" Her flustered exclamation made Richard laugh, and after that Lana managed

to steer the conversation away from where she was and what she was doing there.

Blessings in Disguise

The phone rang, and Lois groped for it, groaning irritably. It was far too early for her to carry on a coherent conversation. "Lo?" she said as she brought the phone to her ear.

It rang again, shrilly, and she yelped. Stupid freakin' cell phone... Lois flipped it open and tried again. "Hello?"

"Lois?"

That voice woke her up in a hurry. Ella - and she didn't sound happy. "Hi, Momma," Lois said. "What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing important," Ella said, and Lois knew that falsely cheerful tone very well. She'd heard it from her own lips too many times to count. "Let me see, I haven't heard from my daughter since she dropped off my grandkids - who are still furious with her, and refuse to explain to their Nana - I've been calling the house since yesterday and not getting an answer, I called your ex and *he* doesn't know where said daughter is and won't tell me where she *was* last week, and now the whole family's at the house except *you*, and the turkey's almost done. Where the *hell* have you been and why weren't you here two hours ago like you said you'd be?!"

Lois' jaw dropped. Turkey... "It's not *Thanksgiving* already?"

"*Yes!*" Ella snapped exasperatedly. "It's Thanksgiving! The second largest holiday of the year! The one day when this entire mad family sits down to dinner together! And my oldest daughter is nowhere to be found!"

For a moment, it seemed to Lois as if her eyes couldn't widen any further. With a groan, she dropped her head forcefully. *Stupid, stupid, stupid! This is not the way you wanted this to go. Nice going, Lane. Just batting a thousand today.* Lois launched herself out of bed while she talked, grabbing her clothes off the chair and struggling into them one-handed, the phone still pressed to her ear. "Momma, I'm so sorry. I just..."

Ella harrumphed. It wasn't a sound that many people could pull off convincingly, but Elinore Lane could do it well. Lois winced, hopping on one foot while trying to shove her other leg into her jeans. She most assuredly was going to get an earful over this and it was best to mitigate it as much as possible. "I said I'm sorry, Momma, I lost track of time. A lot has been going on. I didn't even know it was Thursday yet..."

A horrible thought penetrated the fog of self-recrimination in Lois's mind. Thursday? But she had been scheduled to go back to work Wednesday... She leaned her head back with a wince and a groan. "Oh, *shit*. I was supposed to be the *Planet* yesterday!"

"Indeed," Ella said. "But you still haven't heard the best part."

Oh, this was *bad*. When her mother got sarcastic, Lois knew she was *really* in trouble. Putting her hand to her forehead, she braced herself. "What, Momma?"

"When you get here, you can explain why you answered *Clark Kent's* phone."

Lois' jaw dropped. She pulled the phone away from her ear to look at it, really look at it, and felt her stomach plummet. Her new phone was red, and she hadn't gotten around to changing the ring tone, so it still rang with that annoying Nokia tune. This phone was black, and knowing Clark, he had simply never seen a reason to change the default ring tone.

She had answered Clark's phone. Hers was still in the Riverside house. She'd answered *Clark's* phone, obviously half-asleep. Oh, dear God. Oh, dear *God*...

"Maybe when you explain that, you'll see fit to explain a few other things," Ella said archly, and hung up.

"Oh, *fuck*," Lois whimpered, still staring at the phone for a long stunned moment. How

was she going to get out of *this* one?

Clark came in the balcony door in a hurry. He could hear Lois cursing angrily from halfway across the country, and had flown back at speeds that had seriously alarmed the pilots of a wing of Air Force jets on a training mission. "Lois? What's wrong?" he called worriedly, still in uniform as he came in.

"Where the hell are my frikkin' boots?" she called back. Her voice sounded strained, and when she turned to face him, her eyes were glazed in blind panic. She seemed about twenty seconds from a meltdown, which was decidedly not how he had left her.

"By the coat rack," he replied, and she barreled past him to snatch them up. "Lois, what's going on? What's *wrong*?"

Something in his tone caught her attention, perhaps the rising fear, and, tossing her hair over her shoulder with an irritated gesture, Lois met his gaze for the first time since he'd returned. Her expression spoke volumes. "My mother called. Kal-El, it's *Thanksgiving*. I'm supposed to be at Mom's *right now*. Actually, I was supposed to be there two hours ago."

"Uh-oh," he said slowly.

"I didn't even know it was Thursday!" she continued, shoving her feet into the boots she'd brought over last night. "She called here, and I was still sleepy, and I thought it was *my* phone when I picked it up, but it was *yours*. So now she's ticked about that, too. And better yet, I was supposed to go back to work *yesterday*. Oh God, Perry's gonna *kill* me." With boots finally on, she jerked her trench coat off the coat rack and upended it over the sofa, shaking it briskly so that everything fell out of the pockets.

"Um..." Kal-El had never sounded so very *Clark* while he was still wearing the super-suit. "Uh, Lois? You don't have to worry about Perry. I, um, I called him and told him you weren't going to be at work yesterday."

Lois snatched up her hairbrush, intending to roughly tame her rumpled hair before hurrying to her mother's house. She didn't have to make it *obvious* what she'd been doing over here, not when Ella already suspected. At his words, though, she froze. For the second time that morning, Lois felt as if her eyes were going to pop out of her skull. "You *what*?" she asked disbelievingly, her voice rising.

"You were sleeping so much," he said awkwardly. "And I know you, you've *never* been that relaxed. I, um, I figured you needed the rest. You know, Perry was trying to get you to take the whole week back, so I called him and said you weren't feeling like your usual self, you were mostly staying in bed, and you wouldn't be in yesterday."

For several long moments, she simply stared at him. "Kal-El, you *do* realize that calling me in is going to ignite the rumor mill, right? They're not stupid, contrary to popular belief. They wouldn't miss that."

"We have to tell them something eventually..."

She sighed heavily, closing her eyes and pressing the heels of her hands against her face. "Oh my *God*. I knew we were gonna have to deal with the real world eventually, but why did it have to be *now*?!"

The fabric of the suit was cool against her skin as Kal-El gathered her in his arms. "These past few days have been like a dream," he murmured. "I didn't want to wake up, either. But we *needed* this. We needed time for just you and me, no distractions, no job, no family. Not even the twins. Just us."

Lois took a deep shuddering breath, her arms sliding around his waist as she leaned

against him. He kissed her hair and continued speaking softly, "The key is, we have to find ways to bring this dream into our real lives. We have to make sure we don't lose what we found here when we have to cope with work and family and being parents - which I still have to learn how to do."

"Not to mention saving the world and all that," Lois added with another heavy sigh, her voice muffled against his chest.

"That, too," Kal-El told her with a chuckle, holding her tighter. "Come on, I'll take you to your car. I'll even go to your mother's house with you if you need the moral support - Ma's expecting me, but it's an hour earlier there and we eat dinner later."

It took a minute before she raised her head, her expression just a bit more hopeful. "Not dressed like that you're not," Lois teased with a grinning glance at the shield just at cheek-level, and he laughed with her.

Fifteen minutes later, Lois pulled into the driveway close behind Ron's sedan, and sat in the Audi for a moment, her heart hammering as she stared at the house as if it had every intention of swallowing her whole the minute she crossed the threshold. Seeing her intent look, Clark put his hand on her knee and squeezed gently. "I'll go in with you," he said softly. "She won't say anything to you in front of me."

"Yeah, the minute you leave she'll be on me like white on rice," Lois muttered, heaving what seemed like the hundredth sigh of the last half hour. "I know my mom, Clark. If she wonders about anything, she'll bat you like a cat with a mouse until she gets an answer. And she wants an answer. Trust me."

Clark grinned then, pushing his glasses back up his nose. "Sounds like someone else I know."

The look in Lois' eyes was not kind.

"I told you that I'd go with you," he soothed, tilting her chin up to look at him. "It's going to be all right. Better done now and finished with."

She didn't want to drag him into this, knowing there was a possibility that Ella would say whatever she wanted to say regardless of whether or not Clark was there, but Lois needed him. She couldn't bear the thought of facing her mother alone, remembering how furious Ella sounded. Lois slid her hand atop his and squeezed gently, her eyes begging him to come with her even though she couldn't bring herself to ask it of him. Finally, she gave him a brave smile and nodded. "Let's do it."

They got out of the car in silence, and walked up to the front door holding hands. Clark didn't let go until Lois rang the doorbell, and even then he touched her shoulder lightly to let her know he was still there, still supporting her.

Lucy opened the door and dragged Lois into a hug. "Where have you *been*?!" she exclaimed, but she didn't expect an answer. Kissing her sister's cheek, she continued, "We were all worried, and I *told* Mom you'd show up, but of course she wouldn't listen. Nobody believes the pregnant lady..."

Her voice trailed off when she saw Clark standing behind Lois, nervously shoving his glasses up. For one second Lucy darted a surprised and impressed look at her older sister, but then she grinned at him too. "Clark! Sweet of you to join us. Thanks for looking after Lois - we all know she won't take care of herself when she's not feeling well." She looked back at Lois as she ushered them both inside, and asked curiously, "Are you feeling any better? You look pretty good. For a while there you were looking like you were about worn out..."

"Thanks, Luce. You know that nothing makes me feel better than to have you remind me when I look like a train-wreck." Lois shot Clark a look over the top of Lucy's head, and he read her expression clearly. *See how fast the rumors fly?* Before Clark could do more than smile apologetically at her, Ron was at his side.

"Clark! Brother, we all missed you," Ron said, grabbing his hand and shaking it, giving him an enthusiastic slap on the back. He seemed almost *too* excited to see Clark again... "You all right? We heard you got out after the earthquake, and you had some time off, but no one's really got any other news. Everything okay?"

"Well, you know, it was pretty, um, traumatic," Clark said. "For a while I didn't think I was going to live..."

In that brief instant, when Clark was distracted, Ella appeared as if out of nowhere and grabbed her oldest daughter's arm, abruptly ending Lucy and Lois' grumbling at each other. Without a word to anyone, Ella dragged Lois down the hallway to her bedroom and shut the door behind them. "What in the *hell* do you think you're doing?" she whispered, mindful of Kala's hearing.

Trapped. I knew it. No one can ever call my mother less than sharp as a tack. Lois's gaze flickered between her mother and the door - this was exactly the situation she'd wanted to avoid, and in spite of Clark's presence it had happened almost the moment she walked in the door. "Momma..."

"I cannot *believe* you," Ella hissed, her arms crossed in front of her and her expression stern and stormy. "You run off without telling anyone where you're going, and you don't even tell me when you come home. I can't find you at the house, you won't answer your cell phone, and in the middle of me *panicking* - because Luthor is still out there, and God alone knows what could have happened to you - Ron finally admits he heard a rumor that Clark called you in sick to work yesterday. So I get Clark's cell phone number from him, and call Clark to ask where you are, and *you* answer the phone!"

"Momma..."

"Not only that, you sound half asleep in the middle of the day! At *Clark's* apartment! Now you tell me right this instant what's going on!"

"Momma, I was at Clark's apartment," Lois retorted, raising her voice to cut off any more of the tirade. Maybe there was still a way to save this. "I can't sleep at the house. Not after everything that happened. So Clark very graciously let me stay at his place, and I must've picked up a bug somewhere, because I've been sleeping almost all the time. He was kind enough to look after me - he's brought me meals and made sure I was comfortable."

Ella gave her a steady, skeptical look, raising one eyebrow. Lois mirrored her unconsciously, her lips pressed to a thin stubborn line that said, *That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.*

After a moment of tense silence, Ella sighed in annoyance. "Really, Lois? Then why are your twins suddenly talking about Daddy Clark and their Grandma in Kansas?"

Dammit. Lois' eyes widened, her heartbeat quickening. She'd told her mother that Superman was the twins' father, and had confirmation from Kala herself. Not only that, Ella was aware of their developing powers. There was no way she could get Ella to accept the same fiction that she was half-planning to feed to the rest of the rumor-hungry friends and family and coworkers...

"Momma, there's an explanation..." *How could you be so abysmally dumb, Lane? Of course she was going to question it. Now think of something quick before the whole thing*

explodes like Pompeii. Unconsciously, Lois had started playing with her hair, pulling one curl out straight and letting it go before catching it and pulling at it again.

"I don't know how you convinced the kids, but what you're doing to Clark is inexcusable," Ella said sharply. As her mother continued to speak, the reporter kept pulling at her hair, faster and faster, twisting it a bit. Soon she would be tearing it out... "That poor boy has always been in love with you, and you've always known it. Lucy tells me there's a rumor in the office that he's the twins' father. Well, I have no idea how you managed to convince him of *that*. But using him now is just *wrong*. I know perfectly well who their father is, and so do you. I raised you better than to play a trick like this on probably the only person who's desperate enough to believe it."

"Momma, there's a perfectly good explanation," Lois said weakly, hating that her mother would think the worst of her. But that's the way the cards had fallen. *Why didn't I plan for this? I knew it was going to happen at some point. From the moment he woke up, I knew. Hell, I was the one who told her about Superman; why the hell wouldn't this infuriate her? I couldn't keep it from her forever.*

"Well, I'd surely love to hear it," Ella snapped.

The bedroom door opened, and both women looked up abruptly in surprise. Clark came in, his expression determined. He had heard Lois' heart speed up and realized what must have happened. Making excuses to Lucy and Ron - weak excuses, but he could deal with them later - he'd hurried to Lois' side.

"Clark, this is a private discussion," Ella said to him, but her tone was kind, almost pitying.

"No, ma'am, it's not," he replied, his voice low and steady. Ella had never heard him that serious, never seen him act anything but nervously respectful in her presence. This new firmness in his tone and manner was almost as shocking as his next words. "Not when you're discussing me, Lois, and our twins."

"Clark..." Lois whispered, her heart hammering. In that instant, she felt a flash of terror. That hadn't been Clark's diffident stutter. Right now, he sounded more like his true self. She had to warn him; he was awfully close to blowing the secret, and she hadn't told him that her mother knew the twins had superpowers... She rapidly shook her head, pleading him not to do it, mouthing the word, *No!*

Ella sighed, her expression both curious and sad, but before she could say anything, Clark overrode them both. "Mrs. Lane, as Lois' mother, there's something you should know. And I think it will make things a great deal clearer."

"Clark. Don't. Please, not for me," Lois whispered brokenly, her chest tight with panic. "Don't do this."

"Not for you, love. For us. For Kala and Jason," he replied with a solemn glance at her. Looking back at Ella, Clark took his glasses off and straightened up to his full height, the nervous smile replaced by a stern look. As Ella stared, not quite understanding, he ran a hand through his hair, freeing the one curl to fall onto his forehead.

That trademark curl, the one Lois had sometimes sarcastically called the super-curl of justice... Ella's jaw dropped, and her hand pressed against her chest. For a moment she could barely breathe. She took one step back, then two, and then fell back to sit on the bed. Still staring at him in wonder and shock, she whispered, "You?"

"Yes," Clark said. "Me. Clark Kent, Superman, Kal-El."

"My God," Ella murmured. The difference in his voice was very clear, the deeper, richer

timbre Ella had heard when she'd told Superman that Lois was missing. She'd wondered how on earth the hero had known who she was...

"I'd appreciate it if we kept this between us," he continued. "The twins know the whole truth, and so do Richard and Lana. But no one else knows that I'm living a double life. It would probably kill Perry White to learn that his biggest story has been right in the same newsroom with him all along."

"Of course," Ella said, and finally she seemed to be getting a handle on the situation. Lois hovered nervously beside her, uncertain what to think as her eyes went from her lover to her mother. Ella took a deep breath, smoothing her hair in a gesture eerily reminiscent of her daughter. "Well. It's a lot to take in all at once ... but everything makes sense now."

"I'd hoped it would," Kal-El told her.

Silence reigned as Lois' heart churned. Her feelings were so mixed; he hadn't even asked her opinion before revealing this secret to her mother, and at the same time she knew it was his to reveal or conceal. So much would change with just those few words; Lois' entire world seemed to tilt on its axis. Her mother knew it all, now, including how Lois felt about this amazing man.

In that thoughtful silence, the knock on the door was loud. "Hey guys, I don't want to bust up your little conclave in there, but the turkey's done," Lucy called. "Want me to bring the kids in?"

Ella glanced at both of them before calling back, "No, wait just a minute. We'll be right out."

Clark held up a hand, listening to her leave, then said softly, "All right, it's safe to talk again. I don't think she heard anything."

"What are we going to tell them?" Ella asked. "Ron and Lucy, I mean."

Clark looked at Lois then. "We haven't had a chance to talk about this yet," he said, a trifle sheepishly. "Do you think we could just ... go without saying anything for now? We'd have to talk to the twins..."

"I have to talk to them," Lois said, quiet dignity in her voice. "I'm the one they blame for wrecking their family. Let me take them aside for a minute before we eat."

"Talk to Jason especially," Ella advised her. "He seems to be the one who's the most upset. I think Kala is just following his lead - all she wants is to know she's not losing either of her parents. *Any* of her parents."

"We both need to talk to them," Clark said.

Lois nodded, and that seemed to be the end of the family conference. Clark smoothed his errant curl back and put his glasses on, stooping his shoulders slightly before opening the door. Ella stood up, catching her daughter's arm. "I'm sorry I yelled at you," she whispered. "Lois, if I had had the slightest clue..."

"I know, Momma." Lois tried to smile, but it was hard to do so when she was dreading facing the twins. Jason in particular - he had always been very close with her, and since being kidnapped he had been quite protective of her as well. To see him angry and disappointed would be more painful than bringing him into this world, but it had to be done. Kala, it seemed, understood on some level even if she wasn't sure how to feel on a whole. Events had led her to this point, and Lois could not turn aside from the task before her.

Ron and Lucy gave them some questioning looks, but refrained from asking what was on their minds as Ella took over directing the kitchen. Clark took a deep breath, Lois coming to stand beside him, and they both looked at each other for a long moment before he opened the

back door. The Troupe kids rushed in, delighted to see him and Aunt Lois, but the twins held back, their small hands clasped.

Lois' heart broke to see them acting as though they expected punishment. "Jason, we need to talk to you and Kala," Clark said quietly, keeping his tone neutral.

Seeing the way their grasp on each other tightened, Lois added, "It's about what happened before I came home the other day. Why you came to Nana's."

Jason looked up at both of them stonily and walked forward, his head down, his eyes fixing determinedly somewhere else, anywhere but on the pair of them. He passed Clark, who said his name in a firmer tone, but Jason kept walking as if he hadn't heard.

Kala, however, stopped. Her hand pulled out of Jason's, and she glanced up at the two adults briefly, her eyes wide and worried. Jason hesitated for a fraction of a second when he lost the contact with his sister, but he set his shoulders and kept moving, heading for the back of the house.

"Jason Garen," Lois said in an amazed tone, and paused. It had always been rare occurrences when Jason had been this defiant. But she'd glimpsed his face as he had stormed past, and her son looked as if he were about to cry. Her heart ached for him, but before she could turn and go after him, Kala silently hugged her around the waist. Lois returned it gratefully, holding her daughter to her.

"I'll get him," Clark said, his mouth curving up in a rueful smile as he touched the top of Kala's head gently. "We need to talk. Man to man."

Lois returned the apprehensive look, leaning up to brush her lips across his. "Just remember, he's only six," she said with a sigh. "He doesn't understand any of this. All he knows is that Mommy turned into a creep who's lied to him."

Kala squeezed her tighter at those words, and Clark stroked her hair as he left to follow Jason. Lois sighed, picking up her daughter to enfold her in a tight hug, both grateful that Clark was going to speak to Jason instead of her and pained on his behalf.

As she turned to watch him leave, she caught sight of Lucy staring at her. Her sister's eyebrows were raised in the traditional Lane woman's look of *and what the hell was that?* She had seen the kiss, and it wasn't the hesitant kiss of new lovers - that brief brush of lips spoke of long familiarity. And it was *Clark*.

Before Lois could even think of something to say, Kala pulled back far enough to look at her mother and murmur, "We didn't know Daddy was gonna be here, Mommy."

Lucy's blonde eyebrows went up another inch, and she mouthed, *Daddy?* Ron, who had been coming out of the kitchen with a tureen of mashed potatoes, halted with an incredulous look.

"Neither did I, baby, but both of us missed you," Lois replied to her daughter, letting Kala nestle her head on her shoulder. Things had gone completely out of control. And now the entire household suspected at least one of her long-kept secrets. "A lot of things have happened in the last few days and we both needed to talk to you two. That and I just missed you so much. Mommy's had a busy week." Resting her head against her child's hair, Lois' eyes slid closed as she gratefully breathed in the sweet scent of Kala's hair and tried to force herself not to bawl.

Clark had done a great deal of difficult things in his life, but none weighed so heavily on his heart as following his son into the guest bedroom. *His son* - the words still made his heart clench in an uneasy mix of pride, joy, and terror.

Jason finally turned, facing him reluctantly, and the look on his face was anger firmly overlaid on deep hurt. Clark couldn't help smiling sadly at that expression; he knew it too well. "You look just like your mother," he said quietly.

The little boy tried to scowl, but it quickly turned into a pout as tears welled up in his eyes. Breath hitching, small hands balled into fists, he said angrily, "Don' try an' make nice!"

"Jason," Clark said, kneeling in front of him, hating to see his sweet face reddened by anger and twisted with the effort not to cry. *Why do I have to be the one to hurt him? All I wanted, coming back into his mother's life, was a chance to make things right. But now I'm tearing his world apart, and he's as angry with me as I was at fate when Pa died.*

"Mommy's making Daddy Richard go away!" Jason accused. "An' it's all *your* fault!"

That struck home, and Clark reeled. Wasn't it his fault? Hadn't he wished for the life Richard was leading, wanted it so much it made his heart ache? Wanted not only Lois, but the kids as well? He *wanted* to be their daddy, and for a while, it seemed like they were perfectly happy to accept him in that role.

Now this: Superman, the home-wrecker. A nice little nuclear family, Mommy, Daddy, and two children, torn apart by an interloper. Worst of all, the outsider forcing his way into their neatly-ordered lives wasn't just some stranger. He was the twins' actual *father*, the man who'd left their mother before they were born, and who was arrogant enough to presume he could pick up where he left off...

No. It's not like that, I'm not like that. Jason doesn't understand. "First of all, Jason, Mommy didn't make Daddy Richard leave," he said sternly, wanting to hug his son and knowing that he couldn't right now. Trying to coddle the boy would only confirm his suspicions. "Daddy Richard made his own decision to move out. He still loves your Mommy, and we both told you it wouldn't be fair for him - or me, or your mother - for all of us to live in the same house. We all love you kids enough to share you, and to be friends with each other. We *have* to be a part of each other's lives, because no one wants to give you and your sister up. But romantic love, grown-up love, can't be shared that way. I love your Mommy like that. I've *always* loved her like that."

"An' you left," Jason said, folding his arms with an emphatic thwap of each fist into the crook of the opposite elbow. "You left Mommy before me an' Kala were born. Now Daddy Richard's leavin'. How long's he gonna be gone? He might not come back for years and years, like you did. An' what if you leave us again?"

"I would die before I'd leave you and your mother again," Clark said very solemnly. "If I had known she was going to have you two, have my children, I would've never left in the first place. And Richard's not going to be gone as long or go as far as I did. I left the whole planet, trying to find the place I came from. Richard, he's not going any further than he can fly in a few hours. He wouldn't want to be separated from you guys by more than that."

Jason's lip was still trembling, his blue eyes still fraught with fear and fury. But all of the adults had been telling him and Kala the same things for so long that he couldn't help wanting to believe them. Daddy was *Superman*, after all; he *couldn't* tell a fib. Still... "How come everything's gotta *change*?!" Jason wailed.

"Son, that happens," Clark said. He really didn't know how to explain so that Jason would understand, and he was forced to make things up as he went along, thinking, *I hope parenting gets easier with practice.* "Places change, people change. Sometimes grownups realize that what they thought they wanted isn't really what they should have. Sometimes..."

All of a sudden, Clark remembered how he had felt when he had first returned to Earth.

Everything seemed to have changed in his absence; Ma was dating Ben, Lois was a *mother*, affianced, and assistant editor - he'd felt as though he had landed on the wrong planet entirely. He smiled then, trying to reassure his son. "I wondered that a lot when I came home, you know. Why everything has to change. And I still don't know the answer. But I know this - if everything I knew hadn't changed, I wouldn't have you and your sister. I wouldn't be with your mom. And my mom wouldn't have a boyfriend who raises beagles and lets kids borrow his mules." That last made Jason's mouth break into a tremulous smile, which he tried to hide. "Out of everything that happened, one thing didn't change at all. Love. Ma still loves me, your mommy still loves you so much, and even Daddy Richard still loves Mommy, just not like boyfriend-girlfriend love. And the fact that all of us love you will *never* change."

"Promise?" Jason sniffled.

"I promise," Clark said, and Jason flung himself into his father's arms.

"Don' ever leave again," he whimpered, and broke down sobbing.

"Never," Clark said softly, holding him, cherishing the amazing softness of his son's hair where Jason's face was buried in his shoulder. Even shaking with sobs, red-faced and crying, furious only a moment ago, Jason was a miracle. It shouldn't have been possible for this little boy or his sister to exist, yet here they were. And amazingly, in spite of relatively short acquaintance and all the mistakes Clark had made, all the ways he'd failed them, when Jason's façade of anger finally broke, he sought Clark for comfort.

"I will never let you down again," Clark murmured, and kissed the top of his son's head as Jason hugged him tighter.

Lois had enlisted Kala to help her set the table, forestalling any questions from Lucy or Ron. She really couldn't handle that right now; it was enough to watch Kala's face as she occasionally paused to listen in the general direction Jason had gone. *Something we need to work on*, Lois thought. *Eavesdropping isn't a habit I want her to have, but right now it's letting me know how the man-to-man talk is going.*

Kala kept looking worried, but every now and then she smiled slightly, and that was encouraging. Before Lois could decide to give up and go look in on the both of them, Jason reappeared, his face freshly scrubbed, with Clark following him into the dining room, his hand on the boy's shoulder.

It only to a moment for him to go to her, destroying all of her earlier fear. Lois couldn't help fussing over her son for a moment, smoothing back his hair as she knelt in front of him. "You okay, baby?"

He nodded before slipping into her arms and hugged her tightly. Her breath caught in her throat, the relief nearly dizzying. In spite of barely being able to breathe, Lois hugged him back as tightly as she could. "I love you, Jason," she whispered, kissing his soft brown hair.

"I love you, Mommy," he said against her shoulder.

In the midst of that, Kala watched her twin cuddle with Mommy. Suddenly aware that he hadn't done it on coming in the door, the little girl walked up to Clark and held up her arms. "Hug, please."

He swept her up, kissing her on the forehead. "Love you, baby girl."

Lois and Jason stepped back from each other, and the reporter saw the looks she was getting from Ron and Lucy. Stunned was the best description she could come up with. All except Ella, who couldn't entirely hide a smile. Even Sam was old enough to have a puzzled frown on his face, though Joanna and Nora paid no attention.

Sighing, Lois stood up, holding Jason's hand. Maybe Luthor had been right; she and Kal-El were no good at hiding their relationship. And this was definitely not the way she had planned to have all of this go down, but when had anything in her life gone to plan? Giving a quirky little smile, she shrugged, "Well, I wasn't planning to bring this kind of drama as my special recipe for the family dinner, but you know me. Ron, Lucy, you're smart enough to figure out what's going on. I brought Clark to dinner for a reason. Surprise."

Lucy's jaw actually dropped. Ron looked over at Clark with an expression of impressed amazement. "Whoa, man," he said quietly. "Is it ... is it *true*?"

"Yes, I'm their father," Clark said with Kala still in his arms, looking at Lois.

"Clark was in Paris on the first stop of his world tour," she said. "All of you know I was there trying to find you-know-who. When I finally came to the conclusion that the guy in the cape was gone for good, I was pretty pissed at him. Then Clark and I ran into each other at a café one night, he tried to keep me cheered up, and then, well, one thing led to another. He had to keep traveling; I had a life to live. By the time I found out about these two, I'd lost contact with him. I wasn't sure what to do, so I lied. Less questions that way." Lois shrugged, amused by the expression on Clark's face. *This is payback for dropping the bomb on my mother*, she thought. *Now I get to spin the story however I want.*

"Lois was protecting my reputation," Clark said quietly.

"And you two..." Ron trailed off, looking from one to the other.

Lois rolled her eyes with a sigh. *Oh, come on. You know better than that. Although it does have to be a bit of a shock.* "**Obviously**, Ron."

"No, I mean *now*," he said, then backpedaled as his wife elbowed him in the side. "Are you two an item now?"

Lois and Clark shared a look, and he smiled slightly. "I think I'll let you answer that, Lois."

She looked him speculatively for several seconds. "I guess so," Lois said with a deadpan shrug. "Well, the twins *do* belong to him. I guess it's kinda required that I give him a trial period." Clark just chuckled, finally making her break down and laugh.

And then the doorbell rang.

Richard parked at the end of the drive, looking up at Ella Lane's house somberly. He would have to confront the twins again, and as if that were not reason enough to give him pause, Ella herself would want an explanation. Although he might luck out - Lois' car was in the drive, which meant she was already there. Maybe her mother had decided to get her answers directly from the source.

Or maybe Lois would be out of sorts because of Ella's questioning, and the twins would be sullen, and Ella herself would be less than pleased with her almost-son-in-law. In short, it could be the worst possible kind of family gathering, almost like being back home. Richard chuckled wanly at the thought.

There was no way to know how things would be until he actually walked in the door. Uncle Perry's advice in a situation like this was "hope for the best, plan for the worst." The first he could do, but the second... If this was going to be the kind of family dinner that had led Richard to spend five years living abroad, then he needed some emotional support. Grinning slightly to himself, he flipped open his phone and hit the first speed-dial.

"Lana Lang," came the answer, quick and businesslike.

"Hello, Lana," he said quietly, his grin becoming a smile full of love.

"Why, Richard," she replied, and he could hear the delighted surprise in her voice. "It's not even four o'clock yet."

He leaned back in the driver's seat, closing his eyes. The one thing that had always cheered Richard up was talking to a beautiful woman, preferably one who found him as attractive as he found her. No matter what was going on in his life, flirting was his ultimate pick-me-up. *And I don't want to give too much thought to why that's true*, Richard mused before saying to Lana, "I couldn't wait the extra hours to hear your voice."

"Flatterer," she told him.

"Only truth."

A moment's pause, and then she said, "So how are things in Metropolis?"

The flirtatious smile fell slightly as Richard answered, "Well, I might be about to walk into what will become known as the Lane Family Massacre. Lois got there first, so she and her mother might've been arguing. I know Ella's ticked at her - all the Lane women have a temper, even Lucy. You just never see Lucy mad because she's difficult to provoke. So I could be walking into a huge argument, and to the best of my knowledge the twins still hate me."

"They don't hate you, Richard," Lana scolded gently. "They *love* you. So much that they're terrified of losing you. Believe me, I'm acquainted with the feeling."

"Do you do that just to make me smile?"

"Do what?"

"Toss out a hint that you really do love me."

She laughed softly into the phone. "Who said I was talking about *you* specifically, Mr. White?"

"Ouch," Richard replied in the same teasing tone. "That burns. Lana, you just broke my heart."

"Oh, please," she muttered. "Remember, I've talked to your ex-fiancée. If I tear your heart out and feed it to stray cats, it will only be payback for all the hearts you've broken over the years."

"And now she brings up my sordid youth," Richard said with a sigh. "To think, I called you for moral support and got acidic banter instead."

"Richard, I'm teasing you," she said, her voice warm with affection. "I was under the impression you enjoyed sarcasm."

"Just because I almost married the single greatest natural source of it..."

They both laughed then, and once they'd finished chuckling Lana told him quietly, "Richard, the twins are scared to lose you. They'll realize soon enough that you aren't going anywhere. Until then, just remember that they wouldn't be this angry if they didn't love you, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, smirking.

"Furthermore," Lana continued, "you have no way of knowing if Lois and her mother are fighting or if they've gotten things straightened out. Don't walk in there expecting an argument. Lois is very smart, and from the brief time I got to meet Mrs. Lane, she seems to be an eminently practical and very wise lady. I'm sure things will be settled down before you get there."

"Well, I'm in the driveway, and I haven't heard any shots fired, so I'm guessing you're right," Richard joked rather weakly.

"Richard, it's going to be all right," Lana said soothingly.

"Yeah, I went through enough of this already," he said, and was surprised at his own

bitterness. "My family... Lana, I don't even want you to meet my mother. Dad's pretty cool, but he lets her have her way in everything and it just..."

"Richard, I plan to meet your parents eventually," Lana said, another of those subtle hints. "I've already told my mother about you, so at some point I'm going to bring you out to Kansas and introduce you to my family, too."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," she chuckled.

"Damn, Lana, from you that's practically a marriage proposal," Richard teased her.

She coughed slightly, and Richard just *knew* she was blushing. "Yes, well, the *point* was, I'll deal with your mother when I meet her. Just like you'll deal with the infamous Lane ladies. I'm serious about not walking in expecting a fight, though. Everything's probably fine."

He took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. "You're probably right, as usual. Okay, wish me luck - I'm going in... You know, Lana, at moments like this, I really wish you were here."

"Me, too," she replied softly, and then she made herself joke again. "Heaven knows you need someone to take care of you."

"Yeah, I do," Richard admitted. "Love you, Lana."

"Love you, too."

With those words, spoken so low and solemnly, echoing in his mind, Richard closed his phone gently and got out of the car. In spite of Lana's encouragement, he found it hard to think positive all the way to the door, and by the time he rang the bell doubt had started to creep in.

Little Sam opened the door, looking up at him in faint surprise. "Uncle Richard?" he said, then remembered his manners. "Come in."

"Hi, Sam," Richard said, stepping into a house redolent with the savory scents of a traditional Thanksgiving feast. It took a moment for Richard to really see the tableau before him.

Lois was holding Jason's hand, and Ella was standing by Lucy and Ron, all of them looking at Richard with surprised expressions. He scanned the room quickly, nervous, and his eyes settled on Kala, who was staring at him wide-eyed from her perch in Clark's arms.

Clark. Well, that's unexpected, Richard thought. Everyone was watching him, so he made himself smile. *Remember, you like Clark. And you're happy for him and Lois - he gets to deal with her when she's snarling about too much blood in her caffeine stream; you only have to see her when she's fully awake now. And you just spoke to the woman who makes you almost forget who Lois is. Grow up and deal with it - this is your life now.*

Internal pep talk accomplished, Richard managed to grin. "Hey, Clark," he said. "Welcome to the Lane family dynasty."

"Hi, Richard," Clark said with obvious relief. The tension dropped away, and the twins came forward to hug Richard.

Both of them were more subdued than usual, Kala easing down from being held instead of just wriggling away as she usually did. She hugged Richard for a long time, too, and Jason was just as reluctant to let go.

Richard had dropped to one knee to hug them, kissing them both on the cheek. When they stepped back, satisfied at last, he gave them a serious look. Kala was wide-eyed and nervous, Jason looked like he'd been crying, and Lois's hair was ruffled as if she'd been raking her hands through it obsessively. The three things together were more than enough clues for a reporter like Richard. "Have you two been giving your mommy a hard time?"

Both twins looked down at the ground, Jason's lower lip pouting slightly. "Sorry," he whispered, and his sister echoed him.

"Now listen," Richard said, catching both of their chins and making them look at him. "I don't love you any less. And I wouldn't let *anyone* take you away from me, you hear? Not only that, neither Mommy nor Daddy Clark would ever do something that mean to you two or to me. We've *all* told you that no one's going to leave - if you don't believe me and Mommy, believe Clark, because he can't lie worth a damn."

"Richard," Ella muttered warningly, but the slight profanity made both twins giggle.

"No more worrying," Richard said sternly. "Promise?"

"Promise," Jason and Kala said in unison.

"None at all," Richard admonished. "Absolutely no worryworting around at all."

"Yes, sir," the twins replied, smiling again.

"All right then," Richard told them, standing up. "That's great, because I don't know about you guys, but I'm starving. Hear my belly growling?"

Kala and Jason both leaned in toward Richard, listening expectantly, and both yelped in mock fear when he growled like a bear and grabbed at them. They ran off giggling like mad, carrying the Troupe kids along in a laughing pack heading to the kitchen.

"Richard, you're amazing," Lois sighed, giving him a grateful smile. He folded his arms and grinned back at her triumphantly as Lucy started herding the adults into the dining room.

Lois and Clark were the last ones out the door, his hand on the middle of her back in an unconscious gesture of closeness that, surprisingly, didn't make Richard feel bitter in the slightest. He turned to see Ella watching them as well, and caught the expression of wonder in her eyes, the way her gaze lingered on Clark. *Well, I'll be damned. Lois told her. I guess that's why I didn't walk into a fight - Ella knows.*

Leaning toward the woman who was nearly his mother-in-law, Richard whispered, "Quite a head trip, isn't it? Welcome to the club."

Ella looked at him, slightly startled, and then they shared a smile. "Richard, you're quite a man," she told him quietly. "You may not be marrying my daughter, but you're still quite a man. And you'll always be part of this family."

"Glad to hear it," he replied, and for a moment they stood there companionably watching the rest of the Lane tribe bustling around the dining room and kitchen.

"Richard?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you bring the wine?"

"Oh, *shit!*"

Black Friday

It was several hours later when the door to Clark Kent's apartment opened, spilling both reporters into its warmth. "Well, that was fun," Lois said with a chuckle, hanging her coat up on the rack beside the door and kicking off her shoes. "Weird, but on the whole, pretty good."

"Richard was the one who finally made it all work," Clark added, coming in behind her and hanging his coat beside hers. "What he said to the kids... If I get really, really lucky I might learn how to be that good of a father before the twins graduate college."

"Oh, stop it," Lois sighed, elbowing him gently as he came up behind her. Feeling his arms encircle her waist, the dark-haired woman leaned back into his embrace. "You think I was a great mom from day one? Not hardly. I barely knew how to hold them when they were born. And that's to say nothing about any of the rest of it."

"Still..."

Lois turned somewhat, smacking his shoulder hard enough to make her palm sting. One eyebrow going up, it was easy to see that this could easily turn into one of those 'Mad Dog Lane' moments in the pretty face that stared up at him. "Knock it off, hero. You're shaping up to be a good father, and you'll shortly become a great one. Hell, it's only been a few weeks since you found out for sure that they really are yours. Cut yourself some slack."

"If you insist," Clark replied, smiling again. It was hard for him to be serious around Lois now; she brought out his most mischievous impulses and kept his mood light. He leaned down to kiss the top of her head, nuzzling her hair.

His lover practically purred at the attention, rising up on tiptoe to make it easier for him to reach her. "Mmm, that's nice," Lois sighed, leaning even further back against him and tossing her dark hair to the side to keep it from being a hindrance. Speaking of adjusting, she was well on her way to becoming *too* attached to moments like this...

For a few moments they simply stood that way, both aware that the twins would be coming home from Nana's tomorrow afternoon. They would've come home tonight, but Lucy and Ella had promised to take the whole gang out to the zoo tomorrow morning while everyone else in the city went shopping.

One more night together. Once the twins came home, Lois would have to go back to staying at the Riverside house with them. Clark would visit as often as he could, but he still felt uncomfortable there - they hadn't discussed it yet, but they both knew that this idyllic time together would come to an end. There would be no more lying in bed until noon, making love as often as they physically could - not at the Riverside house, not within range of Kala's hearing. Tomorrow, their real lives together would begin, starting with the office...

But tonight, their world was these few rooms and each other. Silence reigned as they savored this moment of peace, simply belonging to each other for these last stolen hours. "Kal-El," Lois whispered finally, her eyes going lidded as she leaned her head against his jaw.

"Lois," he responded, nuzzling her neck.

"This is our last chance to be alone together for a while."

"I know."

"Got any plans to make the most of it?"

"Well..." She couldn't see his smile turn wicked, so Lois had no warning before he swept her up in his arms.

"Put me down!" Lois shrieked in thunder-struck surprise, thrashing. *This is **not** what I meant! So much for sweet and romantic...* "Dammit, Kal-El, you *know* I hate being picked up!"

"And you can't do anything about it," he laughed, swinging them both around in a circle.

Lois yelped and clung to him, her eyes wide. She knew very well that he wouldn't drop her, but she *loathed* being out of control...

The moment he stopped spinning, though, she proved him wrong about her helplessness. Lois jackknifed out of his hands and hit the ground running, giggling madly as he chased her. "I'll get you for that!" she yelled ominously.

"Sure you will," he teased, holding back his speed to make it a fair chase. They needed this moment of silliness after the seriousness of dinner at Ella's - neither of them had ever been this playful with each other. In fact, Kal-El had never been able to goof around like this, and he couldn't remember Lois being silly either...

She raced down the hall, trying to stop and slid full-tilt into the bedroom door. Grabbing the frame, chuckling with high spirits, Lois recovered her balance and launched herself into the room, Kal-El hot on her heels.

Lois had actually landed on the bed, almost rolling clear across it. He saw what she meant to do one second too late to keep himself from running smack into the pillow Lois was swinging at his head. His glasses went flying, and Lois laughed the free, lovely laugh he'd heard so rarely.

Then she hit him again. Kal-El got one arm up in time to deflect the blow, trying to get around her to snatch up another pillow. "Gotcha!" Lois yelled, and swung again.

That time, the pillow exploded, spraying feathers everywhere. They both froze, suddenly aware of how ridiculous this looked, feathers drifting gently down like the snow predicted for the weekend. Lois was the first one to break down laughing, falling backwards on the bed and laughing so hard she could barely breathe.

"You owe me a pillow," Kal-El told her, waving feathers away from his face.

"Nuh-uh," Lois chuckled. "It was your head that broke it."

"Wouldn't have been a problem if you weren't swinging it at me," he replied, grabbing her foot. Lois shrieked and thrashed when he did, and he laughed as he tried to keep hold of her.

"Don't you *dare* tickle me! I'll kill you," she threatened, yanking her foot away and trying to scramble to the other side of the bed. Lying on her back, it wasn't easy.

She'd forgotten how much faster he was than herself. Kal-El was kneeling on the bed and catching hold of her knees before she could start to move. Grinning mischievously, he pulled her toward him.

They'd both forgotten his strength in the moment of playing around. Just that slight tug brought Lois all the way to him, looking up in amazement with her knees on either side of his hips. The significance of the position wasn't wasted on either of them.

"Well, I stand corrected," she managed after a moment of surprised silence. And then that smile, that knowing smile began to curve her lips. "I see you *do* have plans."

Deleted Scene - ls_m.pdf

Lois' eyes fluttered open at the scent of coffee, and she stretched with a low groan. Even after a full eight hours of sleep, she still felt a bit tired, every muscle whispering to her to simply roll over and go back to sleep ... like she'd done every day so far this week. *Nope, sorry, gotta go to work*, Lois told her protesting body. *Even if we did make love three times last night, at some point I have to get used to the extra exercise and start going back to the office*. She yawned and sat up, blearily seeking the coffee she could smell...

Clark came into the room carrying coffee just as Lois got out of bed, and she went to him, nestling herself in his arms, snuggling against his chest with an almost feline purr of

contentment. Had anything ever felt so good, so safe, as the way he held her? She could only give another happy sigh. "I love you, too," he chuckled, kissing her ruffled hair as she snagged the mug and took a large gulp. Lois murmured wordlessly in reply, leaning against him and letting him stroke her hair while she sipped the coffee. "And Richard thought you were vicious in the morning," Clark teased, nuzzling her cheek as he hugged her.

"Never brought me coffee," she muttered, leaning up to kiss him. The instant before their lips met, she turned away to stifle a yawn.

He laughed and tousled her hair. "The lion tamer doesn't walk into the cage without a chunk of meat if he knows the lion is hungry - that's why I bring you coffee first thing in the morning."

Lois elbowed his chest, glaring at him from narrowed eyes, but the potential fearsomeness of her glower was spoiled by her sly grin and the lock of hair that tumbled into her eyes. Clark kissed her again as he brushed the wave off her forehead, running his hands down her sides possessively once that was done, and then stepped back with a sigh. "I've got to go, lovely lady," he said with real regret. "I'll see you at work - after I finish with my other job."

"Have fun saving the world, honey," Lois replied with saccharine sweetness, and then continued in normal tones that showed she really was waking up, "Thanks for the coffee."

"You're welcome," he said with another kiss. "Thank you - for everything. For being the amazing woman you are, and for being mine."

"Go before you get maudlin, hero," Lois whispered against his lips. Did he really have no idea of the effect his words had on her? "See you at the office."

Once he was gone - stealing yet another kiss and a brief caress that made her memories of the last night flare into incandescent life - Lois sauntered to the shower, unable to stop smiling. For the first time she could remember, everything was going right...

As she walked into the bathroom, she caught a glimpse of her own expression, the silly love-struck smile she couldn't seem to wipe off her face. "Idiot," she snickered at herself, shaking her head.

It must've been all the extra sleep, a desire to get back into the game, or perhaps the early dose of caffeine that had jump-started her brain. Regardless of the cause, Lois walked into the office fifteen minutes earlier than usual.

Thunderous silence greeted her arrival. Everyone took little glances at her when they thought she wasn't looking their way, busying themselves in their work when she was. *Ah, the rumor mill. I wonder how much they think they know, and what kind of lies they're telling each other.*

Lois breezed past with a smile, heading for her office. Only Perry acknowledged her; on his way to his own desk, he paused to say, "Good morning, Lane. Try getting here this early more often, it might make people forget you've been gone two weeks."

"Hello to you, too, Chief," she told him, raising an eyebrow. "You missed me, admit it."

"Of course," he replied grumpily, "but my aim's improving. Get to work and make up for the time you missed."

"Yes, Mr. White," Lois said in a mockingly sweet tone, dropping her purse in her office and booting up her computer. While it warmed up and began the automatic morning tasks - checking email and displaying the current stories in progress - she headed to the break room for some more coffee.

For once, the morning crowd of useless gossips wasn't there. She was probably just too

early for them - why would the slackers bother coming in early when they weren't going to do any work until at least ten o'clock? Lois smirked as she filled her coffee mug and noticed another benefit; this early, the break room brew hadn't had a chance to turn into tar. It might actually be drinkable.

"Hi, Ms. Lane," Jimmy said behind her.

"Hey, Jimmy," Lois replied, looking over her shoulder to grin at him.

An awkward pause ensued before he managed to ask, "So are you okay? I mean, everyone said you were sick, and you weren't here Wednesday. A lot of us were worried..."

"I'm fine now," she said, smirking. "All I needed was a lot of rest, really. I've hardly been out of bed the last three days."

"Yeah, that's what people were saying," Jimmy muttered. When Lois turned around to look him with an arched eyebrow, he blushed. "Um ... the rumors have been pretty crazy around here."

"Have they now," Lois replied, leaning against the counter. "What's everyone saying, Jimmy?"

The young photographer was afraid to look at her - if she was glaring at him, he'd go to pieces. But he couldn't bear the silence, either, and finally raised his eyes. Lois' gaze was inquiring, patient - fond of him if not fond of the news she was asking to hear. That made Jimmy smile awkwardly before answering her. "Well, um, you know Clark called you in. People have been saying - it's pretty sad, actually, how much they'll invent - but anyway, they've been making comments. About you. And Clark. You know."

Lois gestured for him to go on. Her good mood couldn't be broken, even by this; maybe she needed to take vacations more often.

At last, miserably, Jimmy said, "Everyone says you and Clark ... well. They're saying you two are, you know, a thing."

"A thing?" Lois asked with both brows raised, laughter lurking in her tone. "What kind of a thing?"

"A couple," he said, and blushed even brighter. "They're saying he was ... with you ... when you were sick. Only, you know, they said you weren't really sick."

Lois snorted laughter, smirking. *How many variations of 'Lane had a fever - and Kent had the cure' am I going to see on the company servers from the past two days? Geez. Worse than a bunch of kids - I expect them to all run up to me yelling, 'Lane and Kent, sitting in a tree...'* To Jimmy, she said blandly, "Oh, you mean they're all saying I've been sleeping with Clark."

Jimmy almost choked. "Um..."

Lois shrugged and decided to stop teasing her friend. In the same blasé tone, she added, "Well, obviously I had to have slept with him at some point. He *is* the father of the twins." With another of those cheerful smiles that seemed so odd coming from her, she took her coffee and headed past him.

His jaw dropped as she sauntered out of the office. Lois had to cover her mouth to stifle her own laughter, thinking, *I cannot believe I just did that! Oh well, something for Clark to deal with when he finally gets in.*

Back in her office, though, she had to seriously consider the ramifications of what she'd just done. *Jimmy's not a gossip, but anyone could've overheard that. And if what he's saying is true, the rumors are already running wild.* Her email was up, and she ran a quick check of the company's email logs, searching for her own name. Within a few minutes, she'd seen more

witty remarks about her supposed illness than she cared to think about - and several lengthy emailed arguments over the possibility of Clark being the twins' father.

Dammit. The cat's not only out of the bag, it's gotten out of the house and had a litter of kittens. These people have nothing better to do all day than wonder what I'm doing? She fumed as she read, but a calmer voice in the back of her head whispered, *You're the most well-known reporter this newspaper has. You're also one of the bosses. You know people are going to talk about you; that's why you have access to the email server. Deal with it, Lane.*

Well, it seemed as though the General's Daughter was back. Lois smirked; she'd have to think on her feet to deal with this latest issue, and snap decisions in the heat of the moment were her forte. Another little voice added, *Well, you know you could...*

Listening to the Romantic - for once - Lois started to grin. Yes, that could work very well indeed...

When Clark finally arrived at the office - after stopping in Missouri to thaw an ice storm threatening to cut power over most of Kansas City - he knew something was going on from the moment he stepped into the bullpen. Everyone turned to look at him with expressions of surprise or awe or simply disbelief. And every reporter watched him avidly as he headed for his department. The only two who were acting normal were Ron and Jimmy, both of whom waved and went on about their business, but Jimmy gave Clark a wide grin that seemed to imply he knew something.

He soon saw the reason for everyone else's intense interest. Lois was leaning against his desk, her arms crossed, her expression serious but otherwise unreadable. For a moment, Clark hesitated at the door to International. *What on earth is she doing? We were going to do this slowly - start dating, get everyone used to seeing us together, break the idea to them a little at a time. If Lois decided to change plans, she could've told me...*

Wait. This might just be about calling her in. Yeah, I can see that - she looks angry. Maybe she's about to chew my head off for starting rumors.

*She still could've **warned** me...*

Clark kept all of that off his face as he approached her, making his expression a questioning one. He remembered to bump his briefcase against several reporters' desks and tell people good morning, even though he was concentrating on Lois. No one was paying attention to his performance - they were glancing back and forth between him and Lois with the air of spectators at a tennis match. Or a bullfight - they looked like they were waiting to see if he would get gored.

"Hi, Lois," he said, nudging the glasses up and dropping his briefcase beside the desk. *Oh, God, she's wearing that pinstripe suit too,* he thought, forcing himself not to glance down at her long, elegant legs.

"Good morning, Clark," she replied evenly. Looking up at him wasn't comfortable this close, so she uncrossed her arms, put both hands on the desk behind her, and eased up so she was sitting on the edge. The skirt rode up a little as she did, and Lois re-crossed her legs at the knee. That put her thigh very close to his hand, and Clark remembered the feel of her stockings under his fingers as if he were touching her now. *Focus, you ninny,* he told himself.

"What brings you over to, um, the International department?" he asked.

"I think we need to talk about Wednesday." Lois' tone was still cool and indecipherable.

"Uh, sure," Clark replied, thinking, *In front of an audience. Thanks. You were the one who loved doing improv in college, not me. Can I have a hint, please?*

"Seems there's a rumor going around," she said, glancing around as she spoke. Everyone in International had given up all pretense of work to stare at the pair of them, and the reporters in the City room were standing up to get a better view.

"Really? Wow. Well, you know, I just got in. I haven't had time to hear the latest gossip." He grinned nervously; standard Clark response to being in Lois' presence, and it worked for almost any scenario she could be planning. "So, um, what's this rumor?"

"Everyone seems to think I wasn't *quite* as sick as we were saying I was," Lois replied, characteristically circling around the point. "Rumor is, you and I had *other* plans."

"Gosh," Clark said. "Lois, I'd be really upset if anyone thought I lied to the Chief. I wonder why anybody would think such a thing?"

"Well, you can't exactly blame them," Lois replied casually, "considering the fact that they seem to already think you're the father of the twins."

For a moment, his eyes widened - she'd actually *said* that, no matter how couched in qualifiers. So much for breaking it to them gently... Before he could react with anything other than mute astonishment, Lois grinned wickedly and grabbed his tie. "Damn good thing it's true, huh?" she said huskily, and pulled him down to her for a kiss.

We can't do this at the office, what does she think she's... The voice of reason died away as his mouth met hers, and Clark hesitated only for the briefest of seconds. "We were already busted," Lois whispered against his lips, and he let himself get lost in the kiss. One hand came up behind her to cup the back of her neck tenderly, and the other rested on her knee to balance him. That last little gesture quickly became one of triumphant possession, his hand sliding up her leg a few inches, fingertips just barely under the hem of the skirt. Any man who tried that without Lois specifically wanting his hand there would've gotten bones broken, and everyone knew it.

As Clark and Lois deepened the kiss, forgetting about their audience, the assembled reporters broke into wild cheering and wolf whistles.

Jimmy and Ron had watched the entire spectacle from the doorway between their two departments. Ron had wasted no time telling Jimmy what he'd seen at the Lane family Thanksgiving dinner the previous evening, and Jimmy had sworn not to tell *anyone* - well, until he cornered Lois to ask her if it was true, anyway.

The moment Lois went over to International and camped out on Clark's desk, Ron and Jimmy had known she was planning something. As soon as Clark arrived and saw her perched there, the two friends had gotten together to watch the show.

"You think she's ticked because everyone knows?" Jimmy had whispered while Clark approached Lois hesitantly.

"Maybe," Ron muttered. "Can't tell. She doesn't *look* mad, but if she blames him for calling her in and blowing the big secret..."

"Ouch," Jimmy replied. "Man, I hope not."

"Me too," Ron said. "They were all kinds of lovey-dovey at dinner yesterday. Being good parents, too. I don't want to see them fight out here in public..."

They had hushed while Lois and Clark spoke, and when she grabbed his tie, Jimmy winced. She'd used that move before to yank a taller man closer to her and slap his face - most of the time it had been Lombard. Lois even joked that she *had* to drag him down to her height, or she'd get tennis elbow from reaching up to smack him around so often. In the old days, he'd even deserved it, as often as he'd tried something untoward with the women around the office.

But Lois had no intention of slapping Clark. Instead, she kissed him, and kissed him *thoroughly*. Now Jimmy understood what Ron meant about 'seeing is believing' - those two had kissed before, often enough that they came together easily and naturally. Clark, probably the clumsiest person in the office, even looked graceful for a moment as he bent and kissed her.

Jimmy felt one second of stinging jealousy - how many times had he and Clark both been laughed at, the two guys who both had such obvious crushes on Lois and neither of whom had a snowball's chance in Hell of getting her? Now here was Clark, who had obviously won her heart as well as fathered her twins. And he was kissing her in front of the whole office...

"Look at the Chief!" Ron hissed, elbowing Jimmy. They both turned to look into the Editor in Chief's office, seeing Perry standing beside his desk watching Lane and Kent. For a moment, his expression was unreadable. Then, much to the surprise of the two men watching him, he broke into a broad grin.

The instant of jealousy melted. Lois had never thought of Jimmy as anything other than a little brother, and he'd known it for years. At least now she was with someone who really cared about her, who knew her the way only the old crew knew each other, and who loved her for all of her crazy quirks. Even *Perry* was happy for them. The photographer grinned as he watched the pair, and then his eyebrows shot up.

Clark *was* a notorious klutz, but did he actually have to brace one hand on Lois' crossed knees to kiss her? Jimmy doubted it. And when that hand slid up her thigh ever so slightly, in full view of forty-some-odd gossip-hungry reporters, Jimmy knew it had to be deliberate. *She's mine*, that gesture said, *Lois is mine, now and forever, the twins are mine, and don't any of you forget it*. Seeing his old friend, usually so shy and mild-mannered, being possessive for even a moment filled the photographer's heart with pride. He was the first to whistle and applaud, but soon the office rang with cheering.

Swept up in the general delight, Ron and Jimmy even hugged each other, laughing when a couple of guys from Accounting came to the door to find out what all the fuss was about. No one in City or International was even pretending to work anymore - they were all laughing, clapping, whistling, and calling out encouragement, some of it ribald. In the midst of all that, Lois broke the kiss and rested her head on Clark's chest, blushing furiously and laughing. Jimmy couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her *smile* like that, not to mention laugh.

Clark hugged her, kissing the top of her head, and Lois buried her face in his chest for a moment, still looking a little embarrassed when she finally looked up. When the noise level had died down slightly, Perry walked into International, glaring at all of the reporters who were slacking off to watch the show. That paternal grin Jimmy and Ron had seen was replaced by a glower, and when he was within a few feet of the couple Perry barked, "Lane! Kent! Are you two done entertaining everyone, or do I have to get a fire extinguisher?"

Lois groaned and rolled her eyes, looking like a teenager whose father had just caught her necking. "When did *you* get here, old man?" she complained.

Clark just adjusted his glasses and said, "Good morning, Mr. White."

"It looks like it has been," Perry said archly to him before returning his attention to Lois. "Lane, I'm not paying you to be a desk ornament! Get back to your own department so *someone* - it won't be you, the way things are going - can get some work done around here!"

Jimmy and Ron started snickering, but the Chief wasn't finished. He raised his voice to the bellow they all knew and loathed. "The rest of you, this is a newspaper, not a circus! *Get to work!*" They all leaped to obey, except for Lois, who sat defiantly on Clark's desk glaring at

Perry. And Clark, who couldn't sit down and start working until Lois got off of his blotter.

Richard chose that moment to walk in the doors. A wave of silence spread among the watching reporters, most of whom hurried to their desks without looking at him. Even Jimmy felt his breath catch; as happy as he was for Clark, he liked Richard too. Just because he wasn't the right one for Lois didn't mean he had to have that fact flung into his face...

Ron was grinning, though, and Jimmy took that as a good sign. Richard greeted them both as he walked by, sounding preoccupied; he was carrying a sheaf of computer printouts that he studied intently. "Morning, Uncle Perry," he said as he walked by the Chief.

"You're late," Perry replied, but Richard didn't respond. He was already on his way to his office, greeting his staff with a distracted wave. They all watched him, puzzled; surely he saw his one-time fiancée sitting on Kent's desk?

As he drew level with them, Richard said casually, "Good morning, Lois. Good morning, Clark."

"Morning, Richard," they replied in unison, not looking ruffled in the slightest.

Now the unusually-quiet reporters looked shocked, everyone pausing to watch Richard. Had he *really* just walked past the pair without even noticing? What on earth was he so absorbed in, anyway? Even Perry was giving his nephew a speculative look.

At the door of his own office, Richard paused and looked around. For the first time, he seemed to see everyone staring at him, and his gaze went to Lois, still sitting on Clark's desk. Jimmy held his breath.

Then Richard turned back to the other reporters and laughed. "You didn't think I didn't *know*, did you?" he asked incredulously. "Hell, don't you all remember who made arrangements for them *both* to get personal leave at the same time? *And* covered her department while she was out?"

"Yeah, rub it in, Richard," Lois called sarcastically. She had turned around to look over her shoulder at him, twisted awkwardly and bracing a hand atop Clark's computer monitor. "We've *all* heard about it."

Richard leaned against the door to his office. "Don't worry, I didn't fire anybody, and I didn't clean that disgusting pit you call a coffeemaker, either." Grinning, he added, "Now I know why you'd never marry me - your coffee would've killed me in the first year."

"Can't marry anyone who won't drink newsmen's brew," Lois replied, utterly deadpan. "You guessed it in one."

Richard just chuckled. "Hope you like drinking tar, Clark," he tossed off, and closed his office door behind him.

The m-word had been mentioned in Lois' presence, and predictably, she scurried off of Clark's desk and over to her own department with a muttered apology. Jimmy and Ron looked at each other one last time; against all odds, everything had turned out right. Richard was happy, Lois and Clark were happy, and there were no more secrets floating around the office - for the moment.

The International reporter and the City photographer high-fived each other solemnly, and both went back to work.

Lois and Clark met briefly in the break room after lunch. He took one look at the sour expression on her face and smiled sympathetically. "Did Perry weigh you down with work, too? He's given me six assignments to finish by next Friday."

"Yeah, we're supposed to be rested and ready to work our asses off," Lois growled,

clearly having heard the same lecture from the Chief. "Only he's got me on three stories and four editorials. Not only that, he's dragging me to two of those stupid business meetings. I swear, if this is the kind of welcome back I get, I'll never take a vacation again."

Clark chuckled and touched her cheek lightly, fingertips sliding down to her jaw to tilt her face up for a brief kiss. "We can do it, and he knows that. Besides, you've gotten enough sleep over the past few days that you can afford to stay up writing editorials, right?"

She made an irritated little noise at him and narrowed her eyes, but her lips were curved up in a smile. "Yeah, fine. But you'd better be coming by the house to help me look after the twins if you expect me to get any work done from home."

"Of course," he replied. "I can't stay the night... Wouldn't be a good idea with Kala's hearing, anyway."

Lois grinned saucily. "You know, she's going to hear us eventually. I don't intend to be celibate until she moves out."

He returned the knowing smile. "Then I guess when you find a new place, we'd better soundproof the rooms."

She was about to make a sarcastic reply when Jimmy suddenly appeared beside them. Throwing an arm around each of their shoulders, the photographer hugged his two favorite reporters. "I love you guys!" he exclaimed, beaming, then disappeared out of the break room.

"What the...?" Clark said, giving his friend a bemused look.

"He's happy for us," Lois said, smiling fondly. "I think we just met the President of the Lane-Kent Fan Club. Give him some credit, he waited this long before doing it."

"Still..." Clark shrugged. "I'm just glad the office reaction was positive. Thank you *so* much for warning me what you were about to do, by the way."

"You're welcome," Lois replied with no irony. "As for me, I'm glad Jimmy's timing has gotten a little less accurate. Back in the old days, he was always showing up to *ruin* the moment, not celebrate it."

They smiled at each other, both remembering a California desert, a rental car out of gas, a tirade from Lois, and Superman looking at her with love and relief shining in his eyes. They'd swayed toward each other - and Jimmy showed up, complaining about how he'd been left in the desert. Lois had wanted to kill him for that...

"C'mon, let's get back to work before..." Clark began, but he stopped in mid-sentence and looked toward the door.

Before Lois could ask him what was going on, she heard the thump of running feet. Jason came tearing through the office and into the break room, launching himself at his mother the moment he saw her. "Mommeee!" he called complainingly, "Kala's bein' a pirate again!"

"Oh *God*," Lois groaned. "I'll *kill* Lucy. She knows you guys aren't supposed to watch any of those movies."

"Lois, what on earth?" Clark asked, but the answer to his question was close behind her brother.

"Avast, ye scurvy dog!" Kala crowed merrily when she caught sight of Jason in the break room doorway, hugging their mother. "I'll make ye walk the plank!"

"Mommy, make her stop!" Jason whined.

Kala looked around the break room, grinning manically at Clark, and then caught sight of an empty paper towel roll someone had left on the counter. Snatching it up, she waved it at Jason like a cutlass and yelled, "Arr, miserable cur!"

"Kala Josephine!" Lois called. "Your brother is not a dog, and he doesn't have scurvy,

either. *Knock it off*. Now."

Half the office was watching this latest installment of drama brought to them by the Lanes, and Kala was aware of her audience. Looking up at her mother mournfully, Kala flung her head back and cried in tones of deepest pathos, "But why's the rum gone?"

Clark couldn't help snickering, and most of the listening reporters burst into laughter. Lois just pressed her hands to her temples. "Kala, I'm serious. Stop it *this instant*. You are not, and never will be, a pirate." Hugging her son, she muttered, "I should've *never* let her dress up as a pirate for Halloween..."

"But Mommy, you said I could be anything I wanted to when I grow up," Kala said in wounded tones. "If I wanted somethin' bad enough and worked hard enough, you said I could do *anything*."

Lois gave Clark an arch look. "See, all that crap in the parenting books you're supposed to tell your kids? This is what it gets you. My son wants to be a radioactive lizard, and my daughter wants to be a Johnny Depp role."

He laughed, rumpling Kala's hair. "Sweetheart, you don't want to be a pirate," he said gently.

"Yes I do!" Kala shot back.

"Kala, you *can't* be a pirate," Lois growled. "One, there aren't any more pirates like the ones in movies, because there aren't any more sailing ships. Two, pirates are *bad* - they steal stuff and hurt people. And that'd look bad on your father and me, right? Considering who Daddy is? Three, you're not a boy. All the pirate captains were boys."

Kala's face fell. "There's no girl pirates?"

"No captains," Lois said, "and we Lane women don't take orders well."

Richard had gone to get the twins on his lunch break, and had followed them into the office, grinning indulgently. Lois saw him then, and looked up with a scowl. "Get ready to give Ron bereavement leave - I'm killing my sister. She *knows* not to let Kala see any of those pirate movies."

"It wasn't Lucy, it was Ella," Richard informed her. "It was on TV and she didn't scroll fast enough to hide it."

Jason had decided it was safe to deal with his sister again, and was now mocking her. "You're never gonna be a pirate," he hissed. "A pie-rat, that's as close as you'll ever get. You're already a rat, now you just need the pie!"

"Meanie," Kala snarled at him. "You're never gonna be a lizard, either. Who'd wanna be a dumb ol' lizard, anyway? They're ugly and smelly and stupid."

"Gazeera's not stupid!"

All three adults became aware of the escalating argument at that moment, and quickly moved to break it up before the twins could *really* cause a scene. Clark picked up Kala, Lois picked up Jason, and Richard stepped in between them. "Kids, if you two can behave like civilized children for five minutes instead of the wild hoydens you've been impersonating," Richard said, "I need to talk to you. Clark, Lois, you too. Oh, and I need Perry in on this also."

Lois raised an eyebrow at him. "Uh-huh. You need all of us there, do you? What're you plotting, Richard White?" she asked dubiously.

"You'll see," Richard told her. "Meet me in the conference room. I'll get my uncle."

Five minutes later, they were all assembled in the conference room, Perry grumbling, "I hope you don't think you're doing this in *secret*, boy. Everyone saw us walk back here - you might as well have had this clandestine little meeting in my glass-walled office."

"Uncle Perry, everything I've said to you in your office has gotten leaked to the rumor mill," Richard said. "Maybe the place is bugged. I'd prefer to keep this under wraps for a while, that's why I wanted to talk here."

"And just what's so important?" Perry asked.

Richard took a deep breath. "I need some personal leave," he said.

Perry looked at him, then at Lois and Clark. "Okay, fine. Lane can cover your department..."

"International basically runs itself now," Richard interrupted. "I've got Clark and Ron and a handful of others who'll do their job even if the assistant editor's office is empty. The rest might need some encouragement, but it's not the bubbling cauldron of trouble that City is."

"Gee, that was a huge compliment there. Thanks, Richard," Lois muttered.

"Only you could run it as well as you do," Richard told her.

Her expression was not amused as she stared at him. "Yeah, right. Shut up while you're ahead, White."

"How much leave are we talking here?" Perry asked him.

"I don't know," Richard replied. "As long as it takes."

"As long as *what* takes?" Like any old reporter, Perry wasn't going to let go until he got a real answer.

Lois was already grinning, where he had been going now painfully obvious to her, but she let Richard speak. "I'm going to Milan," he said. "And I'm bringing Lana Lang back with me, even if I have to camp under her window and sing bad Italian love songs until she sees me just to shut me up."

Well, it seems to me that the best relationships - the ones that last - are frequently the ones rooted in friendship. You know, one day you look at the person and you see something more than you did the night before. Like a switch has been flicked somewhere. And the person who was just a friend is suddenly the only person you can ever imagine yourself with.

~Dana Scully

Richana

Lana headed to her favorite lunch restaurant, a pleasantly relaxed trattoria that served absolutely amazing *risotto al salto*. On Saturday, if she wanted a seat, she had to arrive early - the place would fill up quickly. But with her busy schedule, she was lucky to get there while they were still serving lunch.

It *was* busy, but there were a few tables left, and she went in, smiling at the waiters who knew her well. Lana glanced around the restaurant, wondering where she'd wind up sitting...

...and saw a very familiar profile hiding behind a menu. Recognition halted her in her tracks, sea-green eyes going wide. *Is that...? No way. I'm missing him so much that I'm seeing him everywhere, that's all. But... Unruly sandy hair, and I'd know those hands anywhere. But it **can't** be, he doesn't even know I've left Smallville...* She walked over to the table hesitantly, half irritated if her suspicion turned out to be right, and half worried that she was about to scare a total stranger. The man's shoulders tensed slightly as he angled the menu up, almost as though he were trying not to laugh, and that decided her.

Lana grabbed the menu and yanked it cleanly out of his hands. Richard's broad grin and mischievous eyes looked up at her, full of amusement, and she swatted his shoulder with the menu. "Richard! What on *earth* are you doing here?" she asked, trying to sound angry in spite of her smile.

He caught her hand and took the menu back, kissing the backs of her knuckles as he stood up. "I came here for you," Richard said simply, kissing her hand again as he pulled out a chair for her. Lana watched him as she sat down, irked and intrigued at the same time.

Richard seemed utterly pleased with himself as he sat down across from her, and she narrowed her eyes. "You weren't even supposed to know I was in Milan," Lana stated.

"Yes, well, I *am* a reporter, Lana," he replied, smirking. "I have ways of finding things out."

"Oh, so you *stalked* me. I see."

Richard put his chin on his palm and beamed at her, giving Lana the annoying feeling that he knew perfectly well how irresistible he looked. A handsome man, being cute - she couldn't decide whether to smack him for his audacity or kiss him for his charm. After a moment, the confident grin faded a bit, and Richard said quietly, "If you want me to go, I will."

"No," she replied. The answer needed no thought, and Lana covered his other hand with hers. "Stay. I'm glad you're here..." That was saying too much, though, especially when his smile brightened like the sun breaking through clouds, so she changed the subject. "How long have you known?"

"Since the day you arrived in Italy," Richard replied a trifle smugly.

"And you still asked me what was going on in Smallville? You ... you..." Lana was laughing in spite of herself. "You *jerk!* I can't believe you! How did you find out so quickly?"

"A good reporter never reveals his sources," Richard replied, leaning back in his chair as the waiter arrived with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

Lana's lack of facility in the language was revealed the moment she ordered, but her sheepish grin made the waiter smile at her anyway. Richard's Italian was a little better than hers, and after he'd ordered he teased her about it. "Nice to see there's at least *one* thing you're not perfect at."

"Oh, there's a lot of things I'm very bad at," Lana replied, sipping the wine the waiter had brought them.

"Name one."

"Discouraging you." Her wry smile made it more jest than snipe, and Richard replied in kind.

"If you really *wanted* to discourage me, I'm sure you could," he told her. "Luckily for us all, I get the impression you like having me around."

Lana's sea green eyes softened, and she dropped the teasing tone. "You're right," she replied softly.

He took her free hand, squeezing her fingers lightly. "I'm glad to hear it. You see, I promised the twins I'd bring you home with me. Even if I had to camp out under your window and sing bad Italian love songs."

"Your Italian's better than mine, but I'd hate to hear you sing badly in it." Lana ran her thumb over his knuckles, all of the stress of her day fading.

"Yeah, well, the only Italian love song the kids know is *Bella Notte*," Richard said. "So I'm pretty glad you haven't chased me away."

Lana chuckled. "From *Lady and the Tramp*? It *would* be appropriate."

"Ouch," he laughed. "That was cruel, but I gotta give it to you."

She smiled lazily. Richard was stroking the palm of her hand lightly, moving his fingertips in tiny circles, and she was rapidly forgetting everything but the two of them. With an effort, she forced her mind away from the gentleness and consideration in that touch, and asked, "So you told the twins you were coming to get me, hmm?"

"I told them I was doing the whole knight-in-shining-armor thing," he admitted. "Jason and Kala are still a little antsy about me being out of their sight - we got most of it taken care of over Thanksgiving, mainly because Clark was there, and he and I and Lois made the point to *everyone* in the family that I'm still going to be part of the twins' lives. Ella says I'm still welcome to all the Lane family gatherings - Clark let her in on the secret, by the way."

Lana's eyebrows shot up at that, but it made sense. Ella Lane had seemed entirely too intelligent and observant not to figure things out on her own. And for the sake of her grandkids, she'd never breathe a word about Clark's identity. Richard continued, "But yeah, the kids are still a bit nervy. So when I called a conference Friday to ask for some personal leave, I included them. And I pinky-swore to both of them that I would come home. I let Jason keep my watch, too, and he knows what a big deal that is. So he's cool with it."

"How are Lois and Clark doing with them?" Lana asked gently.

Richard grinned. "I imagine they're having fun. Oh, speaking of those two - they decided to go ahead and let the whole office know they're together and that he's the twins' father."

Lana winced a little, and Richard hastened to correct her first impression. "No, it's okay, really. I got to make the grand entrance and act like it was no big deal that she was sitting on his desk. Everybody's got the idea that I've known all along and have been covering for them both, which is mostly true. I haven't said anything about us, but I've let it be known that Lois and I parted on amicable terms and we're still friends." He squeezed the tips of her fingers and gave her that dazzling grin again. "Enough about me. What've you been up to?"

"Haven't your mysterious sources told you everything?" Lana challenged.

"No, not everything," he replied. "Enough to get a hotel less than two blocks from where you're staying, but I want to know how you've been."

"Stalker," she teased. "Well, the show's in four days, which means my job now is mostly to prevent everyone from having nervous breakdowns simultaneously. I can't stop them from panicking, just from panicking *together*."

"Like a newsroom the hour before press time," Richard commented. "Ouch."

"Yes, but your deadlines are daily," Lana pointed out. "We only do a major show maybe four or five times a year, so no one gets used to the frantic last-minute pace. And you work with journalists and printers - I work with designers, seamstresses, and models."

"Yeah, you've got it way worse than me," he replied after a moment of thought.

Lana chuckled. "Yes, well, calling you every day is just about the only thing keeping me sane at this point."

He gave her that dazzling smile again, but before Richard could make a charming and flirtatious reply, the waiter arrived with their appetizer. That ruined the moment - but when the man recognized Lana and referred to her by name, Richard grinned. "You do realize," he said, "that if we keep being seen together, you're going to suffer the fate of all famous women."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"People will do that weird name-hybridization thing to us," Richard replied. "Like Brangelina. Which would make us, what, Richana?"

"No," Lana said automatically.

"I dunno, it's got a nice ring to it," Richard teased.

"No, Richard. Absolutely not."

Christmas shopping with Superman ... I would've never believed it. Lois chuckled, shaking her head. *I would've thought anyone who suggested it was out of their freakin' mind. But here we are, even if he is in civvies.*

"And what's so funny, Lois?" Clark asked her, tilting his head to glance at the amused expression on her face.

"Well, we got up early, went to *breakfast* - which I don't eat except on trips and which you know..."

"Pizza at nine in morning," was his automatic reply, grinning down at her.

She made a face at him, annoyed at being questioned on it. "That's not breakfast; that's an early lunch."

"At eleven it would be an early lunch - at nine it's a late breakfast. Besides, Lois, it's the most important meal of the day..."

"Yes, mother, spare me," Lois interjected, cutting off the lecture she'd heard at least twice. "As I was saying, we got up early, I mean *early*, went to breakfast with the kids, dropped them at my mom's house, and now we're in the *mall*. You know, that place that every sane person *avoids* on the weekend after Thanksgiving?"

"Which explains perfectly why we're here," Clark replied teasingly. "You're crazy, and I'm crazy in love with you."

"Smartass," she said with a roll of her eyes. "The totally freakish thing is, *there's no one here.*" Lois swept her arm out in a gesture that encompassed the entire mall.

Clark looked around, then back at Lois. "It's eleven o'clock on a Sunday morning, Lois. *Of course* no one's here. They're all in church."

"Oh, right," Lois said with a sigh. There was no getting out of this now, she realized with utter dread, and braced herself for the toy-buying wars she had mostly left behind in the last couple of years. "Well, let's make the most of it."

An hour later, she was vindicated in all of her reasons for doing most of her shopping online every year. The mall had started filling up, and even though it wasn't yet December, people were ill-tempered and competitive. This *was* the weekend of Black Friday, after all, and every single store was having a sale.

All was going well for them; three items from the lists the twins had written yesterday were already in the basket when Lois saw the Bratz doll that Kala really, really wanted, and reached for it. Another woman came out of nowhere, dove across the display, nearly crashing into Lois, and grabbed at the same box. Unfortunately for her, though, Lois had better reflexes and snatched the doll out of her grasp, making the woman almost fall to the floor. "See, this is why you don't grab at stuff," Lois growled, clutching the box in a death-grip. The expression on her face was of a woman who was willing to physically fight to keep her prize. "Psycho."

"Bitch," the other woman hissed.

Clark, watching this exchange, looked politely horrified. "Uh, ma'am? They have several more of those on this shelf - I'd be happy to get one down for you."

"Yeah, be a hero," Lois said under her breath, still eyeing the other woman with contempt. "Toss it to her quick or she might bite you, Clark. She looks rabid."

With an obscene gesture and more profanity for Lois - and no thanks whatsoever for Clark - the woman disappeared into the growing throng once she got her prize. Lois retorted to the stranger's retreating back, "Screw you, sister - I got the toy first! My kids were better than yours. They deserve it more."

"Lois, calm down," Clark said, looking around in embarrassment and sounding alarmed. "It's just a toy..."

"Yeah, you weren't around for the godforsaken Tickle-Me-Elmo craze a few years back," she replied sharply, triumphantly putting the doll she'd snagged into the cart. "Fights broke out, people went to the hospital. I'm telling you, Christmas shopping for kids is *madness*. It's a frikkin' war zone, and your only weapon is your cart."

"Lois..."

"Fear me, Kent, for I am the master of shopping-cart-fu," Lois replied sarcastically, eyes weary as they started moving again. "I'm serious - I had to practically carry the cart up to the register last year because some psycho rammed me hard enough to knock a wheel off." Smiling in dark triumph, she added, "I got the truck Jason wanted, and it was the last one in the store."

Clark just looked around the store, his eyes wide. The season of giving and sharing had become the season of mass commercial feeding frenzies. "You know, I usually do my Christmas shopping way ahead of time. In August."

That seemed to break most of the tension in her. Lois snorted with laughter. "You're a sick man, Kent."

"Oh, hey," Clark said, noticing an end cap. "Isn't that the chemistry set Jason wants?"

"It's too expensive and he'll blow up the house," Lois said automatically, not even looking. "Give it a couple years."

"How about the microscope?"

"Once he sees what's in the water, we'll have to buy him juice every day."

Clark could look through several aisles at once, and grinned. "Hey, they've got a karaoke machine..."

Lois stopped and looked up at him in horror, thinking that he clearly hadn't heard his daughter's attempts to sound like Celine Dion. *It could be worse, though. She could be trying for Mariah Carey.* She winced at the thought. "Not 'til Kala's voice settles a bit. She can hit notes that shatter my eardrums *now*; she doesn't need amplification."

Clark sighed at her, shaking his head. He clearly wanted to spoil the twins and Lois was making it difficult. "Okay, so what gifts are on the approved list?" he asked.

"Anything that isn't going to require me to take more Tylenol than I already do," Lois

said, giving him a grin and taking his hand. Her smile was warm when she looked up at him. "I promise, there's stuff they *can* have. You act like I'm telling you that *you're* not getting this stuff."

"All I want for Christmas is the chance to spoil them," Clark said honestly. "It's the first time I get to buy them presents..."

"But not the last," Lois reminded him gently. "Keep this up, and you'll have to buy them new cars when they're fifteen just to top your previous gifts - and you *won't* be buying them cars. Ever. If they wanna drive, they can save up like I did."

"If they turn out to be as responsible and determined as you are, then I'll say your plan worked," Clark replied, ruffling her hair.

Lois glared sourly, swatting at his hand. "I wasn't *nearly* as responsible as you think I was when I was seventeen."

"C'mon, Lois..."

"Responsible seventeen-year-old girls don't sneak into bars with fake IDs and make their grocery money playing pool against guys who can't play in the presence of underage cleavage." Lois arched an eyebrow and added unnecessarily, "Which Kala will *not* be doing. I'm responsible *now* because I had to take care of myself pretty much since high school, although I did a lot of irresponsible, crazy, dangerous stuff to get here."

"Oh, and jumping out a sixtieth-story window to try and prove someone's secret identity isn't crazy or dangerous?"

"Not for me it isn't," Lois retorted, grinning. "All right, help me find the puzzle aisle. Jason needs something he can put together on Christmas Day, and something that'll keep him busy for a few weeks."

They navigated across the store, dodging harried shoppers and whiny kids. Just before they reached the puzzles aisle, Lois saw Clark surreptitiously trying to sneak a couple of action figures into the cart when she wasn't looking. *My God, it's as bad as shopping with children*, she thought.

Sighing, Lois caught his face in her hands and looked directly into his mournful expression. "Clark, m'love, I don't care if you insist on paying for this trip, stop trying to single-handedly keep the store in business."

"Lois..." he began, and in that one word she read everything, and hushed him with a finger over his lips.

"Clark, listen to me. It doesn't matter what you buy them, you can't make up for missing the first six years of their lives. But *that wasn't your fault*. You're part of their lives now, that's what matters. And having you for a dad is the coolest gift they'll ever get." She paused, looking lovingly up at him, the crowd in the store forgotten as she fell further into those amazingly blue eyes. "Honestly, it does wonders for me, too."

No words could express what that admission meant to him; not just that Lois wanted him in *her* life, but that she wanted him to be the twins' father in actual fact, not just technical truth. She loved Jason and Kala so much, and was so fiercely protective of them, that hearing her say he was a welcome part of their family made Clark's heart tighten in his chest. He smiled slowly, lovingly, and leaned in a little closer to her.

Lois tilted her face up ... but the instant before their lips met, a kid in the next aisle started wailing for a toy. "Mommeeeeeeeeee ... I wanna wanna wanna..."

Lois and Clark both laughed, glad they'd left the twins with Ella even though they were better behaved than that little monster... "Welcome to the madhouse, 'Daddy'," Lois joked,

cracking herself up with the absurdity of calling him that. *If he addresses me as Mommy any time other than in front of the twins, I'll just flip out. If you'd told me seven years ago... Not just that my kids would call Superman 'Daddy', but that I had kids at all - and if you really wanted to blow my mind, you could've told me back then that I'd finally break down and breed with Kent. Oh, dear God...*

"Lois, you're laughing way more than that comment entails," Clark said, watching her with what appeared to be her own raised-eyebrow dubious look. The familiar expression only made her laugh harder. "What, exactly, is going on in that devious mind of yours?"

"You wouldn't want to know, Kent," Lois chuckled, elbowing his side affectionately. "Just that the kids know our names, so we don't have to traumatize ourselves by calling each other Mommy and Daddy in front of them."

"Sure, Lois..." Clark trailed off, certain there was more to it than that, but Lois was picking out puzzles.

"What do you think, Clark? Motorcycle or sailboat?" Lois held both boxes up, looking at them with a keen eye for difficulty and the coolness factor.

He just chuckled. "Promise me you won't get him *that* one, okay?" He nodded toward one of the upper shelves, and Lois burst out laughing. The puzzle Clark was looking at was a picture of Superman, taken when he'd momentarily landed on the White House roof.

Controlling her snickers, Lois grinned up at him. "Aw, why not? They say he's the hardest one to get."

"Not when people *really* need him." Clark kissed her forehead and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Especially certain lovely, irascible lady reporters with a penchant for falling from high places."

"I prefer the term reckless, thank you very much," Lois said, almost primly, and headed for the back of the store with both puzzles in the cart.

"You've caused so much trouble in your life, Lois, I'm surprised Santa sends you *any* presents at Christmas," Clark teased her.

She halted and turned completely around, her hands behind her holding onto the cart. Smiling wickedly, Lois purred, "Clark, I'm the whole reason Santa *has* a naughty list." She let her expression become a smarmy grin as she whipped back around, and added, "Hasn't stopped me from getting presents *yet*."

Clark stayed frozen in place, a wicked little smile of his own bringing a gleam to his eyes. His first thought was, *Hmm, I know what I'm getting you for Christmas, Ms. Lane.* And after he started following her, admiring the sway in her hips - and knowing that she knew he was watching - he also thought, *The guys at the office would go wild if they saw us acting like this. Guess they'd better get used to it sometime.*

Lana had been late returning from lunch with Richard yesterday, an event that caused much speculation amongst her staff. She had *never* been late to anything, and Kay in particular had given her a skeptical look when she hurried out to lunch today.

She hadn't thought about that until the waiter came to clear their table, however. Glancing at her watch, Lana realized she would be late *again*, not a precedent she wanted to establish. The meal had been over for a while, she and Richard just talking and delaying the moment of departure. "I'm sorry, I've got to go," she told him, smiling ruefully.

Richard shrugged. "I know, you've got a lot to do. But I'll miss you until I see you again." There was such resignation in his voice that she didn't *want* to leave. Not yet, anyway.

But she had to get back to the hotel... Lana made an abrupt decision. "Would you like to come with me?" she asked. "I'm going to be incredibly busy, but ... I suppose you could figure out how to stay out from underfoot..."

Catching her hand, Richard leaned forward to kiss her fingertips, completely unaware of how that simple gesture affected her. "I'd love to," he replied. "Lead on."

He paid the bill - he insisted on doing so - and walked back to her hotel. Richard was surprised to find himself pleased out of all proportion by the simple fact that Lana held his hand during the short walk. She was so strange about touch; sometimes she would seem to delight in the warmth of her hand in his, other times she would shy away from any contact. It was hard to tell why she had such contradictory reactions, and he was too drunk on her presence to try and puzzle it out.

The moment they arrived back at the hotel, however, Richard was stunned out of his current train of thought. Lana and her staff had basically taken over the old-fashioned hotel, and he walked into a downstairs conference room full of women. Mostly younger, very attractive women, who were all looking speculatively at him. He hadn't gotten a reaction like *that* since sneaking into the women's dorm in college, and sheer surprise made him flash his brilliant grin at all of them.

This was stupid, Lana thought, as every single employee (and half the married ones) returned that smile. She cleared her throat and said, "Ladies, this is Richard White. He's..." *Well, what exactly is he? 'Boyfriend' is far too teenage a term, 'lover' isn't accurate...*

"I'm Lana's boy-toy," Richard said, sliding his arm around her waist and beaming.

"*Richard!*" Lana turned to look at him, blushing, utterly scandalized, and just a bit delighted...

"Well? My own paper printed it, so it must be true." And now that million-watt grin was just for her, which woke a flame of possessive pride in her heart.

That also provoked indulgent chuckles from most of the girls, and Lana swatted Richard on the shoulder affectionately before addressing them again. "Now ladies, I didn't intend to distract everyone. We do have three days..."

A collective groan answered her, and Kay appeared at her side. It was the first time Kay and Richard had seen each other; he didn't know who she was, this brunette with the short razor-cut hair and serious gray eyes, but he didn't like the intent way she looked at him.

"Boss?" Kay asked after a moment, turning to look at Lana.

"I *hate* it when you call me that," Lana replied.

"You are," Kay said. "A word?"

Lana gave a sigh, shooting Richard a long-suffering look. He shrugged; apparently this girl didn't like anything that interfered in business. Looking around, he found himself a free seat and watched in rapt fascination as two older women operated their sewing machines at such speed that he expected to see one of them stitch her fingertips into the garments at any second.

Kay pulled Lana aside, still giving Richard little looks over her shoulder, and the redhead took a deep breath. "Kay, I should not be getting a lecture from someone nine years younger than me."

"Yeah, well, apparently you need one," Kay replied, crossing her arms and giving her employer an incredulous look. "What is *wrong* with you, Lana?"

"Nothing-" The retort was cut off by Kay's next words.

"You *ran* from that? *Damn!* That is a fine-looking man - a little too scruffy for my taste,

but ... *damn*. Unless he's got like a criminal past or something, *go for it*, lady."

Lana's jaw literally dropped - that was *not* the lecture she was expecting. "This from the woman who scolded me for being absolutely head-over-heels in love?"

"Well, you were being pretty flaky," Kay replied. "And showing up late - it's just not you. But seeing that, I can see why your lunch breaks are taking a bit longer."

For the second time in five minutes, Lana blushed to match her hair. Under her breath, she muttered, "Kay, I am *not* sleeping with him."

"Why not?" Kay looked over her shoulder, catching Richard in the act of returning one of the older women's smiles with one just as dazzling as the grin he'd offered the girls. "Hell, *I* would."

"Don't get any ideas," Lana growled, and then blushed even redder when she heard her own jealous tone. "I mean..."

Kay just snickered. "Never mind, I get the hint. Let's get back to work."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm going to hear about this for weeks?" Lana sighed, and quickly made her rounds of the various groups. She and Kay kept things so well organized that there wasn't much to do in the final three days before the show, but the few tasks left were utterly critical. Soothing a few egos and calming several tempers, she wound up back in the main room...

...where Richard was accepting a glass of wine from one of the models, who *really* didn't have to flash quite that much cleavage at him. To his credit, he was looking at her eyes, but Lana shot her a green-eyed glare that made the girl scurry off abruptly. Richard turned slightly in the chair as Lana came up behind him and rested her hands on his shoulders possessively. "I have this feeling that bringing you into a hotel full of younger, better-looking women was *not* one of my best ideas," she said archly.

"Hey, now," Richard replied, looking up at her. "Who says they're better-looking? *I* didn't. I happen to be highly partial to redheads."

"I know, Lois told me," she said, tousling his hair. "Most of them are still younger than me."

"As if I care." He searched her face, looking worried, then stood up quickly and caught her hand. "Is there someplace we can talk for a minute?"

"Sure..." she answered dubiously, and led him out across the hall into one of the meeting rooms that they weren't using at present. "What is it?"

"We need to get something settled right now," Richard replied seriously.

Lana felt a little queasy. "What's that?"

He took a step closer and cupped her face in both hands, making her look directly at him. "I don't care if you lead me into a room full of barely-legal bellydancers, Lana. You will *still* be the most beautiful woman in the room. And the only one I'm interested in."

She blinked; that wasn't quite what she had expected him to say. "Richard...?"

"You are amazingly gorgeous," he told her. "Yeah, there's about three billion other women on the planet. At least half of them are more than pretty. So what? None of them are *you*. *You're* the reason I took personal leave and flew to Milan, not a bunch of fresh-out-of-college girls who think I'm cute. *I love you*. And yes, I like it when you're possessive over me, but you don't actually have to be. There's no one else but you."

For a long moment, she just stared up at him. She didn't want to ask the question that had been lurking in her mind since the moment she saw the way the girls reacted to Richard, but in the end she couldn't deny that she worried about it. "Even though half of those girls out there

would probably go to bed with you tonight, and I won't?"

"Lana, I spent four years in the Air Force, four years in college, and about three years after that just looking to get laid," he replied frankly. "If that was all I was after now, I wouldn't be worthy of you. You're not that kind of woman - I figured that out. Believe me when I say this: I. Want. *You*. No one else. If you want to wait until we're married, that's fine. I'll wait. You're *more* than worth it."

She had no words for the way that made her feel - loved and cherished and adored all at once. So instead of speaking, Lana slid her arms around his neck and kissed him. And as was rapidly becoming usual between them, the moment their lips met, she lost all track of time and place.

Finally drawing back, Lana looked up at him with a fey gleam in her eyes. Richard chuckled and kissed her forehead. "Of course, if you want to change your mind about the whole wait-'til-marriage thing, there *is* a lock on that door."

"Richard," she muttered, swatting his shoulder affectionately, but her tone was much less scandalized than before. "Enough of this, I've got work to do." She kissed him one last time - briefly - and turned to leave.

The moment she opened the door, however, Kay was standing there grinning and shaking her head. "I don't even want to hear it," the younger woman laughed. "C'mon, don't make me separate you two."

Lana just groaned heavily and walked past her. "And I'll be hearing about *that* for *months*."

Life in the Lane household was getting back to normal, and normal meant Wednesday afternoon piano lessons for Jason. Kala was over at Barbara Thomas' house, too, even though she didn't take piano - she played well with Barbara's daughter Ashlyn, keeping both of them out of trouble while Jason practiced. And having the twins out of the house gave Lois and Clark another chance to go Christmas shopping and hide the gifts.

Once that was done - Lois muttering threats at the high linen closet shelf which she could barely reach, even with a stepladder, and which only required Clark to stand on tiptoe - they headed out to pick up the twins. Clark didn't think anything of it until they were at the door, and then he suddenly wondered if Mrs. Thomas knew about the recent changes in Lois' life...

It was already too late to wonder. The door was opening, and Barbara greeted them both with a smile. "Lois, it's lovely to see you - and you must be Clark. Pleased to meet you."

"I gave her the scoop," Lois replied to his surprised expression.

"Very nice to meet you, too, Mrs. Thomas," Clark replied, shaking her hand. She gave him an appraising look and a warm smile as she invited them inside.

He was listening for the kids, already hearing Jason on the piano, and happened to overhear Barbara's whispered comment to Lois: "Very nice - good catch."

"Thanks," Lois whispered back. "He's definitely a keeper. And he can cook."

Chuckling - she had to know he could hear her - Clark turned his attention to Jason's playing. He was *very* good for his age ... and he was playing *Heart and Soul*.

That gave Clark a moment's pause, remembering the Pulitzers, Lois in his arms, her mouth so close to his - and then she'd dropped the bomb of knowing his secret. *Only Lois would choose to do it like that*, he thought, half fondly and half exasperatedly.

The three adults went into the music room. Jason was so absorbed in his playing that he didn't hear them, completely focused on making each note exactly right. For a long moment,

Clark just watched his son, seeing an echo of himself in the intensity of Jason' concentration. He didn't want to break the spell of the music...

But it was soon broken for him. Kala had heard her parents arrive, and she barreled into the room with Ashlyn in tow. "Mommy! Daddy! Didja mail our Christmas lists to Santa?"

"We did," Lois said, hugging her daughter. Jason turned around at his sister's voice and hopped off the piano bench, hurrying over to hug Clark. Lois ruffled Kala's hair and smiled at Ashlyn, who giggled and hid behind her mom.

"You were gone a long time," Jason said. "I almost learned another song, but I like *Heart 'n' Soul* best."

"There was a long line at the post office, sweetheart," Lois said, changing the subject quickly. "I like *Heart and Soul* the best, too. Daddy and I danced to it at the Pulitzers."

Both twins beamed. "When you wore the pretty gray dress?" Kala asked.

"Yes," Clark told her. "And it is a *very* pretty dress, but not half as pretty as the lady who wore it."

"Yay!" the twins cheered in unison.

"Flatterer," Lois laughed, and kissed both twins. "Come on, you munchkins. Barbara, thank you so much."

"It's always a pleasure to look after them, Lois," she replied, giving her friend a brief hug. The twins got longer hugs before they skipped out to the car, arguing over who was going to get more of the toys on their list.

Clark just slid his arm around Lois' waist. "So you're keeping me?"

"Unless you plan to go rocketing off to Krypton again," she replied very quietly, tilting her face up for a quick kiss. "Do *that*, and you won't be welcome on the same planet with me anymore."

"I wasn't welcome when I came back the first time," Clark told her, giving her a brief, affectionate squeeze. "That dress you wore to the Pulitzers was absolute murder, I hope you know."

"Good thing it wasn't a rental," she said, her eyes bright. The twins were waiting patiently beside the Audi in Barbara's driveway, giggling over the silly affectionate antics of their parents.

"So I'll get to see you in the pretty dress again?" Clark asked, lightly teasing.

"And out of it," Lois whispered, kissing him again quickly.

"Stop kissin' and let's go!" Kala called. "I'm *hungry*, and you promised we'd make cookies!"

"As if Barbara didn't feed you two heathens," Lois grumbled. "Fine, fine, we're coming. Hold on." She and Clark shared one more look full of amusement before they opened the car doors for Jason and Kala.

Once inside and buckled up, Clark looked in the rearview mirror and winked at Jason and Kala. "Hey, you two. Remind me later there's something I have to ask you."

Lana and Kay had planned to arrange a catered dinner party for everyone after the show, but when two finished white dresses got splashed with red wine the night before, everyone who could run a sewing machine or cut fabric was pressed into service trying to recreate them. Even Richard found himself playing peacemaker amongst the panicking seamstresses and running out for coffee or bottled water. They finished in unheard-of time, but the dinner plans were basically scrapped as Kay and Lana hurried on with the show.

At the end of the day, however, all of the exhausted women came back to the hotel to find that Richard had taken it upon himself to contact a catering service while they trooped off to the show without him. They had dinner waiting for them when they arrived back hungry and tired. He'd done it all on his own tab, as well - the thoughtfulness and generosity of it impressed Lana enough that she kissed him in front of all of her employees, most of whom giggled in delight.

As the champagne was being drunk and the buffet demolished, Lana headed upstairs to her suite. She'd stayed only long enough to personally thank everyone. After the hectic pace of the past few days - and two hours of sleep the night before - all she wanted was a chance to relax and unwind.

Richard was waiting for her, however, standing outside her room with a bottle of champagne, two glasses, and a tray of hors d'oeuvres. She looked at him with raised eyebrows, folding her arms and waiting for an explanation.

"You have to eat something," he said, gently chiding. "And a glass of champagne won't kill you. You deserve some celebration after pulling that off today - nobody else I know could've fixed a mix-up that big, that fast."

"Thank you," she replied. "But champagne's probably not a good idea right now..."

"It'll put you to sleep," he said. "And you need the rest. You were still up when I finally went to bed, and you got up before me, too."

"I'm so worn out I could fall asleep right here," Lana murmured, and went to him. She leaned against his shoulder as she nibbled a canapé.

With both hands full, Richard couldn't put his arms around her like he wanted to, so he had to settle for kissing her cheek. "Don't fall asleep out here. Open the door, have a little more to eat, and fall asleep in your room. It's gotta be much more comfortable than this floor."

She chuckled softly. "You really want to be in the gossip pages again, don't you?"

"You've got a balcony," he retorted. "We'll eat out there, with the entire city as our chaperone."

"Still wind up in the papers," Lana replied, but she unlocked the door and led him through the rooms.

Richard was quite impressed by the suite - it was *huge* by his standards, and the balcony outside was almost the size of some motel rooms he'd stayed in while traveling on the newspaper's budget. A small table and two chairs gave them enough space to eat and drink in comfort, Lana going very easy on the champagne.

She sat back at last, licking a crumb off her lip in a totally unconscious way that made Richard's heart stutter. Looking lazily over at him, she smiled slowly. "There's only one problem."

"What's that?" he said, seeing the warmth in her gaze. *It was only one drink...*

"Now I'm awake," Lana replied with a quiet laugh, getting up and walking to the balustrade. "And I know myself, it'll be a few hours before I fall asleep again."

"You must be the only woman on earth whom alcohol doesn't make sleepy," Richard remarked, polishing off the last bit of prosciutto-wrapped cheese. He got up from the table and went to her cautiously, but Lana didn't back away as she so often had during the past few days.

Lana leaned against the railing, looking out over the city, and she gave a sigh in pure contentment as Richard slid his arms around her. He was standing behind her, his chin on her shoulder, and she felt wrapped up in him as if he were a warm, comforting blanket. Her eyes

slid closed as she murmured, "Thank you."

"For what?" he asked gently, leaning on her just the slightest bit.

"For dinner tonight," she replied, her voice growing softer as Richard kissed her shoulder very lightly. "And for coming here at all. You really are ... so very..."

Her voice trailed off; she had tilted her head when he started kissing her shoulder, intending only to make her long hair fall out of his way. Richard took it as an invitation, however, and began kissing his way up to her neck. His mouth on bare skin just below her ear brought her train of thought to a sudden halt and sent a shiver down her spine.

Richard took a step forward, pressing close against her as he nuzzled her neck. *No more than this, you know she's jumpy*; he told himself sternly. But he couldn't resist one more kiss at the curve of her jaw, and felt Lana lean back against him with a languid sigh...

...seconds before she suddenly tried to pull away. "Richard, no," she whispered, her voice sounding strained. "We shouldn't..."

"Why not?" he asked, getting a little frustrated. Lana had pulled the come-here-go-away act on him several times in only a few days, usually without any warning. "It's only a little necking..."

"Richard," she said quietly, and now there was a note of sadness as well. "We ... we can't. I'm sorry. *I* can't."

He sighed sharply, ruffling her hair with his breath, and heard her gasp. "Lana, listen, I'm not trying to seduce you. Especially not now, when you've had a glass of champagne and I know you're not a drinker," Richard said, surprised to hear a hint of anger in his own voice. "You don't have to flinch like I'm some kind of convicted rapist every time I touch you."

That startled a laugh out of her. "It's not that!"

"Then what is it?" Richard gave her some space, totally confused now, but his hands on the railing to either side of her prevented Lana from sidling away. "Seriously. You'll let me hold your hand or kiss you, but then you run away from anything more than that. I mean, you act like I'm going to drag you away by the hair and ravish you if I kiss you more than twice in the same hour! Please, whatever's going on, let me know, all right?"

"Whatever's going on?" She sounded totally disbelieving, and just a bit angry herself.

"Well *something's* clearly wrong here..."

"You want to know what's wrong?" Lana twisted in his arms so that she faced him, her eyes blazing. "Fine, *you* asked for it." With that, she grabbed his belt and yanked him tight against her, the other hand running into his hair and pulling him down for a kiss.

And what a kiss. Richard would have said he'd never been kissed like that out of bed, but he'd never been kissed like that *in* bed, either. As he pinned her against the railing and returned the hungry kiss, the only coherent thought in his mind was, *Damn, I thought Lois was hot-blooded... I guess everything they say about redheads is true...*

Lana only broke away when she needed air, and looked up at him with that same fierce desire in her eyes. "*That's* what's wrong, Richard," she said, panting for breath.

He shivered and tightened his arms around her. "Lady, there was *nothing* wrong with that. Trust me."

"Richard..." she murmured, and belatedly realized she was still holding his belt. Blushing furiously, Lana let go and placed both hands on his chest as if to hold him away from her.

"Well?" The irritation was gone from his voice, replaced by warmth and a touch of bewilderment. "Please, tell me how on earth that could be wrong."

"Because I've never wanted *anyone* that much," she said in a rush. "Because everything I

am, everything I've done, I built *by myself*, and I'm used to running my own life now, I'm used to being independent. I don't want to give that up, but my heart isn't listening to me anymore. Because I'd give you *anything*, and that scares me half senseless." She took a deep breath and met his eyes as she added, "When I'm with you, I turn into the stupid light-headed besotted romantic teenager I never was. And I am *far* too close to forty to be acting like this."

Richard kissed her forehead gently, then her brow. "Lana, Lana, I'm not trying to take advantage of you. I *love* you. Yeah, love is scary - you think I wasn't scared to chase you halfway across the world, knowing you might kick me out for stalking you? The only time in my life I've been this much in love and this terrified was when I met the twins."

That wasn't what she expected to hear, and Lana looked up at him, startled. A jealous little voice in her mind whispered, *He wasn't even like this over Lois...*

"I'd never wanted to be a dad - I liked kids well enough, but I wasn't out there trying to get married and start a family. I met Jason and Kala, though, and they stole my heart. I loved them before I ever loved their mom; she fascinated me, and I was attracted to her, but I had to grow to love her. The twins, though, I loved them on sight. And it scared the hell out of me how much I cared about them." He kissed the bridge of her nose. "It's been like that with you. I wouldn't let myself think it when we first met, but from the moment I saw you..."

Lana leaned up to kiss him again, slower this time, lingering and loving. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," he replied. Some of that familiar mischief gleamed in his eyes, and Lana knew he was about to break the solemn mood a moment before he said, "And you're nowhere *near* forty."

"Richard," she heaved a sigh, leaning back from him a little. "Do you know how old Clark is?"

"Three years older than me," he replied. "What does that have to do with it?"

"I went to school with him," she said. And when understanding still didn't dawn in his eyes, Lana elaborated, "We were in the same grade, Richard."

"You're... Damn. I thought you were *younger* than me."

She cut him an annoyed look. "Yes, well, I've known from the moment we met that your ex is *five* years younger than me."

"And that matters to me because?" Richard challenged. "I didn't fall in love with your age or your zodiac sign, Lana; I fell in love with *you*."

"Say that in ten years, when I'm pushing fifty and you can still pass for forty," she said, hearing her own voice get a trifle snappish.

"Oh, stop it," Richard said, tightening his arms around her again. "You know what? Almost forty or not..."

He leaned in close and whispered into her ear, making Lana gasp. She'd been trying to pull away slightly, expecting him to kiss her, but the things he was saying... Eyes wide, she pressed her cheek against his as her hands gradually tightened on the fabric of his shirt.

Richard was very, very careful in what he chose to say - this was Lana, and a certain level of propriety had to be observed. But he managed to tell her what he would've liked to do this evening, if she wasn't both tired and under the influence, without being too explicit.

When he could feel the warmth of her blush against his face, as well as her constant trembling, Richard laughed softly. "Does that sound like I care in the *least* about anything but *you*?" he asked her.

Not expecting a reply - and he wouldn't have gotten one at that point - he kissed her neck,

her cheek, and her lips as he drew back from her gently. Lana watched him with an absolutely dazed expression as he loosened her grasp on his shirt and kissed her cheek again. "I've got to leave," Richard whispered, and she heard desire trembling in his voice, making her eyes slide closed again. "Before I do something we'd both regret. But not until later - I'd make sure we didn't regret it until later."

Lana didn't trust herself to look at him or to speak, leaning back against the balustrade as he picked up the champagne bottle and the tray. She had to hold on to the railing to keep her balance, suddenly dizzy as if his whispered promises had made her more drunk than a dozen bottles of champagne. Only once he was gone, and her breathing was somewhat back under control, could she whisper to the cool night air, "Oh, dear God..."

'Tis the Season

Lois growled at her computer screen, raking her hair back. She'd been at this for half an hour, knew where she needed to go, but couldn't quite untangle the words she needed from the mass of thoughts swirling in her mind. Meanwhile, delighted laughter floated up to her from downstairs; Kal-El and the twins were watching a movie together.

Looking up, she cast a longing glance at the door. She would've liked to be with them, but this editorial *had* to be finished before the meeting tomorrow. Especially since she had to get up early to send that package out in the morning and there would be no extra time to get anything done last minute. Besides, it gave him more bonding time with Jason and Kala, and the three of them were making up for everything they'd lost. Lois found that these days she preferred for the four of them to do things together as a family, but Kal-El needed his Daddy-time, too. Lois chuckled to herself, thinking, *I guess I'm still trying to learn how to share them. All three of them.*

It still made her head ache to think things like that - Clark's Daddy-time, doing things together as a family, sharing Kal-El with the twins and vice versa. *How the hell did I wind up falling into this? It's like a fantasy - one I never really knew I wanted or dared to dream. Me, Kal-El, and our kids. A family. It's almost perfect, except that he doesn't stay the night ... and oh, God, I miss that.* She sighed, rubbing her temples as she stared at the laptop. Sleeping alone in the living room once the twins were in bed was slowly becoming its own special torture. And it wasn't just making love that she missed. The nearness, the warmth, the feeling of being absolutely safe and adored... *I can understand why he's avoiding it - the twins are here, and he still thinks of this as Richard's house. Quite frankly, I wouldn't be comfortable making love to him here, either. But thinking about **that** really isn't getting this damn editorial written.*

She glared back down at the screen. The title seemed to glare back: *Why the World Needs Superman*. The ideas for this editorial had been simmering in the back of her mind since Kal-El had been hospitalized. Lois had stopped pretending she didn't need him when she was sitting beside his bed, holding his hand, and thinking of how he needed to live to see the twins grow up. *She* needed him - but even though the title of the editorial had come to her during those lonely hours at his bedside, she couldn't have written it then. The words that occurred to her while she watched his too-still face would have been as subjective and deeply personal as the Pulitzer-winning editorial had been accused of being.

So Lois had waited, in spite of Perry nudging her more than once to write something about the apocalyptic events she'd been part of. *Part of it, hell - I was at the center of it all. The only part I missed was him confronting Luthor on the island. And honestly, I'm kinda glad I didn't see that. If I had been there, I would've either killed Luthor myself or gotten all of us killed by attacking him.*

Now that she had some distance from the events and from the aftermath of them - her whole life had changed so quickly - it was time to write this. The three people she loved most in the world laughed again, and the raven-haired reporter grinned, her heart lightening. *Oh yes. The world needs him - I need him - **they** need him most of all.* Lois looked back down at the screen and began to type slowly. Having an inkling as to what she was about to do, she gave silent thanks to spell-check with a brighter grin.

A perfect world would not need a Man of Steel. Such a world would have resolved its socioeconomic conflicts and be so enlightened that matters of race and class and religion were cause for polite discourse, not hate crimes. There would be no war, no crime, no

*injustice, none of the self-destructive tendencies of humankind.
But this world is far from perfect...*

Richard headed to Lana's hotel early in the morning, waving friendly greetings to the models and seamstresses he now knew. He stopped by the front desk, ordered up room service, and sweet-talked them into letting *him* bring breakfast to palatial suite upstairs. Plucking the rose from the breakfast tray, he placed it between his teeth and knocked on the door. That ought to make her laugh, and he loved to see those green eyes sparkle with merriment...

The doorknob turned, and Richard grinned around the rose. He wanted to strike just the right note, charming and funny but not presumptuous, in case Lana was having second thoughts about last night. When the door swung open, though, it wasn't Lana standing there. Kay gave him an amused look and called over her shoulder, "Lana, your boy-toy brought you breakfast. With a rose in his teeth, no less."

Richard dropped the flower back into its vase. At least Kay seemed a lot more relaxed. "Hi, Kay. I didn't know you were sharing the suite."

"It's got three bedrooms, why waste the space?" she remarked, adding quickly, "Don't invite yourself to the third."

"I wouldn't..." he began to defend himself, but Lana arrived at that moment.

"How sweet of you, darling," she said, grinning as she leaned across the room service cart to kiss him. Apparently Kay wasn't the only one who had mellowed out in the last twenty-four hours; that affectionate little kiss spoke volumes about Lana's mindset after last night.

The redhead seemed much less nervous as she drew back slightly, grinned, and then kissed him again. To his surprise, she seemed to finally trust Richard, for which he was profoundly grateful. It had been painful to him to watch Lana shy away as if she feared him, wondering if maybe she had a reason to be wary of a man's hands on her. *No, she wasn't hurt like I thought - and I would've beaten her ex within an inch of his life if she had been - she was just scared of how much she enjoyed even the most chaste of kisses. I'm glad she feels safe with me now. And I'm very glad she's comfortable being affectionate now.*

Richard kissed her a third time, ignoring Kay's sigh and eye roll. "Breakfast, my lady? Or ladies, as the case may be?"

"I'm going out," Kay said, tapping Richard on the shoulder. "Move it, Mr. White. You two behave yourselves while I'm gone, all right?"

"You're not my mother," Lana sighed, standing aside so Richard could bring the cart into the room.

Her assistant just laughed. "Don't make me *call* your mother. I've got all your pertinent phone numbers, remember? Including *his*."

Richard folded his arms and gave Lana a very serious look. "You're giving my number to other women now?"

She sidled close and kissed him again, lingering a moment longer than before, then looked up at him with that laughing smile he'd so wanted to see. "She's my assistant - she manages my address book."

"Yeah, well, I don't think she likes me too much," Richard muttered as they brought the plates through the room to the balcony.

"She thinks you're devastatingly handsome," Lana told him, deftly stealing a biscotti from the tray and dipping it into the cappuccino. "And probably not good enough for me."

"Well, I *know* that," Richard teased. "No one's good enough for *you*. I'm just lucky enough that you like me anyway."

"Flatterer."

"Merely the truth, ma'am."

Silence reigned as they devoured breakfast, Richard saving the last pastry for Lana. She took the last sip of her cappuccino and sighed. "That was decadent. I could get very used to the way people eat in this country."

"I could get very used to having breakfast with you, beautiful," Richard replied, and she smiled at him again. Before she could accuse him of being unrelentingly charming, he changed the subject. "So what's on your schedule?"

"Practically nothing," Lana said. "The show's over and it's the holidays; I don't want anyone to have to work for me between now and Christmas when they could be with their families. I'm basically free 'til then."

He nodded. "So, since there's nothing you *have* to do, what do you *want* to do?"

Lana's smile grew tempting. "What every woman wants to do when there's a new man in her life, Richard." She paused while his eyebrows shot up, and added with a chuckle, "Go shopping."

"I should've known," he groaned. "Wait. You're a *designer*. Why would you want to go clothes shopping?"

"Christmas shopping," she corrected. "And I do wear some clothes that aren't my own. I even wear things that are off the rack - once they're tailored. But speaking of Christmas shopping..."

Richard followed bemusedly as Lana headed back into the suite, hunting through a large selection of blouses hanging on a garment rack. Finally she pulled one out - the color was deep ruby, with a v-neck and a trace of embroidery around the collar and cuffs. "Well?" she asked, and when he hesitated, she smirked. "Doesn't it just shout *Lois Lane*?"

"You're making clothes for my ex now?" he asked.

"No, this was a test - which means it's an original. One of a kind." Lana paused to admire it. "The version that went into production doesn't have the neckline like this, and there aren't any in this color, either. But it makes me think of her. Do you think Lois would like it?"

"I'm a guy," he replied. "I don't buy clothes for women. It's like asking a snake to buy shoes - we don't get it."

"You never bought Lois any clothing?"

"Once, and she looked at me like I was smoking crack," Richard replied, not mentioning that the garment in question had been lingerie.

Lana rolled her eyes as she hung the blouse back up. "Well, I like it. Although I'll probably pick something else up for her as well."

"You're gonna buy Lois a Christmas present?"

"Yes," Lana said. "Why not?"

Richard stood there looking at her confusedly. "Maybe because she's my ex?"

"And I'll pick something up for the twins, too," Lana replied. "Oh, goodness, I have to get Clark something... What do you buy a superhero for Christmas, anyway?"

"Lana," Richard said. "Um, you got his true love's fiancé out of the picture. That's gift enough."

She looked at him disbelievingly for a moment, then shook her head and muttered, "Men. So, are you going to go with me, or do you suffer from that gender-based phobia of shopping?"

"I can think of a dozen things I'd rather do than spend all day in stores," Richard said. "However, since I'll be with *you*, that makes it worthwhile. Just don't ask my opinion on anything clothing-related."

Lana hugged him, not hesitating in the slightest when his arms slid around her, and kissed his cheek. Richard found himself surprised by just how demonstrative she was now that she wasn't holding back, and he nuzzled her hair with a delightfully surprised little chuckle. "Such a sweetheart," Lana purred, kissing the curve of his jaw. "You'll even go *shopping* to be with me, you hopeless romantic you. Tell you what; since you're going with me today, I'll go somewhere with you tonight. Somewhere you *really* want to go."

"Oh, really?" Richard asked, seeing the gleam of mischief in those lovely sea-green eyes. "And where would that be?"

Lana tilted her face up for another kiss, and whispered against his lips, "Back home to Metropolis."

Richard had to draw back and blink at her, shocked. He'd purchased his plane tickets one way, not knowing when he would be back, and to be honest, he'd expected it to be weeks before Lana agreed to come home with him. "You're serious?"

She tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, some of her shyness returning. "So serious I already booked our flight this evening. I don't have any reason to stay in Milan now; Kay and the girls will pack everything up and ship it back to Gotham. And I know you must be missing the twins."

For a long moment, Richard was so stunned that he simply stared at her. Then he broke into a broad grin and hugged her tightly. "You're amazing, you know that?"

Laughing, she let him kiss her one more time before pulling back. "Come on, you. Shopping first."

Leaving the department store on Thursday afternoon, Jason and Kala were bouncing around with excitement while Clark carried their purchases to the car. He privately considered it a Christmas miracle that Lois had agreed to let him drive her Audi. That car was virtually sacred space - no one else was allowed to profane the driver's seat. Clark, however, needed a vehicle to take the twins shopping, and given the choice between renting a car and loaning him hers, Lois had handed him the keys.

"D'ya think Mommy will like the perfume we got her?" Kala asked, skipping along beside him. It seemed as though they had smelled everything in the perfume case before all three had agreed.

"I think so," Clark replied beaming down at her as he opened the trunk. "You picked a really lovely scent, sweetheart." Kala giggled, grinning back up at him at the compliment.

"An' the slippers," Jason said hurriedly, feeling left out. Handing the bag containing his present to his father, he added, "Mommy's always complainin' how her feet get cold."

"I'm sure she'll stay nice and warm," Clark told him, taking the bag and ruffling his hair. "And comfy, too. Those memory-foam slippers feel really nice - you were smart to find them."

Both kids beamed at the praise, but Jason soon wore a scowl of concentration. "Daddy?" he asked with his usual innate curiosity. "How come Santa doesn't bring presents for grownups?"

Clark put the packages away and closed the trunk, seeing both twins now looking up at him curiously. *Quick, think of something. Wait a minute, think of an answer Lois won't kill you over.* "Well," he said slowly, "Santa brings a different kind of present to grownups."

"Like what?" Kala asked, utterly innocent.

"Things you can't wrap," he replied. "Like faith and hope and the spirit of the season. In my case, I got the best gift ever, *and* it was early."

"What was it?" they both asked, eyes shining at the thought of early presents.

"A pair of twins - the smartest, most beautiful kids on the face of the earth," Clark replied, sweeping them both into a hug. Kala and Jason both laughed in delight, returning the hug, and when he let them go they scampered into the back seat and buckled in.

When Clark got into the car, however, he didn't start it up immediately. Turning around in the driver's seat to look at them, Clark asked in a conspiratorial tone, "Would you two like to help me with *my* Christmas gift for Mommy?"

"Sure!" they chorused, grinning at each other. This was their first real outing with him and they were enjoying it immensely.

"First I have to ask you something," he said hesitantly. "And whether you say yes or no, you *can't* tell your mommy that I asked, okay?"

The excitement seemed to die down a bit, the twins looked at him dubiously. "Mommy says secrets are bad," Jason whispered. "Specially now."

Clark couldn't help chuckling, which settled his nerves. "It's more of a surprise than a secret," he promised. "But I need to ask if something's okay with you two. If it isn't, don't tell her, because it would upset her. If it is okay, then you have to keep it a secret so she can be surprised on Christmas. All right?"

Kala and Jason conferred silently, staring at each other while they reached a mutual decision based on some deep bond peculiar to twins. Clark had seen them do it several times, and it never failed to raise the hairs at the nape of his neck - his own powers were fantastic, but telepathy wasn't one of them. Lois insisted the kids weren't psychic, they just knew each other extremely well. In spite of her casual attitude, Clark still felt a bit unsettled at times like this.

After a long moment, they both turned back to him, and Kala gave a sober nod before she gave a hesitant, "Okay."

Clark took a deep breath; if this was this hard to ask the *twins*, he was a fool to even think of asking Lois... "Would it be okay with you two if I married Mommy?"

Both children blinked in surprise, the expressions on their little faces full of utter amazement. Clearly *that* had not been what they were expecting. Clark had just enough time to feel his hopes fall; it was out of the question, they didn't want their lives disordered, Mommy had publicly proclaimed that she'd never ever marry...

And then, just as he was about to backpedal a bit, Jason said, "*Really?*"

"Like, *really* get married this time?" Kala added only an instant later. Clark began to realize that he had completely misjudged their reaction. "With a wedding an' flowers an' all?"

The breathless excitement in both their voices was all the reassurance Clark needed. "Yes. And you two can be in the wedding party."

"*YAY!*" both twins yelled, grinning at each other as if this had been *their* idea.

"I take that as a 'yes', then?" Clark asked, laughing.

"Yeah!" Jason replied, bouncing a little in his seat. "When are you gonna get married?"

"Whoa there, son," Clark said. "I have to *ask* her first."

"She'll say yes," Kala replied both solemnly and promptly, nodding encouragement.

"Mommy's smart."

"I still have to ask her," Clark told them, grinning at Kala's certainty. "And if I'm going to

propose, I have to have a ring for her to wear if she says yes." Kala and Jason both went wide-eyed, the excitement reaching a new level, and he continued, using what he was starting to think of as his 'father' voice. "I want you two to help me pick out the ring. *But*, if I take you to a jewelry store, you have to be on your absolute best behavior. No running, no arguing, no touching *anything* unless I say it's okay."

"But Daddy..." The twins pouted, imagining a shop full of shiny baubles they couldn't touch. When Clark continued to look at them sternly, however, they gave in with big sighs. "Yes, sir."

"All right, then. If you go back on your word, we're leaving the store, and I'll have to buy the ring without you. I don't want to do that, so make sure you behave."

They both nodded, and only then did Clark start the car and head uptown, to one of the finest jewelry stores in Metropolis. Whatever Jason and Kala had been imagining, the reality of the place stunned them speechless. Their eyes seemed to light on everything, dazzled. The thick carpet and large display cases full of beautiful jewelry displayed on black velvet impressed both twins, and they stuck close to Clark's side. This was a place for grownups and they were being allowed into this world just once and for a short time. And there was so much to take in.

A salesman quickly came to their side immediately, smiling at the wide-eyed children. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Um, yes," Clark said, not having to fake his nervousness at all. Was he *really* going to do this? "I ... I need to buy an engagement ring."

"Daddy and Mommy are getting married," Kala informed the man with her characteristic toothy grin.

If the salesman wondered why a man with six-year-old twins was just now getting around to marrying their mom, he didn't mention it. "Right this way, sirs and ma'am," he said, including the two children to their delight. "We have a fine selection of diamonds..."

Kala started shaking her head almost immediately, tugging on her father's sleeve until he looked down at her. "Daddy, no... Mommy doesn't like di'monds," she whispered urgently. When Clark glanced at Jason, he nodded his agreement and added in the same low voice, "Mommy says they just look like glass."

The salesman probably hadn't heard that, so Clark said politely, "Actually, I'd prefer to see gemstone engagement rings, please."

"Of course, sir." They were soon standing at one of the counters, Clark whispering to the twins not to touch the pristine glass-fronted case, while the salesclerk took out several trays of rings. "Do you have a particular stone in mind?"

Before Clark could answer, the twins were again giving their expertise. Kala whispered up a reminder, "Daddy Richard got her a blue one..."

"Not sapphire," Clark said without a pause. He was very glad that the atmosphere of the place seemed to have made the twins quiet - all he needed now was speculative looks from people who wondered just what the heck he was doing romancing someone else's fiancée. Then again, he was beginning to see that he could never have done this alone, he thought with a smile.

Putting one tray back, the salesman continued smoothly, "We have many fine rubies and emeralds, sir, as well as other stones." Eliminating sapphires had narrowed the choices slightly, but as Clark looked at the array of rings before him, he was still bewildered by all the options. Round stone or square? A simple, modern setting, or one surrounded by tiny diamonds?

Platinum, gold, white gold, or silver? *Lifting the island was easier than trying to choose one ... and if Lois doesn't like it, well, that'd be about the worst omen I could imagine...*

As he pondered his choices, Kala and Jason were having problems of their own. They had been trying in vain to see over the high counter, wanting to see what Daddy was seeing, and gave it up when they couldn't see more than the edge of the tray, even while standing on tiptoe. Frustrated, they looked at each other and sighed. If only they could put their hands on the glass...

Since Daddy said they couldn't, they started looking instead at the rings still inside the display case. Most of those were bigger and in individual boxes instead of trays. Kala wrinkled up her nose at rings so encrusted with diamonds that the metal could barely be seen, and rings with stark modern settings that sported a giant stone. Jason scowled at stones that were pale pink or lime green or even yellow; he liked the richer colors better, and looked further into the case for those deep tones.

Clark, still puzzling over the myriad of choices and no closer to making a decision, gradually became aware of the twins' whispered conversation just below the counter level. "That one's pretty," he heard Jason say, nudging his sister.

"Oooh! I like it!" she whispered back. Her eyes gleamed as they looked closer at it. "Look at the little scrollies!"

Clark took a half step back, peering into the case as well. The ring Jason and Kala were entranced by was a large emerald with a small diamond on each side, in a very unusual white gold setting. "May I see that one?" Clark asked, both little faces turning up to his in surprise.

"The Victorian?" the salesclerk said. "Certainly." He brought the ring out and placed it in front of Clark, who immediately picked it up and held it where the twins could see it better.

"Wow," they both whispered in tones of awe.

"It's so green," Kala said in a hushed voice, full of wonder.

"And it's got little sparklies," Jason added, noticing the six even smaller diamonds around the main stones.

It was a very deep color, for an emerald. Almost the same shade as kryptonite, in fact - Clark chuckled. *Why not? Superman only has two weaknesses - that crystal, and Lois Lane. Although she's more asset than liability, she **does** make me go weak in the knees with a smile or a look ... or a red satin nightgown...* "Do you think Mommy will like it?"

"Yeah!" came the chorused reply. Jason nodded with excitement, "Buy it, Daddy!"

"All right, then," Clark said with a laugh. Their enthusiasm was infectious. He was going to do this. He was going to ask Lois to marry him. Only then did he hand the ring confidently back to the clerk - and see the price tag. *WHOA!*

Lois had walked into the afternoon editors' meeting with an air of dread, and not just because *Kent* was driving her Audi today. No, the sick feeling in her gut was because she *loathed* meetings - she hated being an administrator, period. She had no problems managing people and running her department, it was just the endless networking and infighting and mounds of bloody *paperwork* that annoyed her. And everyone knew it.

She was one of only two women in this meeting, the other being the Features editor. Lois was also the youngest person here; had Richard been in the office, that would make a total of three people in the room under the age of forty. In the newspaper world, management was still very much an old-boy's network.

The amusing thing was, no one turned a hair at Lois' presence. She was mainly running

the single most important department in the paper; without City, they might as well be a magazine. Perry still maintained nominal control of the department as well as being Editor-in-Chief, but everyone knew he was grooming Lois for his job. *She* would never admit it, and argued vehemently against the idea, claiming to be nothing more than a reporter with lots of seniority and an office.

The other editors knew the truth, and respected it. Most of them had known Lois since she was a hot-tempered teenager working in the mail room, and while she was clearly Perry's favorite, it was just as clear that he made her life *more* difficult instead of less so. Like right now...

"And Lois, are you going to hand in that fourth editorial or do I have to pawn it off on someone else?" Perry asked gruffly. "Hell, I thought you'd *like* doing editorials. You've raised bitching at people for their stupidity to a fine art, why are you so reluctant to do it in print?"

In reply, took two typed pages out of the folder she was carrying and dropped them unceremoniously in front of him. Perry started to skim through it, then slowed down and read it thoroughly, his eyebrows rising. The rest of the management staff tried to crane their heads around for a better look. Anything that both impressed and surprised the Chief was interesting to them...

"Well," Perry said finally, and laid the editorial down carefully. The way he handed the document was another indication of how good he thought it was. Most editorials turned in to him got slapped on the desk or tossed back to their owners. No one in the room had *ever* seen him align the edges of the paper before, and those further down the table sat forward to get a better look. All they could see, however, was the title: *Why the World Needs Superman*. That alone drew surprised looks.

"Well?" Lois prompted almost casually, ignoring the stares of her fellow editors.

"I'll run it," Perry said. "It's going to be seen as a reversal, you know that. An attempt - a *late* attempt - to cash in on his skyrocketing popularity."

"Oh, great," she said with clear sarcasm, eyes rolling heavenward. "So it'll be misconstrued just like the other one was. What else is new? That's why I didn't want to do your follow-up. Then again, maybe at least this time they'll *listen* to what I'm saying."

The guy who ran the sports section finally got a glimpse of the headline, and in his shock he spoke out of turn. "Well, first you tell the world we don't need him, and win a Pulitzer for it..."

"No, I told the world we needed to stop mourning him and start helping ourselves," Lois snapped, turning on him with eyes afire. "And you know, so far I've met *one* person who didn't take that article as a great big 'screw you' to my *supposed* ex. That person happened to be a farmer in Kansas, which really looks bad on all of you highly-educated city people. *Furthermore*, I shouldn't have won the Pulitzer for *that*. It was the shock value of the title combined with the byline that got me the prize, and that's not how I wanted to win."

"Lois, for the millionth time, *no one cares* what you won it for," Perry said in exasperation. "It's just that you *got* one."

"*I care*," she replied hotly, the words out of her mouth before she could stop herself. "And because of that I *don't* have one. Not anymore."

"What the hell are you talking about, Lane?" Perry barked gruffly, his brows furrowing.

"I wrote the committee and returned the plaque." Lois looked him right in the eye, the words spoken calmly and firmly. "Today."

"*You did WHAT?!*" Perry bellowed, smacking both palms onto the table.

"*I shouldn't have won for that article,*" Lois stated forcefully for the second time. "And I can promise you that I'll win one again before I drop dead. But not for that editorial, not when it was so widely misunderstood. I should've never let you talk me into going up on that stage and accepting the award *in the first place.*"

"You can't *return a Pulitzer,*" Perry snapped.

"That's funny, I think I just did," Lois retorted, knowing that it had been five hours since she had sent the award off via FedEx. "It's *my* editorial and *my* award, I'll do whatever I damn well please with it!" As badly as she had wanted a Pulitzer, it amazed her even now just how easy it was to let it go. It had been a hard decision to make, something she had been thinking about for a couple of months now, but it was the right one. She knew it was.

Perry's face had gone red with fury and shock. He'd never wanted to strangle Lois quite so much, not even the time when she'd only been working for him for six months and spiked the company Christmas party punch bowl - with 151-proof rum. He drew in an enraged breath to lambaste her - and stopped, considering. *The article was widely misinterpreted. Now, what exactly is she losing here? Everybody knows she won the thing. By giving it back, she gets another dose of notoriety, and if she explained her reasons for doing so well enough, she also gets a boost to her reputation for integrity. It might not be all bad ... especially when the editorial in front of me is at least as good as the one that won the prize.*

He sat back down, wondering exactly when he had stood up to yell at Lois, and regarded his favorite reporter keenly. The rest of the editors, used to their bickering, waited for the next volley of profanity-laced incrimination to fly. To their surprise, Perry finally said in a normal tone, "All right, Lane, we'll roll with it. I hope I've taught you how to handle writing a letter like that so you sound noble and high-minded instead of pissed off. Anyway, next - Williams, have you done anything about our circulation numbers or are you still dithering?"

While the next target of Perry's attention stuttered an explanation, Lois just smirked and got back to making notes. Not notes on the meeting of course; Lois was planning the rest of her Christmas shopping. She still had to find something for Martha...

And since Richard and Lana were going to be back tomorrow - which Richard himself might not know yet, given the way Lana had been chuckling when she called Lois with their flight information - she would also have to add the cheerleader to her Christmas shopping list. And figure out what to buy Richard now that he was her ex. *The gift I bought him two months is definitely not one that Lana or Clark would appreciate,* she thought with a snicker. *Back to the drawing board.*

In the end, Lois, Clark, and the twins all wound up waking up early Saturday morning to meet Richard and Lana's flight. "This is freakin' surreal," Lois muttered as she stood on the international flights concourse, holding Jason's hand tightly.

Clark had picked Kala up to stop her from jumping up and down to see over people's heads. "A little," he admitted, then added in a lower voice, "There they are..."

A moment later, Lois saw why Clark's voice had trailed off. Not only were Richard and Lana holding hands, they were looking more at each other than at the crowd around them. The pair were drifting down the concourse in a haze of obviously brand-new love. "Quick, fetch me some insulin," Lois whispered. "I think I'm going to go into sugar-shock. *Jeez.*"

"Lois," Clark scolded, but then Kala cocked her head. Only she and her father could hear Richard laugh at that distance, and the little girl leaped out of Clark's arms with startling speed.

"I see them! I see them!"

Jason tore away from Lois, almost yanking her off her feet, and both twins yelled, "Daddy!" Luckily, Richard had passed the security checkpoint, and he dropped to his knees before the kids could bowl him over.

"We're gonna have to work on that," Clark muttered as he and Lois headed toward them.

"Starting *right now*," Lois growled unhappily. *I did not raise a pair of heathens. This is going to stop right now.* She stalked up to Jason and Kala, glaring down at them with her arms folded until they looked up.

"Uh-oh," Jason whispered, eyes wide when he saw his Mommy's expression.

"Uh-oh," Lois echoed, one eyebrow raised. "Kala, Jason. What do we *not* do in crowded places? *Especially* without saying a word to Mommy?"

Both twins looked up at her contritely. "We don' go runnin'," Kala answered softly.

"Because we could get hurt," Jason added, shamefaced.

"That's right," Lois said, taking a deep breath. "We *ask permission* before we let go of Mommy's hand - or jump out of Daddy's arms like a freakin' squirrel monkey - and go tearing across the airport. You've been forgetting that a *lot* lately. It scares Mommy when you do that and you know I don't like that."

"I'm sorry," both twins chorused, and Kala added, "We were excited..."

Richard was still on his knees, looking down and biting his lip slightly. The twins had done the same thing back when he and Lois were first dating, and she'd hated to see them dive-bomb him back then, too. Only now that he knew who their father was did he understand just *why* Lois' most dreaded nightmare had always been the twins running away from her. *Or flying away*, he thought.

Lois glanced at him, glad that he wasn't undermining her lecture, and met Lana's eyes as well. The redhead was clearly torn between wanting to fuss over the twins herself, and not wanting to interfere. Lois sighed. "I know, you two," she said to Jason and Kala. "But the rules are there to keep you *safe*, all right? Behave."

"Yes, ma'am," they both replied, brightening now that the scolding was over. Kala immediately turned and flung her arms around Richard's neck. "We missed you! Didja eat lotsa pizza?"

Chuckling, Lana ruffled Jason's hair. "That's a very handsome watch you have there," she remarked.

"It's Daddy Richard's," Jason told her. "So he *had* to come home."

"I wouldn't have kept him from you, sweetheart," Lana said gently, and Jason hugged her.

The next few minutes were a riot of greetings as each twin noticed the other getting more attention. The four adults, too, had to exchange affectionate welcomes. Lois hugged Richard and, under the guise of kissing his cheek, whispered, "What did you do, *drug* her? I've never seen Lana so calm..."

"Don't ask," he muttered back, then raised his voice to a more normal level. "Just one problem, you guys. How the heck are you gonna fit all of us in one car?"

"We brought Lucy's van," Clark said. "That gives room for everyone and luggage."

"I just brought clothes and my shaving kit," Richard said with a grin. "Everything's in one bag. Lana, on the other hand..."

"Oh, I don't have luggage," Lana said. "Just the carryon."

"Wait, you had like six bags in Milan," Richard said, turning to look at her incredulously.

"Airport baggage handling is notoriously unreliable," Lana told him. "I'm having everything sent FedEx." Lois and Richard looked at each other in disbelief before staring at

her. Even Clark was giving her a perplexed look. "What?"

"Lana, do you have any idea how much that costs?" Richard asked.

"No," she replied honestly. "But it's worth it to have something traceable that's guaranteed to arrive where it's supposed to... Why are you all staring at me?"

The three reporters rolled their eyes and sighed in unison, and the men each picked up a twin. "C'mon, let's get out of here," Lois said as Richard settled Jason on his shoulders and Clark tucked Kala into the crook of his arm. "We have to run back by Mom's with the van and meet Ron and Lucy and the kids." She turned and grinned like a cat about to pounce on an unsuspecting songbird. "You know what today is, right, Richard?"

He looked at her blankly, and then groaned. "Oh, God. It's tree-buying weekend. Saints preserve us."

The twins began to look a little dubious, also aware of this ritual, but Clark and Lana were both mystified. "What's wrong with buying a Christmas tree?" Lana asked Richard softly.

Lois was having to explain it all to Clark as well, her voice filled with good cheer. "It's the Lane family tradition that we all go around the Christmas tree farms on the first weekend in December and buy our trees together."

Knowing Clark could hear him, Richard slid his arm around Lana's shoulders and whispered, "Yes, and by the third or fourth tree lot, everybody wants to kill Lois because she can't settle for less than the *perfect* tree. If it snows, we're gonna risk frostbite tramping around listening to her kvetch about how that one's too small, that one's too lopsided, the other one's too spindly..."

"Sounds like fun," Clark told Lois.

The raven-haired reporter was leading the group as they reached the garage, and she paused to crack her knuckles. The grin she turned on the others was full of savage joy. It was that look she always got before going gangbusters on a story. "Let's go find that tree."

Richard groaned in despair even as Clark started to look worried. "Woman, couldn't you wait 'til I've had a drink? Or six?"

Lois just shot him a narrow-eyed glare filled with all the things she wouldn't say in front of the kids. Jason and Kala, however, just laughed at Daddy being silly, and Lana was smiling at him indulgently.

"You'll learn," Richard warned prophetically as they exited the airport. "You'll all learn."

O Christmas Tree

Ron, Lucy, and the three Troupe kids were waiting at Ella's house, and another riotous swirl of greetings ensued as Sam, Nora, and Joanna all rushed out to hug Richard. Lucy, of course, was the first of the adults to do the same. "Oh, I'm glad you're home so soon," she told him, beaming up at him. "The twins made it sound like you were going to be gone *ages*."

"No, not that long at all," he replied, stepping back slightly and holding out a hand to the redhead behind him. "Lucy, hon, I'd like you to meet Lana Lang. Lana, this is Lois' sister, Lucy Troupe. And her husband, Ron - hey, Ron, good to see you again, man."

Lucy looked at Lana curiously. She'd heard about this woman from Ron, but not much - family matters had precluded talking about Richard's new girlfriend. Darting a glance at Lois, she saw that her sister was perfectly comfortable with Lana being here. That had been a bit hard to believe, in spite of Lois taking the twins and Clark to go pick up Richard and Lana. This had all happened so fast...

But Richard was glowing with cheerfulness in spite of a long flight, and Lois was grinning with amusement at the pair of them. Lana offered her hand with a smile and said, "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Troupe."

Was she nervous? She sounded it, just a trifle. "The same to you," the blonde replied, thinking, *Poor thing, I wonder if she knew she was coming straight off a transatlantic flight to meet the notorious Lane horde. And we **are** a horde now, with five kids between the two of us...* She put an extra lift into her usual smile, and saw relief brighten Lana's sea-green eyes. "But please - it's Lucy. There's no standing on ceremony around this family."

"Thank you, Lucy," Lana replied, and shook Ron's hand as well. The corner of her mouth quirked in amusement, which Lucy didn't see and wouldn't have understood. Not without being reminded of just how Ron knew before everyone else that Richard and Lana were involved. "It's good to see you again, Ron."

"And you, Lana," he said, a trifle sheepish. From the glint in her eye, Lana remembered just who had answered Richard's phone last week. He turned to the milling children and called, "Hey, kids! Let go of your uncle for a second and come here."

The three Troupe children were introduced, Sam gravely shaking Lana's hand and the two girls giggling. Ella had been hanging back a bit, letting the rambunctious youngsters finish acting crazy before she came up to hug Lois and Clark, kiss the twins, and hug Richard. She gave Lana a polite smile, but the moment Lana turned away, Ella shot Richard an arch look.

"All right, folks," Lucy finally said. "Give Richard and Lana a break for a second, will you? C'mon on inside, sit down, have something to drink."

"In a travel mug," Lois said instantly, rubbing her hands together and chuckling. "The tree lot awaits."

"Oh for the love of..." Lucy sighed and rolled her eyes. "Welcome to the Lane family madhouse, Lana. Please forgive my sister; she's got some kind of psychotic obsession with picking the perfect tree."

"So I've heard," Lana replied dryly.

"Oh, but the Christmas season can't truly begin until Lois has found The Tree," Lucy told her, making sure the capital letters stood out. "Sometimes we're not sure we'll all live to see New Year's."

"Sometimes we're not sure we'll let *Lois* live to see the New Year," Richard muttered.

"Richard," Lana scolded him, but he just grinned.

"No, really, he's being serious," Lucy said. The three of them glanced over to see Lois,

still grinning and chuckling gleefully, being watched affectionately by Clark.

"You know, they have drugs for that," Richard whispered.

"You're so mean to her," Lana hissed, whapping him in the shoulder lightly.

Lucy chortled. "Aw, look at Clark. He thinks it's cute because she's all chipper and bubbly and acting like *me*. It's almost like you the first year, Richard."

"Yeah, but I learned better. And I warned him at the airport. Nobody listens to the ex..." Richard rolled his eyes melodramatically.

"*Come on!* Get inside, troops!" Lois yelled, and they obediently hurried into the house, laughing.

"Are you sure you want to come with us on the mad quest for Lois' ideal tree?" Ron asked Richard as they sat down in Ella's living room. "You guys just got in from the airport..."

Richard shrugged. "It wasn't that bad. We had a layover in London and got a couple of rooms at the airport hotel so we could get some rest. And Lana slept most of the flight from there to here." He smiled slightly at the memory of watching her doze curled up against his shoulder. Oh yes, he could get very used to watching Lana dream beside him.

Ron shook his head. "You're gonna be jet-lagged tomorrow."

"Don't I know it," Richard groaned. "I'll probably sleep the whole day."

"Here, boys, hot chocolate," Lucy said as she swept into the room, handing them each a mug. "Where's Clark?"

Lois had followed her sister into the room, and she frowned slightly. "Good question..."

"Maybe he left his jacket in the van?" Richard asked, trying to catch Lois' eye. Clark might have had to step out for an emergency somewhere...

Jason and Kala, each clutching a mug of hot chocolate, chose that moment to try climbing into his lap simultaneously. Keeping them from spilling the drink all over him distracted everyone for a moment, and then they heard Ella in the hall.

"Why, Clark, how did you get left outside?" she asked as she opened the front door for him.

"Oh, I left my jacket in the van," he replied blithely. Lucy handed him some hot chocolate before turning her attention to her children, and only Lois saw the quick, grateful wink Clark gave Richard.

"See, I'm psychic," Richard said with a grin.

"Psychotic is more like it," Lois muttered, giving Clark an arch look. Under her breath, too softly for even Lana to hear while standing beside her, she added, "Saving the world again?"

Clark sipped the hot drink and bent to kiss Lois' cheek. "Just me being forgetful, *as usual*," he replied, the emphasis making it clear what he really meant.

The whole family had a chance to rest while they drank hot chocolate, asking Richard and Lana about Milan and filling them both in on everything that had happened stateside. Richard was particularly glad to hear that the International department had survived his absence. Clark and Ron had stepped up to make sure everything was covered, and the rest of the reporters had pulled their own weight even with the boss gone.

But Lois' impatience couldn't be contained for long. She managed to chivvy everyone else into finishing their drinks and getting their coats on, and she was the first one out the door. "How many lots do you think she'll hit this year?" Ron muttered as he picked up Joanna and carried her to the van.

"Oh, at least three," Richard replied. "If one of us doesn't knock her out before then."

Lana was right beside him, and she tugged his elbow gently. "By the way, who are we riding with?"

That caught the International editor off guard. "Damn, my car's at Perry's," he groaned. "Ron..."

"Daddy, come with us!" Kala called, darting back to him and catching his hand. "Please pretty please?"

"With sugar on it?" Jason added.

Lois chuckled at them, and Ella chose that moment to solve everyone's problems for them. "Richard, go with them, at least the first trip. Lana, dear, you can ride with me."

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Lane," Lana replied, and Richard was so distracted by the twins that he completely missed the look of trepidation she shot at him.

The *fourth* tree lot also failed Lois' expectations, so they moved on to an actual tree farm outside the city. At this place, the trees were still alive and growing; every group that arrived received a map of the farm and a crosscut saw, of which Lois promptly took possession. Fortunately, the kids were still happy with the excursion; they were seeing lots of Christmas lights, and the tree farm had a few farm animals to pet as well as tame reindeer to feed. But the adults were getting a little frayed around the edges.

While Lois hunted through the larger trees at the back of the lot, looking quite imposing with a saw in her hand, Richard gently pulled Lana aside. "You okay?" he asked softly.

She chuckled and linked her arm through his while they walked. "Lucy's willing to take her sister's word where I'm concerned, but Ella seems to think I have to interview to be your girlfriend. I've been getting the third degree ever since I got in the car with her. And somehow she always manages to get just *me*, or me and Lucy."

"She's a general's widow," Richard replied. "She's fiendishly organized. Trust me; I got the same treatment when I was presumptuous enough to date her daughter. Don't you hate the terribly polite way she asks such probing questions?"

"Oh, yes," Lana said. "I suppose I should be grateful everyone else in the family likes me..."

"Yeah, if I had a choice, you'd only have the Lanes to deal with," Richard sighed. "My family... Besides, don't worry. Lucy thinks you're cool, and you and Lois have everything worked out. Heck, even just Lucy liking you was enough. She's capable of convincing the other two."

"She is a sweetheart," Lana replied. They had drifted far behind the rest of the family, listening to Lucy and all five kids laughing as they roved through the aisles of trees. "Sometimes it amazes me..."

"That she and Lois are sisters? Yeah, me too." Richard slipped his arm around her waist, and Lana cuddled close against his side. "Ella calls them sunlight and midnight, sometimes. But different as they are, the two of them are incredibly close."

They turned a corner and saw Lois up ahead, arms crossed and scowling critically at a tree that Clark had pointed out. Before the raven-haired reporter could proclaim the tree's shortcomings, Lucy came up behind her and hugged her hard. "Smile, Lois, it's Christmas!" the blonde trilled.

Nearly tackled by sisterly affection, Lois startled, turning her head to glare with annoyance over her shoulder. But after a moment, she couldn't help catching some of Lucy's relentless cheer, and she began to laugh, rubbing a gloved hand over Lucy's blonde curls.

"Yeah, I'm happy, you bratty broodmare," she said affectionately, leaning back to kiss Lucy's rosy cheek.

Her younger sister chortled, squeezing Lois again, her very pregnant belly making the hug awkward. "I love you, sis," she said just as warmly, then lowered her voice to add, "Just so you know, Mom's at it again."

"At what again?" Lois murmured back, her eyes tracking the area for her mother. Ella and Ron were some distance away, looking at trees for Ella's house.

"The third degree," Lucy replied, her eyes following Lois'. "She's been grilling Lana every chance she gets. You realize Mom's managed to snag her every single time we've gotten back into the cars?"

"Oh, geez, does she have to do it to all of them?" the reporter growled, rolling her eyes heavenward. She'd been so caught up in trying to keep an eye out for the tree and keep track of the kids that she hadn't seen who the redhead was riding with. And knowing her mom... Lana and Richard were catching up to them, and Lois heaved a sigh. Before they got close enough to make it seem as if *Lana* had been the one to say something about it, Lois called out in her best bullpen bawl, "*Mother!*"

Six rows of trees away, Ella's white-haired head whipped around, startled. "Yes, Lois?" she called back, heading over to her oldest.

"You can put down the sodium pentathol and knock off the interrogation, Momma," Lois replied, folding her arms as the Lane matriarch came into view. Beside her, Lucy took up the same position, even imitating Lois' stern glare, but to less effect. Richard and Lana had drawn level with them, and the shocked look on the redhead's face made it very clear that she'd had nothing to do with this confrontation.

Ella simply raised an eyebrow at her daughters, Ron quietly slipping off to watch the kids. Lane family confrontations were few and far between, but there was no way of guessing the final results. Lois raised an eyebrow right back, the resemblance between the three women very obvious as the reporter continued. "Really, Momma, lay off. God knows you gave Richard enough hell when *he* first signed up with the are-you-worthy business; you can leave Lana alone, I promise. Lucy and Clark and I all approve, so it's fait accompli. Besides, aren't you just a little too *mature* to be practicing for the CIA's next open hiring?"

The tone, slightly stern and mostly affectionate, made Ella smile in spite of herself. She looked past the girls to Richard who, looking more than a bit worried, simply pointed at Lois and said, "Ditto. What she said." Lana was blushing slightly, looking away from all of them - she hadn't expected to start a controversy.

"Lana, stop. It's alright," Lois snickered, unable to stop the smile that came to her lips. *Poor thing*. Then she looked expectantly back at Ella. "You can smile and admit that you actually approve now, mother."

"What? Admit that any man could *possibly* do better than one of my daughters? Never," Ella said calmly, but she offered Lana a peacemaking smile.

"Well, thank *God* that's over. Congratulations, Lana. You and Clark have had the shortest approval period ever." Now her mind shifted gears yet again, she was moving off from the group. Lois looked around at the surrounding trees with a jaded eye and growled with frustration. "Now can we finally find a tree?"

"Yeah, Lois, can we *finally* find a tree?" Richard shot back as they followed her. "And not like the last twelve damn trees you've found and shot down because they didn't have enough pine smell or had a bare spot way down at the bottom or shed too many needles or..."

Not bothering to turn, she raised the saw into sight. "Watch it, mister. I'll send everyone else back to the car and *we'll* look for it."

"And I'll come back minus a leg," he retorted, ignoring the look on Lana's face. He was enjoying this far too much. "Who gave you the damn saw, anyway? Isn't there a law against letting crazy people have sharp objects?"

"Who says you'll be missing a *leg*? I could think of more vital organs that would pain you more," Lois said with clear comic warning, turning around to tap the back of the saw against her free hand threateningly.

Lana sidled in front of Richard. "Don't taunt her, darling," she murmured, even as Clark came up behind Lois and hugged her gently.

Richard kissed Lana's hair. Mission accomplished. "Thanks for being protective, love."

Lucy just beamed at them all while Lois sighed and rolled her eyes. "None of you even begin to understand the importance of this. Every single year, you guys nag at me, but have we had a bad Christmas since I started picking the tree? Have we?" None of them could argue that. "No. That's what I thought."

"Superstitious reporters," Lucy murmured under her breath.

They all trooped off in search of the elusive perfect tree again, Lana turning to say to both Lane girls, "Thank you, by the way. It wasn't really a problem, but I'm glad you're both supportive."

"Hey, the matching monograms club has to stick together," Lucy said happily, and then all three women paused. *Lois Lane, Lucy Lane, Lana Lang...*

"That's *weird*," Lois frowned, puzzling over the coincidence. How had she not thought about this before? "Geez, Lana, you're only two letters up the alphabet from being a Lane."

"And we all have the same number of letters in our first names, too," Lana agreed. "That *is* pretty odd, don't you think?"

Lois nodded, still thrown by the realization, but then chuckled. "Not quite. One of us has a *much* longer name..."

"Don't! Lois, don't you dare! You know I hate-" Lucy frowned, but not quickly enough.

"*Lucinda*," Lois intoned, grinning ear to ear, "was named by my *father*. Oh yes, Daddy named his little princess *Lucinda Isabelle*. All golden hair, eyes blue as the sky, and pink bows all around."

Using the only weapon in her arsenal where that was concerned, Lucy yelped, "Lois Joanne!"

"You know I hate my middle name, but at least I don't sound like something out of a fairytale," Lois shot back.

Lucy just glared at her. "What was the Wicked Witch of the West's name? I'll bet it was Joanne."

"Careful. You gave your youngest a variation of that name..."

Lana shook her head slightly, amused by their quarreling. "You two almost make me glad I'm an only child."

"Only *almost*?" Richard asked her, as Lucy stuck out her tongue at Lois.

"Well, if I had a sibling, my mother might not harp quite so much about certain things," Lana replied with a slight impatience in her voice.

"I think I know the feeling," Richard sympathized. "I'm an only child, too - I get to play host to all of my parents' expectations. I have to warn you, though, my family's nuts. I mean, you've met Perry, and my mom makes all of this Lane craziness look like a walk in the park."

"Oh, the Lanes aren't that bad," Lana said with a smile. "At least every time Lois and Lucy visit their mother they never have to hear about how they need to hurry up and find a nice man and have kids before it's too late." The edge of bitterness that crept into her tone surprised even Lana.

"No, Lucy took care of making sure the Lane family line continues well before I got into the act, which I hadn't even been planning," Lois interjected after crossing her eyes at her little sister. "She's been picking out baby names since she was a kid, got married right out of high school, and had Sam exactly nine months after the wedding. Just like clockwork." She shrugged then, smiling at her mother. "Besides, Mom was never that pushy, anyway. I wish *I* could have seen her face when I told her I was pregnant. I thought she was going to have a heart attack for the shock."

Richard slid his arm around Lana's waist. "Well, you know, if you don't want to disappoint your mother, I'd be perfectly happy to continue the Lang family line." Lana gave him a very cool look, her eyebrows rising slightly, and he grinned mischievously. "Tonight, if you're interested."

Lana actually blushed as she muttered, "Marry me first."

"Gladly," Richard said, kissing her cheek. "Let's go find an all-night jewelry store. Lucy, you're a notary, right?"

"Richard!" Lana scolded, blushing even redder.

Lucy couldn't help snickering, as much at Richard's eagerness as at Lana's hesitation. "I think that was a *no*, Romeo."

Lois just rolled her eyes. "Lana, you were married for *how* long? Geez. Knock off the blushing-innocent act. I mean, *come on*."

"Yes, well..." Lana trailed off and just glared at Richard.

He gave her his most charming smile, and when that failed to dissolve her glare, Richard switched to looking meek and pitiful. "So you won't marry me?" he asked sadly. Lois snorted; she had seen the exact same expression on Richard's face when he wanted to let the twins stay up an extra hour to watch monster movies.

"Not right now," Lana replied, brushing off the question. But no one missed the way she was fighting to keep a neutral expression, trying to keep a giddy grin from curling the corners of her mouth. "Richard White, that was the least romantic proposal I've ever heard. 'Let's go find an all-night jewelry store.' Honestly!" She shook her head, but in spite of her best efforts she was smirking. Richard pulled her closer to his side and kissed her cheek.

Only Clark saw the twins perk up at the mention of a jewelry store. Kala heard the words from two rows over with her cousins, and he saw her and Jason break off from the other kids, heading toward them interestedly. Quickly, he placed a finger to his lips and shook his head slightly. Jason and Kala both grinned then and, fortunately, kept silent on the topic of weddings and rings - with the exception of secretive giggles.

Their mother, fighting to keep her cynical reputation, missed it all as she rolled hazel eyes to the overcast sky. "Hurry up and get married before you two give me diabetes. For the love of all that's..." The snark went unfinished as she stopped so suddenly that Lucy and Clark, just behind her, nearly lost their balance. Looking up, a grin spread across that serious face. "Hey! Now *that's* a tree!"

The entire family flocked to the tree Lois had just spotted. Almost eleven feet tall, lushly green and somehow regal, it appeared to be the ultimate perfect tree. "Hallelujah, the tree hath been found," Richard announced in mock-amazement just before Lana elbowed him.

"Check it for bare spots," Lois said urgently, immediately circling the tree quickly. One would think it was a life-or-death situation, the world's fate hanging in the balance, from the reporter's look of concentration. "Does it have enough branches at the top to hold the star?"

"What d'you care? You can't *see* the top of that tree anyway," Richard muttered under his breath as they all checked, the rest of the family converging on the tree. "It's the biggest damn tree in the field, Lois. I'm fairly sure you can manage to hide a couple bare spots somehow. Will it even *fit* in the door?"

Her eyes snapped sparks when she jerked her head in his direction. "Dammit, Richard, you *know* better," Lois protested in a firm tone. "Buying the tree is the official beginning of the Christmas season! If you don't get the right tree, the wrongness of it will reverberate throughout the rest of the month and screw up the whole holiday! And by God, we are going to get *something* right this year!"

"Who does that sound like?" Lucy whispered with a smile to her mother as Lois ranted, both of them knowing full well that General Sam Lane had given that speech to the family every year until his death.

Meanwhile, Lois was getting herself into trouble. "I thought we *did* get something right," Clark said, looking at her bemusedly as she yelled at Richard.

Hearing that, Lois did one of her trademark complete mood changes, turning to smile warmly at Clark. Her feelings for him were clear in just the curve of her lips. "Clark, I know; I wasn't talking about us. I was talking about this smarmy devil here." She glared narrow-eyed at Richard to emphasize her point.

And Richard didn't shy back from it in the least. "Hey, Clark," he called to the taller man, his eyes bright with mischief, "you wanna pick Lois up and toss her in the air? She needs to know if there's enough branches on top to hold up the star, and no one brought a stepladder." Lana elbowed him that time even as Lois raised her fist at him. "Oh, I'm so scared," Richard teased.

"Jerk," Lois growled, but she was clearly enjoying the banter. She turned the saw around and bopped his shoulder with the handle. "Okay, wise guy - *you* cut it."

"So this is it? The Tree? The Tree to End All Trees? You're sure you don't want to consult your crystal ball or something?" Richard took the saw from her, grinning.

"*It's the tree, Richard,*" Lois growled.

Everyone was now watching them, even the kids absorbed in the spectacle, so he asked, "Are you sure?"

"*YES!* Now cut the godd... *stinkin'* thing down!" Lois barked, having noticed the twins nearby at the last moment. When he still hesitated, she flung her arms wide and looked up to the heavens. "I hereby declare this *the perfect Christmas tree!* There, Richard, are you happy? Should I invite the London Symphony Orchestra and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir to proclaim its utter flawlessness? *It's the tree!* Now would you start sawing before we freeze to death!?"

At that moment, the first snowflake of the weekend's predicted precipitation danced gently down to land on Lois' nose. Richard could only laugh so hard he couldn't speak; she was harassing *him* of all people to move faster, when *she* had been the one dithering over a tree for the past three hours. His amusement only made Lois glare at him furiously, which caused the rest of the Lanes to break into laughter as well.

Lana had stepped away, and she crossed her arms, watching Lois and Richard bicker. Clark was beside her, giving the two of them the same affectionately bemused look she was,

and the redhead only had to lean slightly toward him to rest her shoulder against his. They shared a brief smile full of things unspoken: how this was a better future for them than the one their parents might have planned, and how strangely calm they both were to see the obvious love between their respective partners transmuting into something less romantic but just as strong. Really, Lois and Richard were starting to act more like feuding siblings than lovers...

"Remind me again why I haven't managed to kill you yet? Richard, I have no idea how I put up with you!" they heard Lois yell.

Right away came back with the retort, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. You weren't saying that a few months ago, lady."

"And they were going to get married," Lana chuckled, as Richard knelt down to start sawing through the tree's trunk and Lois mimed kicking him in the rear.

"I think we did the world a favor," Clark replied softly.

Much later, when everyone was hauling their respective trees to the tops of their vehicles, Jason managed to pull Richard aside. "What is it, son?" Richard asked, kneeling to tuck a lock of the boy's hair under his hat.

Jason glanced around, seeing only his twin nearby, then lowered his voice. "Are you gonna marry Miss Lana?"

Richard had to sit back on his heels slightly. He'd only been half-kidding earlier, but trust *these* children to overhear him and ferret out his fondest wish. "I want to," Richard replied softly. "If she'll have me." It occurred to him then that he had gotten engaged to their mother around this time last year, and with a slightly wry smile he asked, "Are you two okay with that?"

The little boy looked at him pensively for a long minute. "Are you still gonna be our daddy?"

"Of course," Richard replied. "Jason, *nothing* will take me away from you, okay? You and Kala will always be my kiddles."

The affectionate nickname made Jason chuckle, but he had another question. "What if you and Miss Lana have a baby? What then?"

"Then you and Kala will have a little brother or a little sister," Richard said. The answer needed no deliberation; it seemed perfectly obvious.

After a long moment, Jason nodded. "Okay," he said, and hugged Richard.

"Hey, Mr. Hotshot International Editor!" Lois called. She was standing by Ella's car, having helped get her mother's tree tied to the top of it. "You wanna come help us or just stand there looking pretty while we all get snowed on?"

Richard snorted and gave Jason an extra squeeze. "C'mon, tiger, let's go help your mom," he said. "She had to pick the biggest tree on the whole lot..."

"And don't scratch my car!" Lois said, causing Ron and Clark to sigh. They had already placed an old blanket on top of the Audi to protect it from the branches. Given Lois' feelings about her car, it was a surprise that she had even allowed it to be used for transporting a tree.

Amid some grumbling and much laughter, the three men managed to get the huge tree securely strapped to the roof of the car - not before almost getting clobbered by it when Clark dropped his end. Richard couldn't help chuckling; he had that klutzy act down *perfect*.

"All right, that's about it," Lucy said with a satisfied sigh. "Now all we have to do is get everyone home and get the trees set up."

Richard stretched slightly. "Hmm. True. Lana, didn't you say you reserved a hotel room?"

You might want to check in ... and what about your luggage? Where's that being delivered?"

"Oh, I'm already checked in and unpacked," Lana replied. "Kay took care of it."

Lois raised an eyebrow. "Now *I* want a personal assistant. Sheesh."

"Well, I guess we have to get you a ride to the hotel, and drop me at Uncle Perry's..."

Richard trailed off.

The twins called out pleadingly, "Daddy! You gotta help put the tree up! You gotta! Please?" Such imploring looks from their sweet faces, all rosy-cheeked in the cold, could hardly be denied.

He glanced at Lois, who smiled and shrugged, and at Clark, who said, "Of course, Richard. Lana, if you'd like, you're invited as well. I'm sure one of us can drive you to the hotel when we drop Richard off..."

"Thank you, Clark, I'd love to," Lana replied. With a slightly embarrassed grin, she added, "If it makes things easier, I reserved a room for you, too, Richard. I didn't realize you were staying with your uncle."

"Trust me, I'll take a hotel room over his guest bedroom any day," Richard said instantly.

"I'm telling your aunt," Lois teased in a singsong voice. It was amazing how good it felt to be on level ground with him again.

"My aunt who's younger than *you*?" Richard shot back. "Yeah, right. Besides, she knows the whole reason I don't want to stay. Perry snores like a chainsaw; you can almost hear him outside. She's used it, I'm not. By the way, Lana, where are we staying?"

"The Centennial," she replied. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"We're gonna make the papers again," he warned.

"This time I have Kay to chaperone," she told him.

"Nobody's gonna think of that," Richard said, smirking. He glanced down at Kala beside him, seeing the look of wide-eyed wonder on her face. The twins had often seen the Centennial Hotel, but never been inside... "What if I bring a couple of chaperones of my own?"

Lois *hated* having the twins out of her sight, but she could imagine just how amazed they'd be to see the city's premier hotel decorated for Christmas. She remembered how impressed she had been when she had seen it herself at eighteen. They really deserved a little magic after the last few months. And they hadn't seen Richard for a week. "Sounds okay by me ... *if* they can behave themselves." She looked archly at the twins, who immediately gave her their best and brightest smiles.

"Sure," Lana said, taking out her cell phone. "Let me call and make arrangements..."

While she talked to Kay and explained that they would have the twins for the night, Ella and Lucy managed to corner Lois and Richard. "Since we're all together," Ella began, "we might as well plan Christmas. Even if we *are* standing around a tree farm while it snows..."

"These are just flurries," Lucy shrugged. "But yeah. Whose house are we going to? And I assume I speak for everyone when I say Richard's still invited, and now so is Lana?"

"You assume correctly," Ella said. "Lois, it was my house last year. Would you like to host?"

"Oh, sure," Lois muttered. "Let's see, new man in my life, two kids, Richard and Lana to keep track of... Sure! Why not?"

"But there's so much more space at your house," Lucy said. "And it's on the river..."

Richard cleared his throat. "Um, guys? Bad news. I promised my dad I'd come home for Christmas this year."

"I had completely forgotten about that, Richard," Lois sighed, wincing. "Oh, *crap*."

"Lois," Ella growled, glancing at the kids milling around the vehicles.

"Like they've never heard 'crap' before," her daughter whispered in aggravation, then raised her voice while rolling her eyes. "*Darn*. Anyway, I remember that from last year. I think I faked the flu so we could get out of it, and you had to promise for this year."

"And Dad emailed me last month to ask if you'd had your flu shot," Richard replied. "He misses me... I guess it's better this way. I can go down to Florida and spend some quality time, and you and the twins don't have to deal with my mom."

"You're not gonna be here for Christmas?" Kala asked, looking heartbroken. Jason, just beside her, mirrored the expression. "But..."

"Hey, munchkin," Richard said, lifting her chin slightly. "My mom and dad miss me, too. And I stayed here in Metropolis with you guys last year."

Pouting, Kala said, "But that's 'cause your mommy hates Mommy."

"And her doggies bite," Jason added, scowling.

"Yeah, I know," Richard chuckled. "But I have to go. I'll be back for New Year's Eve, though. And I'll call you every day."

"Every day?" the twins chorused.

"Every day," he affirmed. "Plus you get presents from Florida. How cool is that?"

"You know, Richard," Lana said almost casually. "If you don't want to face the holidays alone, my schedule's clear until the middle of February. And at least Florida's warm in the winter."

"Lana, you're amazing," Richard told her. "But really. You do not want to travel all the way to Fort Lauderdale just to get attacked by a snarling, hairy, yapping menace that wants nothing more in life than to chew your leg off at the ankle."

"And her dogs are *murder*, too," Lois interjected, completely deadpan.

There was one beat of silence, followed by a lot of snickering, with Lucy burying her face in Ron's shoulder. Richard crossed his arms and glared at them before saying, "Kids, fingers in your ears. Kala, hum." And then over the sound of Kala humming *Jingle Bells*, Richard admitted, "Lana, I'm sorry for the language, but there's only one way to say it: my mother is a bitch. Seriously. Not even an interesting, witty, lovable bitch like Lois." He paused to glance at Lois, who was glaring, but they were both thinking of her office coffee mug with '*You call me bitch like it's a bad thing*' written on the side.

Richard continued, "Mom's evil. I love her, God help me, but there's a *reason* I haven't lived at home since I turned eighteen. I joined the Air Force just to get away. My dad's cool, but Mom... She's something else. And not in a good way. Kids, you can take your fingers out now."

"It's all right," Lana said. "I know how to deal with ... interesting personalities. Besides, I can't imagine anywhere else I'd rather be, on Christmas Day, than with you."

"Aww," Lucy said. "They're so *cute*." Laughing, she swatted Lois on the shoulder and declared, "Tag, you're hosting the party. C'mon, everyone, let's roll!"

"*Dammit!*" Lois snarled, whirling to tag Lucy back, but the blonde was already hiding behind their mother and snickering.

"Language!" Ella and Clark both said at the same moment and in the same indignant tone.

Lois glared at Clark, knowing better than to take issue with her mother. "Shut up and get in the car, Kent." She stalked off to the car, Clark right behind her.

"YAY! We're havin' Christmas at our house!" the twins squealed in delight, following

their parents and practically skipping with glee.

"Well, that was settled quickly," Richard chuckled as Lucy and Ron gathered up their kids and got ready to leave. That left Lana and Richard standing beside Ella's car, and he stole a kiss while she was smirking at the Lane girls' antics.

"Come on, lovebirds," Ella said to them, still shaking her head over the casual way her daughter was ordering *Superman* around. "I'll drive you both to the Riverside house."

Cider and Tales of Old

The fireplace blazed light and warmth into the living room, and the tree was, at last, almost finished. Having Richard, Lana, Lois, and Clark all under the same roof, plus the twins, had resulted in a couple of awkward moments, but nothing too serious. Humor and camaraderie prevailed over any lingering jealousy, in spite of the fact that this had so recently been home to Richard and Lois while they were engaged. Jason and Kala were oblivious to any discomfort felt by the adults, swept up in the delight of the brand-new tree and the hanging of ornaments.

"An' Mrs. Mosley says we're gonna make our own ornaments this week," Kala said excitedly, as Richard picked her up to reach a higher branch. "So we gotta save room."

"Oh, I think we've got room," Clark told her, levitating a few inches to adjust the star on top of the tree. "Is it still crooked?"

Lana took a couple of steps backward to see the entire tree. She was trying to be as casual about Clark's superpowers as he was, but it wasn't easy. Her high school chum could *fly*... "Hmm. Looks a bit too far to the left, now, but it could be me. Lois, second opinion?"

Lois brought six mugs of hot apple cider into the living room, pausing to examine the tree critically. "It's straight enough for me," she declared, and set the tray of drinks down on the coffee table. The twins hung up the ornaments they held and ran for the table, both of them picking a cup of this treat up. "It's still hot, you two. Blow on it before you take a sip," she warned. Both of them obediently did so.

"All right, then," Richard said, rumpling Kala's hair. "I think we're done for now." He chose not to bring up the discrepancy between Lois' insistence on buying the perfect tree and her willingness to accept crooked ornaments. They'd done enough affectionate bickering for a while. "I don't know about the rest of you, but my brain is still on Italian time and telling me I should be in bed."

"I'll second that," Lana said. "Lois, you're sure you're all right with us having the twins overnight?"

"Are you sure *you're* ready to have them?" Lois asked her in response, raising an eyebrow. She stared at her son, who noticed her eyes on him and beamed. Lois gave a soft snort of amusement. "These two are like lion cubs. They look cute right now, but after a while you'll see they're a handful."

Lana looked over at Clark and grinned. "You know them better than I do - are they worse than the Wilson boys?"

Clark groaned. "Oh, God. *No one* could be worse than the Wilson brothers! They used tie cans to *cows'* tails. One time they did that to Henderson's Angus bull, and he broke down four fences! And they threw cherry bombs down the school toilets..."

"Whoa," Lois said. "I thought that was an urban legend. You people actually *do* this stuff?"

"Oh, yes," Lana replied, shaking her head at the memory. "Shut down the school for a day because they blew up the water main. And they did that in *grade school*. When I had the misfortune to baby-sit them. I'd quit looking after them by the infamous cooking sherry incident when they were thirteen."

"Cooking sherry?" Richard asked, worriedly.

Clark filled him in, wincing at the memory. "The Wilson boys got drunk on it one Halloween - I think it was our senior year, Lana? Anyway, they had the brilliant idea to go out to this one hill by the side of County Road 210 where it goes around a curve. They piled up a

couple of bales of hay they found in the field nearby, lit the stack on fire, and pushed it in front of a car coming down the road."

"Which happened to be the sheriff's wife," Lana supplied with a grin. "She wasn't hurt, but she chased those two boys back across the Roys' field. Called their mother that night, too, and she was waiting for them with their daddy's belt when they finally got home."

"Those were a couple of monsters," Clark said. "No, the twins are nowhere *near* that bad. Are you?"

At his sudden question, Jason and Kala stood up straight, trying to look innocent in spite of wondering just what a cherry bomb was. Lois chuckled dryly, "All right, you're qualified. Bedtime's at nine because it's Saturday, and no snacks after dinner. Don't let them - or the charming devil looking at me like I'm nuts - tell you any different."

"Ah, now we know who spoils them," Lana said, smiling at Richard.

"Hey, I know the rules; I even *made* some of them," he defended himself. "But then again, rules were made to be broken. Anyway, how are we going to work this? The Audi seats five, barely. Lois, it'd be easier if you'd..."

"No, you cannot borrow my car," Lois cut him off abruptly. "Out of the question. Forget it. It's *not happening*, Richard."

Richard sighed exaggeratedly, and looked over at Clark. "You know, we could solve this pretty quickly if you wouldn't mind picking up my car from the garage... And I mean *picking it up*."

Clark's disbelieving expression was priceless. "Richard, I don't use my powers frivolously."

"And adjusting the star on the tree was world-shatteringly crucial?" Richard asked, genuinely not understanding.

"Yes, well, someone would *notice* Superman flying around carrying a car," Clark reasoned.

"I thought you could fly faster than satellites can track," Richard said.

"Yes, but at those speeds your car might get dented by the air pressure."

"Never mind," was Richard's instant reply. Then he blinked and shook himself slightly. "Man, what a head trip. I hope you realize it's wrecking my mind to think that you - Kent, the guy I went to Mexico with, the only man on earth who's ever locked himself in the same men's room *twice* in one day - are who you are. With all the powers."

"The guy who caught bullets aimed for you in Mexico," Clark told him.

"Didja faint that time, too?" Lois snorted in amusement. Her sparkling eyes met his and they shared a grin.

"You caught bullets? Like *real* bullets?" Jason asked, wide-eyed. "Wow... Can we do that?"

"Not yet," Clark said, turning his smile on his son.

"Not *ever*," Lois added, giving both twins and their father a dubious look.

Richard glanced back and forth between them. "Why do I get this feeling I'm missing an in-joke?"

"The first day I met Lois, we got mugged in an alley," Clark informed him. "She wouldn't hand over her purse - she dropped it, and when the guy bent to get it, she kicked him in the face."

Richard burst into laughter. "Woman, you are *crazy!*"

Lois just rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, the newbie superhero here grabbed the bullet faster

than I could see, and pretended to faint while the mugger ran like hell. And then he scolded me for risking my life over the *exact contents* of my purse. The *only* reason I didn't catch on that quick was because Superman hadn't made his public debut. Wouldn't for another couple of days afterwards. Hello, x-ray vision, anyone?"

Chuckling, Richard grinned at Clark. "Now, if I you could loan out any of your powers for a day, *that* would be the one I'd choose."

"No," Lana said archly.

"You're a pervert, Richard," Lois said bluntly in almost the same moment.

"No, I'm not," he argued. "I'm a guy. C'mon, Clark, back me up. Don't tell me you never used that power for selfish purposes."

The look on the horrified hero's face was priceless. "Absolutely not," Clark said indignantly.

"You did once," Lois retorted almost smugly. At his incredulous look, she crossed her arms. "I have one word for you, mister. *Planter*."

Clark blushed, but replied, "*You* asked."

"Whoa," Richard said. "Fill us in on the backstory, please." At the look on Lois' face, he added, "Kids, why don't you head upstairs and pick out your clothes for tomorrow?"

"Daddy," they whined, but were so excited about this little 'night out' that they went obediently.

"Okay, so I assume you remember that interview, right?" Lois said with a sigh, hiding a smile. "The first one?"

"*I Spent the Night with Superman*. Yeah, who could forget it? It's framed and hanging on the wall right by the elevators at work," Richard said in a touch of sarcasm.

Clark stepped in to continue the story. "I'd mentioned that I could see through most things, and Lois asked me what color underwear she was wearing." He had to pause while Richard guffawed and Lois blushed slightly. "Unfortunately, she was standing behind a lead planter."

"Yes, well, the moment I walked away from it while I was trying to get my brain under control to ask you what your name was, you freakin' answered me about the underwear," Lois grumbled. "For about twenty seconds I wondered who the hell would name their kid 'pink'."

"I don't know what boggles my mind more," Richard said. "Lois asking a superhero what color underwear she was wearing, or Lois wearing *pink* underwear."

"Shut up," Lois growled. How did she always wind up coming out of these stories looking like a love-struck moron?

Clark chuckled as he added, "Or Lois the fearless commitment-hating reporter asking me if I was married. For what, the second question?"

Lois paled, looking absolutely shocked and mortified. *Oh my God, I can't believe he brought that up! Kal-El!* Richard just raised his eyebrows. "*That* never made it into the article."

"Yes, well, a lot of stuff got left out," Lois snapped, knowing her cheeks were burning. "*Including* the comment that you didn't have a girlfriend, but if you did I'd be the first to know. I wasn't the *only* one flirting. Thanks, Kal-El, for reminding *everyone* how flighty I was back then." She switched her narrow-eyed glare to Richard before adding, "As for *you*, Mr. White, you are so riding in the *back* of the Audi."

"You weren't flighty, you were just impressed," Lana opined. "Which anyone would be, I imagine. What's important is that it took a *superhero* to impress you, Lois."

"Exactly," Lois said, salvaging her pride. "Thank God *someone's* on my side. How weird that it's the one-time potential rival..."

"Lois, if we fought over a man, it would be an epic battle worth immortalizing in print and on film," Lana chuckled. "Fortunately for everyone, it all worked out right in the end."

"Amen to that," Lois replied, grinning. "It would suck for you to have to get your butt kicked the way you would if we'd decided to fight."

Lana actually gave an unladylike snort of laughter. "You think you'd win?"

Lois crossed her arms and looked at Lana appraisingly. *Oh, trust me, I know I would.* "Cheerleader, you'd go down like dot-com stocks in 2000."

Watching in amusement, Richard said in mock-serious tones, "Ladies, you mustn't quarrel. This is the season of peace, remember."

"Says the man who was bickering with his ex all day like he thought he was auditioning for a sitcom," Lana replied smoothly.

Before Richard could do more than laugh at her remark, the twins came barreling downstairs. "Jason's gonna wear *green*," Kala announced disgustedly, herself dressed entirely in red. "*Again.*"

"Can I bring Gazeera?" her brother asked as he followed her into the room.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, the hotel doesn't allow pets," Lana told him. "I'm surprised they're letting me bring Richard."

"All right, kids," Lois said, smirking at Lana for the underhanded comment. "Richard, let's get these guys packed up, and I'll chauffeur you all over to the hotel. Kala, Jason - *behave*. I'm serious. This is a seriously fancy hotel."

"We'll be good; we know how to act in grown-up places..." Jason began, and then hushed himself abruptly at a glare from Kala. Clark just winced; *would* they be able to keep that trip to the jewelry store a secret, after all? Fortunately, everyone was too caught up in the logistics of getting Richard and Lana and the twins to the hotel to notice Jason's slip, and Clark breathed a sigh of relief. *For now.*

Lois was looking forward to an evening alone with Kal-El; Jason and Kala had been very affectionate with both parents during the last week, effectively becoming a cuddly barrier to any adult affection. Now, though, with Richard and Lana watching the twins, perhaps she could get some quality time with her favorite headline...

The moment she opened the door, the scent of something savory captured her attention. It smelled like... "Hamburgers?" Lois burst out laughing.

"They were in the 'fridge," Clark replied innocently, coming out of the kitchen with a plate for Lois. "And pierogies on the side - these are pretty good, actually, but you should really try some homemade."

Lois gave him a slightly odd look, then remembered. *Of course he knows what a pierogie is - he's all over the world.* "Thanks, love. I *was* getting hungry. But you do realize our first date was to a burger place. Our date in Smallville was a diner that served great burgers. And now *you're* cooking me burgers. This is becoming a theme."

"Don't worry, I'll make soufflé next time," he replied, kissing her forehead.

Lois tilted her head up, catching his lips for a quick kiss. Giving him a flirtatious little grin, she took the plate and headed for the living room, curling up on the couch to eat. Clark joined her, bringing his own plate, and chuckled at Lois having to pull her legs out of his way. Surprisingly for someone her height, she could completely take over the sofa with just her legs.

It was still strange for both of them to do something as normal as have dinner together while watching the news. When Cat Grant covered the landslide Superman had stopped that morning, Lois shook her head slightly. She couldn't resist a snarky grin. "You forgot your coat, huh?"

"I actually did forget my coat," Clark told her, taking a bite of his hamburger. He waited until after he'd swallowed it to add, "It turned out to be a convenient bit of forgetfulness, though."

The rest of the meal was livened by conversation about all of the little ways he managed to get away when people needed him. Getting locked in or locked out was a favorite, shortly followed by 'accidentally' leaving personal belongings somewhere. Clark had made quite an art of the quick escape over the years, and Lois couldn't help laughing every time she remembered something else he'd done years ago that sounded so goofy then, and was actually merely a cover for his heroics.

By the time they finished eating, Lois was in a very affectionate mood. The moment Clark returned from putting the dishes away she slid over into his lap and rested her head on his shoulder. Nestled together in the corner of the couch, they didn't need to speak, simply enjoying the closeness. Clark started running his fingers through her hair, and Lois sighed, her eyes slipping closed. That was so very comforting...

Until he stopped, and she could feel the sudden tension in his body. Lois sat up slightly, looking at him. "I have to go," Clark said regretfully.

Of course. The 'other woman' beckons... Reminding herself of the choice she had made, she only smiled at him. "Just when I was getting comfortable," Lois mock-threatened, but she slipped out of his arms willingly. "Go on, then. But you'd better hurry back. This is our first evening alone in a while, you know. And *for* a while, too."

He kissed her once, but she could tell his mind was elsewhere. "I love you. I'll be back." Then just that quickly, Clark was gone out the back door.

She stood up and walked out onto the porch, forgetting the cold and the snow as she looked up at the starry sky with a proud smile. "That's the problem with Men of Steel," Lois muttered softly, knowing he'd get the joke. "There's never one around when you want one."

King Kong was playing on the classic movies channel, and the twins settled in to watch it with Richard on the couch in the suite's living room. Lana had to take a few minutes for business; Kay gave Richard and the kids a fond glance while she waited for Lana to finish signing paperwork.

The redhead signed the last check and looked at her assistant. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"You get all the luck," Kay said quietly, then grinned. "The kids are even cuter than he is." Jason and Kala had, as usual, managed to charm her the moment they met. The twins had been wide-eyed with wonder at the huge tree in the hotel lobby and the evergreen garlands woven around every railing.

"I'll agree with that," Lana chuckled. "They *are* adorable. All three of them."

"Yeah, well, trust you to get the boy-toy with the cool accessories," Kay teased.

"Anyway, I've got a friend in Metropolis who's complaining about not having seen me in *ages*. Mind if I leave the suite to you?"

"Not at all," Lana replied. "Have fun."

"Planning on it," her assistant replied. "You kids be good - you especially, Mr. White."

"G'night Miss Kay!" the twins called, and Richard waved to her. The next moment, King

Kong appeared on the screen in all his badly-animated glory, and the twins returned their rapt attention to the television.

"Daddy Clark could beat up King Kong," Kala said after a while, watching the ape fight a pterodactyl.

"Oh, yeah," Richard agreed. "The monkey wouldn't have a chance against Superman. I mean, c'mon. Super-speed *and* super-strength? Kong would bite the dust. Not to mention heat-vision. Flash-fried Kong in three seconds flat." The twins giggled.

"I cannot believe I'm overhearing this," Lana said, pulling the chair toward them. "I also can't believe I'm sitting down to watch a movie made before any of us were born."

"Sit with us," Kala said pleadingly, and Jason echoed her.

Richard grinned and slid further over. "There's room."

Three sets of pleading gazes were too much to resist. Rolling her eyes at Richard, Lana joined the three on the couch. Jason was leaning against Richard, but Kala nonchalantly climbed into the redhead's lap, the top of her head nestled under Lana's chin. Hugging the little girl, Lana was surprised to realize how quickly she was coming to adore the twins. Going from occasionally envying their mother when she saw them to cuddling them had taken so little time, and happened so naturally. She glanced over at Richard with a soft smile, and he reached out to catch a lock of her hair and twine it around his fingers affectionately.

"Godzilla could beat King Kong, too," Jason said after a moment.

"Yeah, he breathes fire," Richard replied. "The lizard breath isn't as quick as Superman's heat vision, though, so it'd take longer. Barbecued monkey instead of fried."

That made Jason giggle again, and for the rest of the movie he and Richard kept speculating on which movie monsters would win in a pitched battle against Superman, Godzilla, or King Kong. By the time the movie was halfway over, they had gotten to, "Kong *and* the giant spiders against Godzilla" and Kala was getting very sleepy.

Lana, too, was feeling tired. She could blame the time change - it was past midnight in Milan, if only eight thirty in Metropolis. Kala yawned, and then tilted her head back to look at Lana with sleepy hazel eyes. "Miss Lana?"

The redhead smiled adoringly; this little girl was so beautiful, it was impossible not to want to hug her and cuddle her. "Yes, sweetie?"

"If you an' Daddy get married..." Kala trailed off as another yawn assaulted her, but she stifled that one, her nose wrinkling and her eyes closing as she turned it into a long sigh instead. Then she continued, "...an' if you have a baby, can I have a li'l sister? Cuz boys are kinda dumb sometimes."

Lana blinked at her in shock as Jason protested, "Girls are dumb too. *Tea parties*. Blah. Who wants t' go to a tea party where there's no real *tea*? And lotsa bears?"

Richard chuckled at the offended look on Jason's face, and said, "But if there are *girls* at those parties... Wait ten years, son. You'll understand." He glanced up at Lana, catching her dumbfounded look and grinning at her.

She caught the hint of a wicked smile in his expression, and looked back at Kala seriously. "Well, *if* I decide to marry your Daddy - if he ever *asks* me, properly - I'll keep that in mind. But it's not really my choice to make. It's the man who decides whether the baby will be a boy or a girl."

His jaw dropping slightly, Richard gave her an incredulous look. He was saved from any questions about the birds and the bees by Jason muttering grumpily, "Wanna brother. We got 'nough girls around here."

"We'll see what we can do about a sister for Kala," Richard replied smoothly. "Jason, you'll have to ask Mommy and Daddy Clark for a brother."

"Uncle Perry said she had a n'operashun," Jason replied, looking at him curiously. "Mommy can't have any more babies but us."

"If she *really* wants to, she can have another operation so she can have babies again," Richard told him, smirking as he thought, *Okay, Lois, let's see what you do with this.*

"That's cruel," Lana hissed, whapping his shoulder. "She's going to *kill* you when they start asking her to have surgery."

"Nah, you'll protect me," Richard replied.

"Jerk," the redhead muttered. As Kala yawned again, hugely, Lana hugged her and added, "I think it's time for me and the girl-child to get some sleep. We ladies know better than to stay up all night watching television like you boys." She leaned over to kiss Jason on the forehead, making him giggle, and then picked Kala up as she stood up from the couch.

"Yeah," Kala said sleepily, going limp. "Goin' bed. 'Night, Daddy."

"Good night, princess," Richard said. Lana leaned down so he could kiss her, and he added to the redhead, "They won't sleep apart. You'll have to put her in my room."

"That's fine," Lana said. Richard half-listened as she got Kala into her pajamas and coaxed her through brushing her teeth and washing her face. Then it grew quiet except for King Kong trashing New York. Jason sniffled a bit when the big ape died at the end, but by then he was too tired to empathize with the monster.

"You ready for bed, kiddo?" Richard asked, glancing at the clock. Ten minutes after nine - well, what Lois didn't know wouldn't hurt her. It was only a few minutes anyway; it shouldn't have required an act of Congress to finish the movie.

"Uh-huh," Jason said, rubbing his eyes. Richard shepherded him through the same nighttime routine Kala had followed. But when they reached the bedroom that had been set aside as Richard's, they found a surprise.

Kala was curled up under the covers, little more than her hair showing. Beside her, still dressed and stretched out atop the comforter, was Lana. Richard felt his heart skip a beat even as those lovely green eyes opened and met his gaze with an amused look. "She didn't want to be alone," Lana explained as she sat up. Jason toddled past her with a muttered good night and climbed into bed, Kala rolling over to snuggle with him. In moments the twins looked like one organism, a tangle of sleepy limbs and Kala's dark hair everywhere.

"How do they sleep like that?" Lana asked softly. "Can they *breathe*?"

"They'll be fine," Richard murmured, turning the bedside lamp on its lowest setting. "They thrive on it - they've never really been apart. They have separate beds in the same room at home, but whenever they have a nightmare or go somewhere new they have to be together."

That left the two of them standing in a bedroom together, albeit one presently occupied by two unconscious kids. However, Richard and Lana were both aware of her room in the suite... She went into his arms easily, running her fingers through his hair as she kissed him, and Richard hugged her tightly. The kiss, though very sweet, spoke more of leave-taking than passion, and he wasn't surprised when Lana drew back slightly to whisper, "Good night, Richard."

"Walk you to your room, Ms. Lang?" he asked playfully, nuzzling his nose against her cheek.

"Who could refuse such gallantry?" she replied with a chuckle.

With one last glance to make sure the twins were all right for a couple minutes, Richard

walked back through the living room with Lana. At her door, however, he paused. "You know, ever since that night in Milan, you've been a lot more relaxed around me," he said, pausing while she kissed his cheek. "And a lot more affectionate, too."

"Well, you proved I could trust you," she whispered. "You might not share my beliefs, but you showed that you're willing to respect them. I don't have to be so careful now."

Richard smiled slowly, stroking her long auburn hair. He had always somehow known the moment in a relationship when he could take things further, and on that balcony in Milan had been such a moment. "Thank you for your trust," he whispered back, but the gleam in his eyes turned wicked. "Oh, I would've loved to make good on everything I whispered to you then. But not when you'd been drinking. I won't take advantage of you - that's not how I want it to be between us."

"Good," she purred, kissing the curve of his jaw. Standing on tiptoe to do it, Lana whispered softly into his ear, "Because the champagne didn't have much to do with it." While Richard held his breath, not quite able to process what he'd just heard, Lana kissed him again, her lips barely brushing his neck. Her warm breath against his skin made Richard inhale sharply. "And I love you all the more for not taking that advantage."

With that she was gone, a swirl of red hair and smoldering eyes as she escaped his presence and closed the door between them. Richard leaned against the wall, still feeling the press of her lips against his neck, images flickering across his mind that made him almost - *almost* - regret having done the right thing that night on the balcony. *I think I'll have a shower before bed*, he thought with a sigh. *A cold shower.*

When Kal-El finally returned from rerouting a storm to end a punishing drought on the Australian coast, the house was dark and Lois was already burrowed under her covers and deeply asleep. Chagrined, he had headed home to his apartment, vowing to make it up to her in the morning. That was why he was letting himself into the Riverside house at six o'clock, carrying the newspapers and some pastries from a great little bakery ... in Chicago.

Lois was still sound asleep, and he moved quietly so as not to wake her. It took only a few minutes to start coffee, after all. He didn't want Lois coming downstairs until he had breakfast ready for her. While the coffeemaker percolated, Kal-El skimmed through several of the newspapers. He saved the best - the *Daily Planet*, of course - for last; it was the only one he took the time to read *thoroughly*.

A few minutes later he took a tray of coffee and pastries into the living room, where Lois lay under what seemed like a pile of blankets on the sofa bed. She'd still been unable to rest anywhere else in the house, and Kal-El almost hated to wake her now. But the only thing grumpier than Lois awakened too early was Lois allowed to sleep too late, so he placed the tray down on the end table and sat down on the sofa bed to let the scent of the coffee wake Lois up. Meanwhile, he started reading the *Daily Planet*, leaving the stack of competitors' papers beside Lois.

One hand had just ventured out from under the covers toward the coffee, shortly followed by her head as she peered out, when Kal-El opened the A-section and glanced at the editorial. The headline there - *Why the World Needs Superman* - and the byline - *Lois Lane* - made him gasp in surprise. Not a very beneficial reaction when you have a mouthful of coffee, and he had to splutter the hot liquid out of his sinuses before he could even begin to read her editorial.

Kal-El scanned Lois' words, his eyes growing wider and wider. They had long since discussed the infamous editorial that had won her a Pulitzer, and this one was much in the

same tone. Hard-hitting, passionate, yet well-reasoned and deeply intelligent, it would have taken his breath away for the quality of the writing alone. Consider the subject matter - a staunch defense of *him*, and his actions, before and since his return - and that the writer was *Lois*, and it became one of the most stunning things he'd ever seen in print.

A perfect world would not need a Man of Steel. Such a world would have resolved its socioeconomic conflicts and be so enlightened that matters of race and class and religion were cause for polite discourse, not hate crimes. There would be no war, no crime, no injustice, none of the self-destructive tendencies of humankind.

But this world is far from perfect. Look around you; the crime statistics are only a few pages past this one. And I'm not only speaking of those obvious failures when human nature turns violent. Thousands starve while millions seek medical treatment for obesity. Some cheat on their taxes and complain about the price of luxuries, while others must choose between buying necessary medication and paying rent. Still worse, we burn through this world's resources at a shocking rate, and in the name of recreation we despoil far more than we could possibly use.

Our imperfect world survived for millennia without a hero standing ready to rescue us from our own foolishness. And if he were not here, we would be better served to carry on the work he was doing than to mourn the loss of him. That is the message I was trying to send with another editorial, titled very similarly to this one. What Superman does for us is, for the most part, no more than what we should be doing for ourselves.

*But then, there are some things we simply cannot do. No one else can stop a raging forest fire with a single breath; no one else can steer a hurricane away from a heavily-populated coast. What we should have done in those circumstances - preventing arson or building our cities with an eye toward the weather - was past our ability to rectify. Then, we needed him to step in, to give us another chance. To plan better the next time, we need to **have** a 'next time'.*

*And still, if by some miracle the human race manages to get its collective act together, if we stop pretending problems will go away if we simply ignore them long enough, if **all** of us, this journalist included, manage to behave with compassion and decency toward each other and the world we live in, we will still need Superman. We need him to be the symbol of everything good in ourselves, all the greatness within us, every shining accomplishment we're capable of.*

*Think, for a moment, about the terrible devastation three people from his home world once caused here on earth. Superman himself has the same powers as those three criminals, and he **could** have been like them. Living on this planet, he could just as easily have become as cruel and tyrannical as the worst human dictators, and then surpassed all of them. Invulnerable, all-powerful, able to vaporize anything with just a glance, the familiar S-shield could have been a source of terror, not joy.*

But in spite of being raised by so primitive and flawed (in the eyes of his progenitors) a people as ours, Superman managed to absorb the best of what we are and can be. Every mother who risks her life to protect her child knows the same love he feels for our entire race. Every police officer and all of the fire-rescue personnel in the world, if they are true to their calling, share his sense of duty. Every reporter who risks life and limb to hunt down the truth and drag it into daylight tastes the same sweet victory that he does. Everyone who toils day after day, week after week, year after year, trying to help the least fortunate among us, receiving little support and less praise for their efforts, every one of those is Superman to the

people they aid.

*In spite of ourselves, our weaknesses, our greed, our petty squabbles, we took the last survivor of a distant planet to our hearts and made him one of us. And he became what all of us could be if only we followed our better impulses more often, the shining example we need to guide us. As his chronicler, I can guarantee you that the thought of being anything other than who and what he is never occurred to Superman. The mere notion that anyone could suspect him of **ever** becoming a tyrant would leave him looking shocked and appalled. He shares that with the best examples of humankind as well - neither can imagine ignoring the call for help.*

*The world needs Superman for every person who is engaged in the same battle he fights, for everyone struggling to ensure that our kind **has** a future. He is a reminder that their work is not in vain, that this imperfect world is not beyond saving, that the greatness of the human spirit truly exists outside the fanciful imaginings of poets. We all need him, not for what he does, but for what he represents and what he is: **hope**.*

At some point as he read the article, she had re-evolved enough to be sitting up and holding her mug in a death-grip, her eyes only slits against the daylight streaming in the windows. Lois slurped coffee beside him, and he turned to stare at her in astonishment. When had she managed to write this without him knowing? They'd been together well-nigh constantly, except for at night, but... One thought made it through the confusion in his mind: *If you weren't already going to marry her, this editorial would be reason enough to propose.*

Seeing his dumbfounded expression, Lois opened her eyes a little wider, blinking at him until her famously sharp mind warmed up enough to function. "Wha' you lookin' at me like that fr?" she said fuzzily, then licked her lips and took another swig of coffee. "Did I grow 'nother head or somethin'?"

"Lois..." Kal-El couldn't say anything intelligible; everything he wanted to express was jammed together in his chest: amazement, wonder, gratitude, admiration, a whole stew of emotions.

She blinked again, yawned hugely behind her hand, and more awareness returned to those keen hazel eyes. "Oh, this must have something to do with you creeping out on me last night. So much for *I'll be back*, huh, hero?"

Instead of replying to that, he simply plucked the coffee mug out of Lois' hands and set it aside, ignoring her yelp of protest. Kal-El caught her to him and kissed her soundly, letting his mouth on hers say everything he couldn't find words for. When he finally let her go, Lois gazed up at him wide-eyed and finally fully awake. "Ooookay, what did I do?" she asked cautiously. "Other than yell at you?"

Kal-El grinned and kissed her again, gently, on the corner of her mouth. "*Hope*," he whispered to her, and his eyes shone with pride in the honor she'd given him.

Lois arched an eyebrow, her expression growing steadily more dubious. "Kal-El, you're acting weird even for y..." Understanding dawned, and Lois groaned. *Already? Gee, **thanks**, Chief.* "Oh. Yeah. Dammit, I didn't know Perry was going to run it this soon!"

A fleeting expression of dismay crossed her lovely features, and Kal-El cocked his head slightly. "What is it?" he asked, hugging her close again. "The editorial... Lois, it's amazing."

"No, it's just the truth," she replied matter-of-factly. And, from the look on her face, that was all there was to it.

"So why the look like someone just found out where you keep your lock picks?"

"Never you mind," Lois retorted, subtly putting her hand down atop the newspaper.

"Now, if you *really* love me, go make me breakfast."

Now it was Kal-El's turn to look dubious. "You don't eat breakfast."

"I do today," Lois said pointedly, raising that eyebrow. "I woke up hungry from having to sleep *alone*."

In answer, he pointed to the pastries in the box on the table beside her. Lois looked at the box for a moment, bit her lip, then turned back to him. *Well, crap. That didn't work. I have to figure out a way to get that damn paper from him... Okay, fine, I'll bring out the big guns.*

"Okay, here's the deal. This nightgown's pretty short and there's nothing under it, all right? So scram while I get up."

Kal-El blinked. She wasn't generally that modest, either ... and he noticed just then the way that she was pulling the newspaper closer to her. *There's something else she doesn't want me to read.* "All right. I'm sorry, Lois - I'll be in the kitchen." With that, he stood up to go - and took his mug and the *Daily Planet* with him.

Oh, you sneaky little...! "Hey, I might wanna read that," Lois said sharply, her exasperation clear.

"You've got a whole stack of papers there," Kal-El replied, smirking while his back was to her. "Let me finish ours first. I read faster, anyway."

"Oh, give me a break," she huffed with exasperation. Getting up, she scooped up her mug from the coffee table, chasing down the last several gulps of the brew as she stalked past him. Thank God the heater was on or she'd be freezing her butt off. "Fine, now you're being childish. And I'm getting more coffee." *Maybe I got lucky and no one had a chance to get it in print yet...*

Kal-El chuckled as she breezed past him, remarking casually, "You're right, that nightgown *is* quite short. I appreciate the view, though." Then, ignoring her glare, he returned his attention to the newspaper, not bothering to unfold it as he skimmed through for mentions of himself or of Lois.

Only a few seconds later, he nearly choked on his coffee again. Lois barely had time to turn in his direction worriedly before he arrived at her side, staring in shock. "You gave back the *Pulitzer*?!"

No such luck. Making herself shrug nonchalantly, Lois poured herself another cup from the pot. "I wasn't meant to have it for that article. It wasn't even the *article* that won it; it was the sensation surrounding it. No point in keeping it. So I gave it back." Even now, she wondered that she had done it herself. The fact that she had been able to let it go without much grief was even more testament to it having been the right thing to do.

"Lois, it's the Pulitzer," Kal-El said, those blue eyes still wide with shock. "The *Pulitzer*. The award you wanted your *whole life*. The highest honor any reporter can ever receive. I don't even have one... And you gave it *back*?"

"I don't even have one?!" What, just because you're Superman you think you're *supposed* to have a Pulitzer Prize?" Lois snapped, whipping around to glare at him with crossed arms, her coffee mug forgotten on the kitchen counter behind her. She was clearly still *very* touchy on this subject, and just as clearly Kal-El hadn't known about Perry yelling at her for the same thing. "Yes, I freakin' gave it back! The article was hugely misunderstood by ninety-nine percent of the people who read it! They gave me an *award* for what they *thought* was me telling you where to shove it! I should've never accepted the bloody thing, and now I can't in good conscience *keep* it, either. When I win the *next* one, we'll put the damn thing on the mantel and you can tell everyone you knocked up a Pulitzer Prize winner. There, are you

happy?!"

For a long moment, Kal-El just stared at her. Then he dropped the newspaper, grabbed her shoulders, and kissed her resoundingly. That took Lois completely by surprise for the second time that morning, and she just blinked up at him as he hugged her. "You are *amazing*," Kal-El whispered as he kissed her again. "I can't believe... You wanted this ever since you were a kid, but your integrity is stronger than wanting to prove yourself once and for all. Lois, you never cease to amaze me - do you even realize just how much you mean to me?"

"You are seriously freaking me out right now, Kal-El," Lois deadpanned, still glaring slightly, her expression showing exactly where Kala had gotten her trademark pout. "What the hell is going through your alien brain?"

He just grinned. "How did I get so lucky as to find a woman this beautiful, this smart, this driven, and this ethical?"

"I guess you just happened to be under the right helicopter at the right time," Lois replied, smirking. "Got any plans for the morning, handsome?"

"Spending time with the loveliest reporter on earth," Kal-El said warmly. "We do have to get the twins back around noon, and if you have a spare key I'll just bring Richard's car so he can stop having fits. Other than that, I need to call Ma sometime today."

"Good," Lois said, and kissed him gently. "That means you can spend the whole morning with me."

Monday morning, the hottest story at the *Daily Planet* was Lois returning the Pulitzer. Everyone stared at her as she walked in, their expressions ranging from disbelief to horror to amazement. The raven-haired reporter just gritted her teeth, rolled her eyes, and stalked past all of them to her office. Perry grinned at her through the thick glass that separated their offices, and Lois sighed heavily as she surveyed the stack of paperwork on her desk. *I am not an administrator. I am **not** an administrator. I ought to be out chasing stories, not calling the bloody IT department about this glitch in the email server ... admittedly, they're used to Perry cursing them out and only pay attention when a woman snarls at them...*

The other newsworthy event was Richard's return to work. No one else had really known where he was the previous week, and when questioned all *he* did was grin irritatingly. That resulted in Lois having to field questions about his whereabouts as well, which did nothing for her mood.

She stayed busy all the way up to the Monday Morning Massacre, and when Perry opened the meeting for questions so many were about Lois and the Pulitzer that he had to bellow for silence and deliver a three-minute diatribe on what exactly constitutes news - and information about a fellow reporter, printed the previous day, was *not* news. Clark couldn't even offer her moral support; he had been dealing with muttered whispers and a couple of outright questions since he'd arrived, all of which came down to other reporters speculating on the nature of Lois' relationship with Superman. He wasn't sure which disturbed him more - the people who gave him pitying looks, imagining that he was about to lose Lois to the hero, or the ones who smirked at him for having the chutzpah to hook up with Superman's girlfriend. That nickname seemed destined to follow Lois around forever.

The usual rush out of the Monday Morning Massacre happened to throw Richard, Ron, Lois, Clark, and Jimmy together as they tried to avoid getting trampled by reporters who couldn't stand being harangued by Perry. For the moment, Lois ducked over toward International, smirking a bit at the interns who hadn't quite yet figured out that they weren't

going to be fired in the next five minutes.

It just happened to be time for the morning mail run, and a blonde paused long enough to hand Lois her mail. "Morning, Helen," Lois said, then did a double take. "*Morning?* You're night shift!"

"Covering for first shift's supervisor," the woman replied with a wry grin, adding as she turned to leave, "That was one hell of an editorial, by the way."

"Thanks," Lois replied, and then the crowd had thinned enough for the group to head for their own departments.

"Wait a sec," Richard said. "Lois, how the hell do you get your mail *hand-delivered*? Everyone else has to pick it up from the inbound basket."

"When I started working here, I was in the mailroom," Lois said airily, and headed for her desk. Richard just shook his head slightly as he returned to his office and the pile of work Perry had saved just for him.

At last, the bullpen seemed to have settled down, and Lois actually managed to get a few things *done*. Better yet, she snagged a tentative lead on a story to track down. Someone downtown was soliciting donations - sizeable donations, from what she'd heard - for the city's homeless shelter, but no one at the shelter had reported receiving such funds. *Nothing like the holidays for a little fraud*, Lois thought cynically. *'Homeless Shelter's Santa Was Really the Grinch, ' or something like that.*

It was close to lunch; she could just grab a hot dog or something and go stalk the story...

The bullpen was suddenly far quieter than it should have been, and Lois looked up warily. Everyone was looking over at International, where a very familiar redhead had just arrived. Lois cocked her head, wondering what Lana was up to as the other woman walked straight to Richard's office as if she owned the place.

He had stopped in the middle of what he was doing, getting up to open his office door with a huge smile. Lois grinned slightly, knowing that he would try to steal a kiss the moment Lana walked through the door he was holding so considerately. But to her surprise - and Richard's, from the look on his face - Lana stopped and handed him a white bag. That looked a lot like... *Lucky bastard, he's getting lunch catered!* Lois scowled, telling herself she might as well give up on the hot dog stand. Hadn't Clark told her about a great seafood place in Seattle...?

To her surprise, though, Lana turned and made her way back through International, ignoring the questioning glances of the reporters. She went slightly out of her way to pass Clark's desk and tap him on the shoulder; Lois ground her teeth with frustration when she couldn't see across the room well enough to read what they were saying. Lana continued out of International and through the bullpen toward Lois' own office, smiling warmly at her.

Lois leaned back in her desk chair with a smirk. Lana had barely opened the door to her office when the reporter said with amusement, "Presenting a united front, are we?"

The redhead's smile became a grin. "Well, I don't want to disappoint any of your employees," she replied easily. "We'd better not let them start betting on a catfight that won't happen."

"Aha. So you brought lunch to win me over? Best way to a non-rival's heart is through her stomach?"

"So Clark tells me," Lana replied. "It's not General Tso's, but I did pick up a Hunan-style entree you might like. They're calling it Hot and Spicy Peppery Chicken, and since you have to sign a release to order it, you should love it. I'm told you eat things that make grown men weep

and beg for ice cream."

"That's because they're wusses," Lois said casually as she got up. "Lunch sounds *evil*; lead me to it."

"You're welcome," Lana chuckled, heading back through City as if completely unaware of everyone watching them. "Oh, and the last time I checked, the surest route to a non-rival's heart is watching bad monster movies with her kids and her ex."

"I warned you," Lois told her. "Didn't I warn you? Wait until Christmas Day. Richard thinks it's cute to go watch a gory, bloody horror film on Christmas Day. The more severed heads, the better."

"He's welcome to," came the swift reply as they crossed into International. "I'll be home watching *Miracle on 34th Street*."

Both of them were still laughing when Richard and Clark saw them walk in, the entire International department seething with jealousy as the scent of delicious spicy Chinese food permeated the office. Lunch therefore became a convivial affair, with much banter and affectionate teasing amongst the four of them. Even Perry quit glancing speculatively over into his nephew's office after a while.

When the meal was nearly demolished, Richard looked at Lana with an adoring smile and asked, "So, how come I'm suddenly so lucky that I have a gorgeous woman bringing me lunch at work?"

Lana rested her chin on her palm as she regarded him. "Well, darling, I didn't want any gossip about us to get out of hand. And most importantly, I wanted to make the point that all four of us get along perfectly well. If you haven't exaggerated the rumor mill around here, we needed a show of unity."

"Very true," Richard said, glancing around his office. "Half of them probably think we hate each other or something..."

He never got to finish the thought. Perry came barging in, bellowing, "Lunch break's over! Someone's holding hostages at the embassy!"

"On it," Lois and Clark both said in unison. He looked at her oddly and added, "Lois, it's foreign soil..."

"Bull, it's in Metropolis, it's City's story," she snapped back. Holiday fraud could wait for something this hot. But Clark was already getting up to head for the door, and Lois had to act fast if she wanted to outrun a man with super-speed. Perry saw the look in her eyes and barked, "You're not a beat reporter anymore, Lane!"

Lois shot out of her chair and kicked it into Clark's path, yelling, "Like hell I'm not!" to Perry. There was no way *Clark Kent* wouldn't trip over the desk chair, and Lana winced as he stumbled. But that gave Lois the head start to *run* out the main doors, grabbing the doorjamb as she almost slipped on the carpet trying to make the turn for the elevators.

"Bill, get after her!" Perry barked, throwing open the door to City. "Head Lane off before she goes haring off after this story!"

"No way," Bill protested. "She's been doing desk-work for four days, Mr. White - she'll tear my head off for getting in her way!"

Perry growled at the man's cowardice, but shook his head in defeat. Many of the older reporters snickered as Clark tried to disentangle himself from the desk chair, and tripped over it *again*. They had all seen Lane and Kent competitive over stories, and to them this was actually a sign of normality returning.

Clark recovered from the interference, managing not to damage the chair Lois had tripped

him with, and made it to the doors just as one of the elevators opened outside them. The two reporters inside the elevator saw Lois heading their way and knew her well enough to dodge aside. She could *hear* Clark behind her, so instead of slowing down on the slick tile, Lois sped up. Laughing delightedly, she *skidded* into the elevator cab and slapped the button for the lobby before Clark even had a chance to beat her.

"Don't forget to pick up the twins, honey! I *love* you!" Lois called, waving merrily as the doors shut. Clark had to stop short to keep from running into them, and he scowled, watching through the metal as Lois descended. She was still laughing, those hazel eyes bright with mischief, and only he could hear her add, "Better luck next time, hero. I'm *still* the star reporter around here."

"We'll see about that," Clark muttered under his breath, heading for the stairs. But instead of going down to the lobby, he headed up to the roof to change suits. *You might be the first reporter on the scene, but you still can't beat me there.*

Back in the office, Lana, Richard, and Perry stood in the doorway after watching the spectacle. Perry sighed nostalgically and muttered, "Some things never change."

"No wonder he's in love with her," Lana mused, thinking that only Lois would ever have the ambition and the guts to kick a desk chair under *Superman's* feet. How could Clark *not* absolutely adore the one woman on earth who saw him as a man, not just a hero?

Richard, on the other hand, had a far more practical concern. "Well, that's them out of the office for an hour or so. What are we gonna do with their lunch? Everything in the break room fridge gets stolen... Then again, if any normal human tries to eat this stuff, it'll probably melt their brain. I've seen Lois eat a habanero pepper by itself for a bet..." As Lana turned to stare at him in purest horror at that last thought, Richard lifted the carton speculatively and glanced underneath. "If it sits here any longer, it may eat the desk. Uncle Perry, I'm dropping this in the fridge - if anyone leaves early because their mouth caught fire, we've caught our lunch bandit."

No Place Like Home for the Holidays

Lex Luthor leaned forward across his desk, turning a furious glare on the blonde woman seated there. "You must be kidding."

Mercy Graves utterly failed to be intimidated, and her tone was cool, almost bored. "No, I'm not. When have you *ever* been able to predict her behavior accurately? You can listen to my input, or you can ignore it and let me get back to work. Only the fact that you're currently my employer makes it matter to me in the slightest whether or not you get yourself killed over this woman."

The nonchalant declaration made him sit back in his desk chair and regard her thoughtfully. Mercy was unlike any other woman of his acquaintance - honestly, she was unlike *anyone* he knew. Logical, aloof, coldly self-absorbed, she couldn't be swayed by threats or promises, and she seemed to have no personal feelings whatsoever. That, combined with a formidable intellect, made her fascinating. Fortunately for them both, there was absolutely no attraction between them. That made her an ideal colleague, and little as he liked to admit it, she had a point at the moment. "You were saying?" Lex prompted.

"Leave her alone," Mercy said flatly. "Lois Lane isn't coming after you yet. She has two small children and it's only about a week before Christmas. She's far too wrapped up in her family to hunt you down. Assuming she could even find you here."

"That is where you underestimate her," Lex replied. "I'll admit she isn't an intellectual colossus on our level, but she's stubborn and disgustingly lucky. If anyone could find me here, it wouldn't be the alien; it would be that damned reporter."

"Fine," Mercy said. "We can warn her off. We have time to plan. But if you aren't careful, she'll pursue you more intently. If she's as determined as you say, threatening her too much or too little will only strengthen her resolve. Whatever action you take has to be very finely calculated."

"Hmm," Lex murmured. It was true that kidnapping her children and threatening the alien had provoked some astounding responses from Lois. Who could have guessed that she would gamble with her own life so readily? Or that she possessed the strength and courage to subdue Riley *and* Grant?

"We have time," Mercy repeated. "It's the holidays, and all your observations seem to indicate she thinks you're out of commission. We need to be studying her and her circle of acquaintances, looking for a weakness. *Other* than those children; I think we've established that she'll kill or die to protect them, and you don't want her that defensive."

"Very true," Lex agreed. He hated to admit that only the lucky chance of a huge mirror had saved his life aboard the *Gertrude*. If Lois had seen him and not his reflection, she would've killed him in cold blood before any of his men even knew she was aboard the ship. Perversely, that fact only intrigued him more. "If we spend as much time and resources on surveillance as you're suggesting, I'm afraid we'll wind up with a lot of useless data before we find the key."

"There's no such thing as useless data," Mercy said sharply. For the first time, her voice betrayed an emotion: impatience and perhaps a trace of anger. "You never know what tiny detail may become important through further research. Even the fact that her ex-fiancé has now taken up with a fashion designer could be vitally important to us one day. *All* data is useful."

"Very well," Lex said, and Stanford's jaw would have dropped to hear that respectful and almost conciliatory tone being used toward a subordinate. Accustomed as the geologist was to

Lex's arrogance, hearing the tone at *all* would have been a shock. "You have my approval to carry out the observation as you've outlined. I'll see to it that you have sufficient resources at your disposal."

Mercy simply nodded; she would not thank him for doing something that benefited himself. "I'll report back to you weekly by the arrangements I've suggested," was all she said before taking herself out of his office.

Lex watched her go, his mind far away - in Metropolis, to be exact, where the woman who had thwarted him so many times was probably spending all of her time trying to convince her coworker that he was the actual father of her half-breed spawn. He really had to learn more about this Clark Kent - the man seemed so unassuming that he had to be hiding *something...*

As he often did when he thought of Lois Lane, Lex opened his desk drawer and took out his favorite souvenir of their last encounter. He always handled her gun carefully; a trace of her perfume lingered on the rosewood grip, and he didn't want to erase that just yet. Whenever Mercy counseled patience, that faint scent and the memory of Lois pleading for her children's safety stilled the vengeful anger in Lex's heart...

"An' we got to ride horses again, and Daddy Richard fell off!" Kala crowed into the receiver, and Lois couldn't help but snicker. She could hear Richard in the background muttering unhappily; he, Lana, and the twins were in Smallville this weekend, having taken his plane instead of a commercial airline. The plan was for them to explain a few things to Lana's parents - *starting with, 'They're still not precisely mine, Mom, but you'll probably be seeing a lot of Lois' twins,* ' the reporter thought with another amused chuckle. They were also going to bring Ben and Martha back with them. With only a week to go before the holiday, Ma Kent didn't want to miss her son's first Christmas home, and Ben's two sons would be able to look after the Kent and Hubbard farms for a week or two.

The downside of all of this was that Lois was once again left missing her children; the Riverside house was achingly empty without them. Something she was starting to notice more and more lately. No matter how many times she told herself it was only a few days, that she'd miss this peace and quiet when she was hosting Ben and Martha, a part of her kept calling for her babies. *This is the price of having an extended family,* Lois mused, lying on the couch, the phone cord wrapped around her index finger while she listened to her daughter chatter away. *Everyone wants to play with the kids. The whole reason Jason and Kala are out there for the weekend is because Martha missed them so much.*

Kala finished gleefully describing Richard's tumble into the mud, and after several reassurances that Lois loved her very much and missed her terribly, she surrendered the phone to her brother. "I love you Mommy!" was the first thing he said when he got on the line.

"I love you, too, sweetheart," Lois replied with a smile, her heart swelling with adoration. The twins were so different sometimes, and she loved them both so much for those little idiosyncrasies. The urge to hold them both was almost unbearable despite the miles. *Why did I let them go this close to Christmas? They need to be here with me.* Hating herself for the selfish thought, she asked him warmly, "So, besides watching Daddy make a fool of himself, have you been having fun?"

"Uh-huh," he said with a laugh. She could see both the nod and the bright grin on his little face clearly in her mind. "Mister Ben showed us how t' follow rabbit tracks in the snow. Barkley helped." And now it was his turn to chat, his sister in the background giggling and

protesting as the aforementioned hound licked her face. "We got to see a fox - a *real* fox, Mommy, and Barkley howled an' howled 'til Mister Ben picked him up."

"I bet that was exciting," Lois chuckled, remembering the sheer volume the aged hound was capable of producing. "What did Grandma say?"

"She said she's glad Mister Ben can hear better than Barkley, or he'd starve t' death while she was callin' him for supper," Jason replied. "And then we got to go to the store, and since we were with Miss Lana we got candy for *free*!"

Lois stifled a sigh. That was another one of those wonderful things about extended family; she couldn't police what was done while they were away from her. The most obvious of which lately was the non-stop spoiling. Making herself let it go, she just made herself sound chipper. "Really? Wow. So what else has been happening?"

After a while, Richard managed to get custody of the phone again. "So you heard about my ignominious defeat," he said, by way of introduction.

"The entire thrilling tale. It's clear that they're the product of a journalistic up-bringing," Lois teased. "Didn't break your tailbone, didja?"

"No, just my pride. It didn't help that Lana laughed so hard she couldn't breathe. Oh well, the majority of women *do* like a guy who can make them laugh..."

"Speaking of things that'll make *me* laugh, how are you getting along in Smallville?"

"Oh, fairly well," Richard replied, his calm tone making it clear that he had been enjoying himself. "I actually like the people around here - those guys hanging out on the front porch at the general store, they're pretty cool. I mean, dudes in their seventies and eighties who think they can actually ogle Lana... It was hilarious."

"It was a preview of *you* in about forty years," the raven-haired reporter shot back. "Utterly useless and still eyeing women half your age. Glad you like Smallville, you'll be retiring there."

"Nah, I couldn't live here," he said with a hint of real regret in his voice. "There isn't a decent rock and roll station anywhere on the radio dial."

"Oh, please. That's no reason not to stay there if that's what your problem is. That's why God invented XM radio, Richard. Satellite radio stations are your friends."

"Yeah, I'd hate think what would happen if I listened to too much crying-in-your-beer music..."

He trailed off, and in the background, Lois heard Martha clear her throat. She stifled a laugh; it was too easy to imagine the stern look the older woman was giving her ex. A moment later, she heard from much nearer to the phone, "Richard, *I* listen to country. And it is *not* all crying-in-your-beer songs."

Lois choked back a whoop of laughter, her current sadness momentarily forgotten. *I can't believe he didn't expect that to happen. It is Kansas and they are of the older generation. Duh, Richard. You've got a lot to learn.* "Uh-oh, now you've done it. You're in trouble with the cheerleader now," she teased some more. "I can't *believe* you said that out loud."

"I guess I'd better buy a pickup truck and a cowboy hat," Richard said resignedly, and Lois heard both Martha and Lana laughing. Lois rolled her eyes and smiled. *So laying it on thick.* "Seriously, though. People finally quit talking about you, Lois."

"Yes, now *I'm* the topic of the month." The owner of that complaint was obviously Lana, the irritation in her voice quite clear even though she was several feet from the phone. "My own mother can't believe I picked up *your* stray, Lois."

"Tell her she can keep you, Richard," was the younger woman's retort. "And tell

everyone around town that I'm delighted for the two of you. They'll get used to it eventually. Maybe Ben and Martha ought to get into trouble and take the heat off you guys for a while." There was a sound outside, making Lois look up.

"Yeah, they've both been amazing," Richard told her. "I only got to talk to Martha a bit before we made the arrangements and flew out here, but now I see where Clark gets a lot of his best traits from. His mom's seriously cool."

"Flatterer," Lois heard Martha call affectionately. "Don't think that makes up for the comment about the music, though, Richard."

There was another smattering of laughter in the background at the farmhouse. "Darn," Richard sighed. "Hey, Lois?"

There had been a strong gust of a wind a moment before and Lois was staring over at the French doors hopefully, sitting up. She had missed the last moment or two of hilarity almost entirely. "Mm?" she replied, a bit distracted.

"I get the feeling I don't have your full attention," he said gently. "I mean, normally you'd tear my ego apart for at *least* half an hour over falling off the horse. You told the kids Clark wasn't home when they first called - where is he, anyway?"

The reporter paused a moment, then heaved a sigh as she lay back down, bracing the phone against her shoulder. Richard always had been fairly good at spotting her moods, even if he didn't know the reasons behind them. "Out of town," Lois replied, her tone finally giving away her unhappiness as she fidgeted with a lock of her black hair. It was highly unlikely that anyone was listening in to this conversation besides those who already knew the secret, but she chose her words carefully anyway. "He's up north."

Richard paused, then said, "Aha. Checking on the vacation home?"

Lois started laughing as soon as he said it - what a perfect code for the Fortress. Trust Richard to not only catch on to what she was trying to say, but to find ways to help her discuss it. "Yeah, he's been gone since last night. You know there was a break-in, and he's been returning some of the stolen property he managed to recover."

"Kinda lonely at home, huh?" Richard said with clear sympathy. "He should be back soon, right?"

She glanced longingly at the back door once again. "I expect him home tonight or tomorrow morning. I know for sure that he'll be back before you guys get back," she replied, then added softly, "One of the things that was taken ... was a recording of his father. Given the way his old man felt about *me*, I'm not entirely sure whether I'm happy he has that back in his possession. It would almost be better for everyone if the recording was damaged."

"Lois, if Clark's dumb enough to be having second thoughts based on what someone else thinks of you - even if that someone is his father - I'll smack him in the head for you," Richard said. "Although it might break my hand if he's as thick-headed as you think."

That made Lois laugh at last. "Thanks. I love you, too, Richard."

"I know you do," he replied easily. "I'm just never gonna drink your coffee again. Thank *God*; that stuff was lethal."

"Wuss," Lois teased. "Look, I know you have free long-distance, but that's no reason to abuse it. Go play with the twins; Jason will show you Fred the Frog's residence if you ask."

"Gladly, but the pond's frozen over now. I'm pretty sure our boy Fred's vacated his Froggy Apartment." He paused for a minute, listing to something being said, then added, "Martha wants to talk to you really quick. Here she is."

Before Lois could even prepare herself to talk to the older woman, Martha was on the

line. "Listen, sweetheart. I heard Richard's half of that. And if my son is having second thoughts about you, *I'll* swat him. You're one of the family now, you hear me?"

"Well, considering the fact that both of my entries to the Kent family tree are running around your living room playing with beagles, I should hope so," Lois laughed. "I'm looking forward to having you here, Martha."

"And I'm looking forward to visiting," she replied. "Especially to meeting the infamous Gazeera and Captain Jack. And Lana and Richard both insist that I have to meet your mother at the earliest opportunity."

Lois gulped; it was hard to imagine what the two women would make of each other. They had a lot in common: strong personalities, widowhood, a deep adoration of the twins, and a certain irrational maternal protectiveness over their risk-taking offspring. But the last time Ella had mentioned the twins' 'other grandmother' it had been with a distinctly jealous note in her voice. "It ought to be interesting," Lois said.

"I'm sure we'll get along like a house on fire," Martha chuckled. "After all, she *is* your mother. She must be a fascinating lady."

"Yeah," Lois said weakly. "And you'll probably adore my little sister. Everyone does..." *Oh boy. She's small-town Midwestern - I don't think they have **that** many interracial marriages in a town the size of Smallville. Martha ought to be okay with that. She raised an alien, for the love of God. And Ben seems pretty cool on that score...*

"Lana's been raving over how adorable her children are and how handsome her husband is," Martha said, ignoring the muttered protest from Lana in the background. "Not that the twins aren't her favorites - I know you can hear me, Kala Josephine - but I'm actually looking forward to meeting the whole family."

"I'm sure they feel the same," Lois said, reminding herself to tell the others that Clark's mom was coming to town for Christmas. "Speaking of the cheerleader, put her on the phone, please?"

"Sure thing," Martha said. "Take care of yourself. Lana, darling?"

"You too," Lois said, adding quickly before she handed the phone over, "Give my love to Ben." The next moment, she heard Lana's amused voice, and said urgently, "*Please* tell me you explained everything."

"What do you mean?" Lana asked.

"About Lucy. And Ron. And their kids."

"What about them?"

"*Lana*," Lois groaned.

"Oh, *that*." Lana sighed aggravatedly. "Yes, I think I mentioned that the children are mixed. Lois, we are not a bunch of provincials from the nineteenth century out here. No one is going to panic and use any kind of offensive racial epithet, all right?"

"Look, I just don't want to offend anyone," Lois growled. "I did enough of that when I came out there the first time!"

"Yes, well, all your sister's children were born *after* she married Ron, so it's fine by Smallville standards," Lana shot back.

"Don't make me hang up on you," Lois said sharply, and heard Lana snicker.

Taking a deep breath, Kal-El placed the pristine father crystal into the central slot in the Fortress' control console. He had no idea what to expect; the Fortress itself had been completely powered down and demolished before he'd left for Krypton, but had rebuilt itself in

time for Luthor to steal the entire collection of teaching crystals. Not just the ones with simple recordings on them, but also this main crystal, the one that had once contained the programming for Jor-El's artificial intelligence program. The one that had allowed him to speak with his father, at least until Jor-El had given up his own power source to return his son's superpowers and enable him to defeat Zod and his followers. After that, the father crystal had only held static recordings.

But now, he had no idea what to expect. The crystal slid into place easily, and the entire console brightened. For a long moment, nothing else happened, and Kal-El began to think that Luthor had somehow erased the information from this most important crystal. All the others were intact, but this one...

The large, smooth crystal surface across from him brightened, exactly as it had when he had first stepped inside the Fortress to explore its wonders. After another pause, Kal-El heard his father's voice say, "My son" as Jor-El's image began to take shape. He let out the breath he'd been holding in a relieved sigh.

"You do not remember me," Jor-El continued. Kal-El's jaw dropped in shock as he continued, introducing himself in exactly the same words he'd used the first time. Jor-El seemed not to remember him at all. Had the destruction of the Fortress wiped all of the stored memory out of the crystal? Kal-El managed to interrupt the greeting, and stammered out a few questions that established that this was the true AI, not merely a recording. Now he felt his heart begin to pound. He had his father back - but Jor-El remembered *nothing*.

He doesn't remember what happened with Zod. He doesn't remember me losing my powers, or giving them back to me. And he doesn't know that I'm involved with Lois now, or that I have the twins. Oh, boy... "Father, I have much to tell you," he began, falling into the formal rhythms of their speech quite naturally. "The Fortress of Solitude was damaged, and it appears that the records of our past conversations have been lost. I would revisit our past exchanges and all of the wise counsel you have given me, so that you will know where we stand now."

The hologram nodded. "If the central crystal was damaged and regrown, such memory loss would occur. Please, my son, speak. I would know everything."

Taking a deep breath, Kal-El thought back to those first lessons. When he spoke again, it was in Kryptonese. "We have much to discuss, father." *And perhaps by the time I tell him about Lois and Jason and Kala, he will trust my judgment.*

"I'll never forget what we had," she whispered against his mouth.

Lois fled his apartment, tears starting up again. It just hurt too much; even kissing him now brought back bittersweet memories he'd never meant for her to have. She heard him calling out to her weakly, but she couldn't bear to turn back. The sweetness of his lips mingled with the salt of her tears as she sobbed...

"Lois, wake up," Kal-El whispered, shaking her shoulder a little more roughly. "Wake up, it's only a dream. Hush, love, it's just a dream. Don't cry, Lois, I'm here..."

She looked up into those amazing sapphire eyes, seeing him so concerned and attentive, and blinked away tears. It *was* only a dream, he was right here beside her, none of that had happened... Lois snatched the pillow out from beneath her own head and hit Kal-El with it. "Damn you, you'd better not *ever* do that to me! I'd *kill* you! Dammit!"

He fended off the pillow, eventually taking it from her. "Lois, Lois, whatever it is, I wouldn't do anything that would upset you this much. It was a *dream*. It wasn't real."

"It coulda been real, I would've done something that *stupid* for you," she protested, sniffing back the tears that continued to leak. "I *hate* that; I'm so desperately in love with you, I've done such *stupid* stuff before, and I *know* I'd do something that lame..."

Kal-El hushed her, gathering her close against his chest and kissing her tear-streaked face until she settled down a bit. "Easy, love, it's all right," he whispered over and over again, stroking her hair until her breath stopped hitching. After a few moments, he nuzzled her cheek and asked, "Now, what was this dream about so I know what *not* to do?"

Lois sniffled again, burying her face in his neck. "It was a while from now - you and I were both older, I could tell. And ... and you were trying that same stupid nonsense again, trying to pretend you're not Superman. And I knew better, but I ... I went along with it because ... that's what you wanted. I just love you too much for my own good. You are the *only* person I act like a stupid romantic with!"

"Lois, it was a dream," he whispered, kissing her softly. "You know it's a dream, because you're *not* stupid. Farthest thing from it, really. You're brilliant..."

"Done more than my share of stupid stuff because of you," Lois muttered, curling closer against him. "Jumping out of windows and landing in fruit carts, that kind of stuff."

"Being in love makes people do silly things," he murmured. "I've done my share. But you're *not* stupid, and it *was* just a dream. Lois, you know the truth now. We have the twins - we have a life together. I would *never* trade this life for anything..."

"Talked to your father lately?" she whispered huskily, turning her reddened eyes to his. "You did once, Kal-El."

He traced one finger over her cheek before answering, looking at her somberly. "Lois, I made that mistake once. I won't do it again. We're proving every day that I *can* have you and my mission. No matter what Jor-El has to say on the matter, you and I are together now, and I mean for us to be together *forever* this time."

"Yes, but..."

He cut her off with a gently scolding tone. "Lois, I *can't* try to take everything back to the way it was, not now. Too many people know the secret. And I only know of two ways to undo what's been done. One, the amnesia kiss ... well, it's not foolproof. And besides, look who knows. I have no problems kissing you like that..." Lois' elbow caught him in the side, and he hastened to say, "*No*, I mean I have no problems giving you a romantic kiss! That was one heck of a kiss, and I have no idea if it would work as a peck on the cheek, all right? I was saying, I can't imagine going around kissing everyone like that. The twins? Your mom? Lana? That's ... that's just wrong."

Lois actually snickered a little at that thought. "Yeah, well, once upon a time you wouldn't have minded kissing Lana," she teased, and had the satisfaction of seeing him blush.

"*Anyway*, there's one big reason why I can't just give everyone amnesia and go back to keeping the secret," Kal-El told her, waiting for Lois to stop snickering and meet his gaze. "*Richard* knows."

She blinked up at him for a few seconds, then burst out laughing. "Oh my God, Kal-El, that's *hilarious*," Lois wheezed, still giggling. "Thanks, that made me feel better. You're right. I can't see that happening... Wait, you said there were *two* ways to undo it." Her voice was suddenly nervous again, and her hands tightened on his shirt, seeking reassurance.

He sighed. "I wasn't ever going to tell you this, but... It *would* be possible to undo everything. I mean really undo it. I ... I can sort of turn back time. Well, really more go back in time than turn it backwards - it's sort of a quantum thing."

Hazel eyes searched his, seeking some indication that he was joking, but she saw only seriousness. Lois drew back from him slightly, asking carefully, "Why does this sound like something you stumbled into by accident? Kinda like the amnesia kiss?"

Kal-El propped himself up on one elbow, looking at her very intently. "Lois... You're right, it's another power I didn't know I had. I've only used it once, in dire circumstances, and only for a matter of hours. And I wouldn't use it now. I have no idea if I could go back that far, or what would happen if I did. Furthermore, if I went back and stopped you from finding out for certain that I'm Superman, I would basically un-create the twins. And that's tantamount to murder - I would never give up Jason and Kala. *Never.*"

When he said *that*, Lois had looked at him in absolute horror. Un-create the twins? Never, indeed - she had known he was powerful, but never imagined something like *that*. To distract herself from the distressing thought, she asked softly, "Dire circumstances? Why do I get the feeling this has something to do with me?" He was looking at her *very* strangely.

"Lois..." Kal-El trailed off and had to look away for a moment before meeting her gaze again. He spoke very softly and very hesitantly as he answered, "Lois, I... It was for you. In California. That earthquake..."

"My car ran out of gas, and there you were," Lois murmured, nameless dread creeping icily into her heart.

"No," he whispered. "No. A fault opened up. Your car... I was dealing with a dam that had burst. I didn't see the fault widening until it was too late. I found you... The car had fallen in, and there was a rockslide. You ... you were..." The look on Lois' face stopped him, her eyes wide with denial, shaking her head back and forth as if to blot out what he was about to say. Kal-El caught her chin and made her look at him, all the agony of that moment blazing in his expression. "You were already gone," he choked out. "You ... you suffocated. And I was too late to save you. I tried... But I couldn't ... couldn't live without you... So I went back in time, risked the whole world for you..."

Lois felt as if she were suffocating all over again. She'd had a recurring nightmare of being trapped and smothered in some dark place, and she felt the horror of that dream returning as Kal-El spoke. But messing around with *time* ... no, that was too dangerous. Whatever he meant by risking the whole world for her, she didn't really want to know. "No wonder your father hates me..." Lois whispered softly; it made so much sense now. Not only had he jeopardized his mission, he'd risked the *entire world*. "Kal-El, don't *ever* risk everything for me like that again. *Ever*. Please..."

"I won't have to," he murmured, kissing her forehead gently. "I'm a lot better at getting there in time now."

"Promise me you won't do it again," Lois demanded, tilting her face up to kiss him quickly and desperately. "*Promise*. I don't *ever* want you to do that again."

"Lois..." Kal-El's voice was very soft, but he couldn't make that promise. Not when he'd planned to use that power if he hadn't been able to rescue the twins in time. The truth was, he would risk anything, even his own life, for his family. "I love you, Lois. I won't have to take a risk like that again. You see? I'm always looking after you - I got here in moments to wake you from the nightmare. No matter what happens, I'll be there for you." He kissed her forehead again, nuzzling her hair. "Besides, I'm not even sure it would *work* a second time."

She clung to him, still shivering from the dream. It had seemed so *real*, that bleak future. Trying to distract herself, she asked, "So, how'd it go with the crystals?"

Kal-El sighed. "Everything works. Even the artificial intelligence. I have my father back..."

But he has no memory of all the things he and I talked about. It's been ... interesting, going over it all again."

Her sudden stillness communicated her trepidation better than any words, and Kal-El continued by answering the questions Lois hadn't asked. "I haven't spoken to him about us, yet. Nor the twins. I need to recharge the power source fully - we had just gotten through my education and my first rescues when the power started to dim. There's a crystal cluster just for storing the sun's rays, and as it turns out the walls of the Fortress are designed to funnel that energy down to it. It's easier just to carry the thing up out of Earth's atmosphere and let it absorb the unfiltered rays, though, and that's what I was doing earlier this evening. I got caught up - the sun does that to me - and I didn't know how late it was. When I finally noticed, I went back to the apartment instead of waking you. I figured I'd see you in the morning - and it *is* morning now."

He stroked her cheek lightly, adding, "There will be plenty of time to have those arguments all over again. This time, Father isn't dealing with a frightened youngster or a man in the first flush of love. I've had to live without his teaching and advice, and I *know* now that I can do my duty as well as have a life with you and Jason and Kala. Frankly, I'm not looking forward to pointing out that he lied to me about my powers being gone *forever*."

"Yes, well, I'm not looking forward to you having to argue with him *at all*," Lois muttered. "I can't quite forgive him for the last time we went through this."

Kal-El shushed her, placing little kisses all along her neck and jaw line. "Lois, love, you won't lose me again. I *just* got you back; you're not going to get rid of me anytime soon. *That* I'll promise you. I'm staying this time."

Lois sighed contentedly and nuzzled him. "Good. Because I wouldn't *let* you go this time."

Laughing, he lay down beside her - it was three o'clock and they both had to be up early. "Well, since you're so set on keeping me close, I have to admit I have no intention of flying back to my apartment in this weather with just pajamas on. The cold can't hurt me, but it's not comfortable on bare feet, either."

"Pajamas?" She leaned back to look at him and snickered. "I hope no one *saw* you. But yes, you're welcome to stay."

"Thanks," he replied. "You're not the only one who's finding it difficult to sleep alone these days, you know."

Grinning, Lois held up the edge of the comforter so he could slide under it. "I'll never turn down a Kryptonian heating blanket," she murmured as he curled around her. "Just make sure you go to sleep and be as un-irresistible as you can, all right? We do have plans tomorrow. The horde is coming home."

Kal-El just sighed against the back of her neck, breathing in the scent of her hair. Lois jerked away with a shiver, growling, "That is *not* helping. If you want us to behave, you'd better stay the heck away from the back of my neck. In fact..." She squirmed away enough to roll over and lay against him, unconsciously mirroring the way they'd slept that first time in the Fortress.

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "Sorry. You smell so good... Get some sleep, love."

"Fine. You lay there and huff my shampoo, I'll sleep." In an undertone, she added as she snuggled in against his chest, "Don't think I don't know why you don't stay here at night."

"I'm trying to set an example..." But Lois was already falling asleep, and Kal-El simply

wrapped his arms around her and held her. It was so wonderful just to lie with her, to hear her heartbeat and feel the warmth of her skin. He had never dreamed he would be this lucky... *And if I'm very lucky and she says 'yes' when I offer her the ring, I can have this for the rest of our lives. To sleep beside Lois every night and wake up with her every morning... Absolute bliss. Even if she is the most savage creature on earth before she gets her coffee, she's finally mine.*

Lois had made up both guest bedrooms and reluctantly moved back into the master bedroom. They would be using the living room regularly with Ben and Martha both staying here, so she wouldn't be able to camp out on the sofa bed anymore. *There's no way I can keep this house; I'll never be able to sleep here again,* she thought in annoyance as she cautiously slid a bowl of fresh greens into Gazeera's cage. The iguana had been quite lethargic over the weekend, probably missing his owner, but Lois was still using a set of tongs to reach into his cage. There was no telling when the lizard might attack.

Captain Jack rattled his cage bars loudly, nearly making Lois drop the tongs. "Dammit," she growled. "What the hell is it with the Kents and their psychotic damn animals?! *God!* Gimme two seconds, you fur-covered slinky. Here's your freakin' weasel chow." The black ferret pounced as soon as she poured the kibble into his feeder, and the reporter left the twins' room, still grumbling under her breath.

"You can handle convicts, congressmen, and superheroes, but you're defeated by your own children's pets," Clark chuckled. He was standing at the foot of the stairs, looking up at her in clear amusement. "I can't decide if that's sad or just richly ironic."

"Bite me, hero," Lois grumbled. "It's not like they can attack *you* or anything. When's the rest of the family getting here?"

"Richard's plane is about fifteen minutes away," he replied.

"Great," Lois said as she hurried downstairs. "That's just enough time for me to chuck both cages in the river. We can tell the twins their pets went out on vacation and we don't know when they'll come back."

"*Lois!*" Clark scolded. "You wouldn't. You threaten it every day, but you'd *never* hurt those animals." He glared at her, and she just looked back steadily, one eyebrow slightly arched. "I *know* you wouldn't, Lois. Complain and threaten if it makes you feel better, but I know you're a better person than you give yourself credit for."

"Yeah, right," Lois muttered, but her heart wasn't in it. "What's the E.T.A. on the welcoming committee?"

Clark tilted his head slightly, listening. "Hmm. They should be here any second. Lucy's pulling in the driveway now..."

Lois gulped, pausing beside him. "Um, so how'd your mother sound when you talked to her this morning?"

"Lois, it'll be *fine*. This isn't a UN meeting; we don't need an armed peacekeeping force." Clark hugged her close and kissed her forehead, ignoring the pointed look she declared at him, the most effective peacekeeper of them all. "It's just the twins' grandmothers finally meeting."

"That's what I'm worried about," Lois whispered, and then she heard the van in the driveway.

They had just gotten Ella, Ron, Lucy, and the Troupe kids out of Lucy's van when they heard the seaplane's engine approach. "Just in time!" Lucy said happily. "Hustle it, kids."

"Good God, Lucy, you gain five pounds more every time I see you," her sister said,

shaking her head in wonderment. "When are you gonna pop that kid out? Every time I see you, I forget your due date."

"I'm not due 'til January first," the blonde replied. "Heckuva way to ring in the New Year, huh?"

"Remember, Lucy, your sister was a week or two late," Ella commented, looking archly at Lois. She knew *now* that Lois had actually carried the twins *eleven* months, but given their ancestry it was little surprise.

"Yes, well, I'm always early," Lucy said proudly, patting her belly.

Ron and Clark had gone with the three children to wait while Richard docked the seaplane. He had barely tied it to the mooring cleats when Kala jumped out of the plane, giggling madly and running along the dock. Jason was right on her heels, both of them yelling, "*MOMMEEEEE!*"

This time, Lois couldn't kneel fast enough, and she got tackled to the ground. Both kids hugged her, babbling happily about how much they'd missed her and asking after their pets. Only after she'd hugged them both and reassured them that the animals were okay did they suddenly notice Clark, Nana, and the rest of the family, and race off to attack-hug someone else.

Lois got up, dusting snow off her jeans, and glared at Richard. Stalking over to him with her hands on her hips, she lowered her voice to demand, "Why in the hell are my kids acting like a couple of coked-up crackheads, Mr. White? How much candy did they bring back from Smallville?"

"Oh, the in-flight snack was chocolate-chip cookies," Lana replied, patting Richard on the shoulder. "It's been fun." With that said, the redhead turned her attention to helping Martha and Ben off the plane.

"Cookies? Are you freakin' kidding me?" Lois stared at him. "Cookies *and* candy in a two-day period? And they've been seatbelted in for *how* many hours? No wonder they're acting like zoo escapees! Thanks, Richard."

He glanced past her, to where Jason and Kala had finished hugging the adults and were now chasing Sam, Nora, and Joanna around in the snow, all five kids giggling madly. Jason tripped, landed full-length in the snow, and got up looking like an overly-frosted gingerbread boy. For one second, Clark looked concerned, but Jason just laughed and ran off after his cousins. "Hey, what's wrong with cookies?" Richard asked, grinning at their antics. "They don't have allergies anymore."

"Yes, but they *do* react to *sugar*, Richard," Lois growled. "This is why I always bought them sugar-free candy, Richard. Because I don't particularly like them being psychotically hyper, *Richard*."

Seeing the look of imminent strangulation on Lois' face, Richard just held his arms out and smiled. "I missed you, too, honey."

Grumbling, Lois hugged him anyway, looking over his shoulder at Ben who had just exited the seaplane. The older man waved a greeting, which Lois returned ... and then the hand on Richard's shoulder tightened into a claw when she saw the dog carrier Ben was holding. "I will freakin' *kill you*, Richard," she snarled under her breath.

"Wha...? Oh," he said, starting to smile apologetically as he stepped back from her. "Lois, Barkley pines when he's left alone..."

Lois gave him a very black look and said flatly, "I *hate* y..."

Her words were cut off by the sudden baying of the beagle, and everyone jumped, even

those who had met him. "We brought Barkley, Mommy!" Kala yelled happily. "He can meet Gazeera an' Captain Jack!"

"For the love of God, Benjamin Hubbard, *shut that fool hound up!*" Martha called, glaring at Ben. She didn't see the measuring glance Ella Lane gave her at that.

Clark chose that moment to make the introductions, catching his mother's elbow gently. "Ma, I really want you to meet Lois' family," he said warmly, and offered Ben a smile, too. "Ben, you and Barkley too. Let's go inside."

Lois swatted Richard on the shoulder and called to her sister, "Gather your heathens, Lucy. Momma, Ron, c'mon. Everybody in the house where it's warm. Jason! Kala! No, you are *not* making snowmen right now. *Inside.*"

Once indoors, Lois went to make hot chocolate, listening to Clark introduce everyone. Her attention drifted from the milk in the saucepan for just a moment as she reflected on the situation. *Not so long ago, he thought he was alone on this earth, the last of his kind. The Last Son of Krypton, with only his adopted mother knowing the truth. But now look at him. He's not the Last Son anymore; there's a son **and** a daughter who both look like him and who are both inheriting his powers. Plus he has me, the love of his life... Lois grinned to herself before adding, and he's the love of mine. That would've been enough, I think, but he also has my family now. Momma knows, and even if Lucy and Ron and the kids don't know he's Superman, they love Clark. They always have. Lucy's going to drive me nuts with 'I told you so' over him.*

And the weirdest thing of all, Richard and Lana are some kind of family, too. He's more my irritating brother than my ex-lover these days - for which I'm thankful, even when I want to deck him - and Lucy's working her way around to unofficially making Lana a Lane girl. 'Matching Monograms Club,' indeed. Even Momma's commented that the cheerleader reminds her of herself at that age, and I can see it. Lana's got the poise and diplomacy Momma couldn't quite instill into her headstrong foul-mouthed oldest or her bubbly cheerful youngest.

Lois was saved from having to contemplate how much like her father she really was by the milk starting to simmer. She quickly poured hot milk into mugs and added powdered cocoa, and Lucy arrived in a moment to help her carry the drinks out. "I love this kitchen," her sister sighed. "It's *huge*, you realize."

"And totally wasted on me," Lois replied. "That's part of the reason why we're not keeping it. Clark cooks, but he's just as busy as I am. You'd get more use out of a kitchen this size than I ever would..." She trailed off thoughtfully, then shook herself. "So how's everything going out there?"

"Momma and Mrs. Kent haven't had much of a chance to talk," Lucy said in her usual sunny manner. "The kids are pretty much monopolizing everyone."

"I will *kill* Richard for giving them sugar on a long flight," Lois promised. She gave Lucy one tray of mugs and took the heavier tray herself, heading out to the living room to circulate.

Ella and Martha had each taken one of the deep, comfortable chairs that faced the sofa, and Richard and Lana were on the sofa, leaving space for Lucy. Ben, Ron, and Clark had taken chairs from the dining room, and the kids were all on the floor except for Joanna, who was perched on her father's lap. Jason and Kala had shrewdly decided to sprawl on the floor between Ella's seat and Martha's, showing no favoritism.

Lois, however, glared at Richard. *You **live** here, you jerk, you should've let Ben have the sofa. I swear you can take your arm from around Lana's shoulder for five minutes and she won't run away. Jeez.* He interpreted the glare correctly and leapt to his feet, gesturing at the

sofa. "I saved you a seat, hon. Here, give me that tray. You kids, mugs stay on the coffee table, *not* on the floor."

Lois rolled her eyes and gave Ben a sweet smile. "Are you sure you wouldn't prefer the couch, Ben? I sit on those dining room chairs all the time. It's no trouble."

The older man just grinned at her. He'd pulled his chair up beside Martha's, and now he patted her arm. "Thank you, Lois, but I'm fine. Besides, with all these handsome younger men around, I'd better stick close to my lady."

Clark *almost* controlled the stricken expression that briefly flitted across his face, but Lois caught it as she sat down. Well, he'd been very good about Ben and Martha lately. It was only when he was reminded that they were more than just friends that he looked nauseated. He'd come a long way since he'd first found out they were dating, the details of which Martha had told Lois over much coffee and laughter.

Richard gave Lois a cup of hot chocolate and a smirk, perching on the end of the sofa beside Lana, who cut him a bemused look. Lois rolled her eyes at him and then turned her attention back to her mother.

And caught Ella and Martha looking at each other intently. Lois held her breath; the two had been introduced, and had been darting glances at each other, but they hadn't yet sized each other up. Now it was the moment of truth, and it occurred to her then that she had never formally introduced her mother to the parents of any of her men. *First time for everything*, she thought, trying to make herself chuckle and failing.

A large portion of her future with Clark was now being decided. If their mothers didn't get along, it could become a constant state of war - Lois knew how determined Ella was, and she'd had a taste of Martha's disapproval. On the other hand, Clark was smiling at both of them, clearly expecting them to be instant friends. If that happened, it would go a long way toward making the rest of the couple's life blissful.

Ella set down her mug with a barely-audible yet very deliberate clink, and turned in her chair to face the older woman. Martha looked back at her steadily, and gradually the other women in the room became aware of the tension. Lois had the thought that if the moms had been dogs, they would've been circling each other with hackles raised. *And one of us would be running for the garden hose to split them up if they decide to fight. Might be a good idea anyway...*

On the surface, the two women seemed to have much in common. They were both widows of a certain age, gray-haired and light-eyed, their faces full of character and their bearing full of confidence. A closer look revealed the differences. Silver hair and gray-blue eyes for Martha, whose face was lined by laughter and the Midwestern sun. White hair and hazel eyes for Ella, who had always taken judicious care of her skin but who could not hide the lines left by stress. Martha had worried over her son, but her life had contained a great deal of joy, first with Jonathan and now with Ben. Ella had frequently worried about the General and her headstrong eldest, and had often had to compose her features into a mask of serenity to hide her mourning for the close relationship her beloved Sam had never been able to have with Lois.

The corner of Martha's mouth twitched up slightly as she observed that Mrs. Lane's shoes probably cost more than her own outfit, and the other woman looked less comfortable in them. Ella noted with a trace of chagrin that Martha had to be several years her elder, but they looked the same age. The two continued considering each other for a long, silent moment, while Jason and Kala lay on the floor peering at them both. At last the twins turned to each

other, and Jason whispered, "Why do they look funny?"

That brought a snicker from the three women seated across from the grandmothers - the Matching Monograms Club was watching them closely, even if the four men were still engaged in animated conversation and unaware of the tension. The kids had broken the ice, at least, and Martha smiled first. "Kala has your eyes," she said quietly.

"And Jason has Clark's," Ella replied in the same complimentary tone.

"So we've both done our part to beautify the next generation," Martha quipped, and the two women shared a laugh even as Lois sighed heavily in relief. Lucy patted her shoulder affectionately as Martha continued, "I was very much looking forward to meeting you, Ella. The twins have been filling my head with tales of their Nana and her wonderful house and all the exciting places they get to go with you and their cousins."

"I'm glad to know that," Ella replied. "Ever since they came back from Kansas, I've been hearing nonstop about their Grandma and her cool farm and all the chickens, goats, and *frogs* you have."

Martha laughed at that, but before she could comment further, the twins leaped to their feet. "Grandma and Mister Ben and Miss Lana haven't met Gazeera!" Jason said excitedly. He and Kala pelted upstairs, and Lois dropped her forehead into her hands with a groan.

"Well, this'll be the first time I meet an iguana," Ben said with amusement. Barkley lay on his lap, snoring; the dog had managed to sniff everyone's ankles and was satisfied with life for the moment.

"The pets are a handful," Richard cautioned. "Lois swears up and down she's going to kill my uncle."

"The swearing I believe," Ella said archly, getting a chuckle from Martha. "But she'd never harm Perry."

"Thanks, Momma," Lois muttered under her breath.

Kala scampered downstairs first, holding her ferret tucked against her chest. For once *she* had the limelight while Jason was still coaxing Gazeera out of his cage, and she held her pet out to the assembled adults with a proud smile. "This is Cap'n Jack," she proclaimed. "He's a ferret, an' he's really smart. Uncle Perry gave 'im to me for my birthday."

"He's very handsome," Martha said, but Barkley had woken up when the strange scent drifted to his nostrils. Almost blind and nearly deaf though he was, his sense of smell was still keen. The beagle got one whiff of 'vermin' and broke loose with an ear-splitting bay that made everyone yelp.

"Shut up, Barkley, it's a pet," Ben said urgently, ruffling the hound's ears to distract him. But Barkley scented something whose ancestors had killed chickens *his* ancestors protected, and he howled for the ferret's blood, his hackles rising.

Captain Jack was smart enough to recognize the threat, and he was trying to scramble out of Kala's hands and flee just as much as Barkley was trying to get away from his master. "Ah, Lois, we might want to put him in his kennel," Ben said, clutching the hound's collar. "I don't think he's gonna quit..."

"Come with me," Lois said, getting up quickly and offering Ben a hand. He needed both of his to hold on to the struggling dog, but fortunately he managed to follow Lois with little trouble. The reporter snagged the travel kennel from where it had been set down in the foyer and carried it up to the guest bedroom, while Ben alternately soothed and chastised Barkley. At least the beagle was quieting down once they left the living room and the scent of ferret behind.

Captain Jack was still squirming, but Kala was getting better at holding him. She snuggled him close and whispered, "It's okay, Barkley wouldn't hurt you. He just got excited. It's okay, Cap'n Jack."

"It's not your fault, Kala," Lana said gently, seeing the troubled look in the little girl's hazel eyes. "Barkley was falling asleep anyway. He'll be glad to take a nap upstairs while the rest of us talk." By way of further reassurance, she reached out to rub the ferret's head. Captain Jack had calmed down considerably, and even when panicking he hadn't tried to bite Kala, so it seemed safe enough.

Getting Barkley settled in his cage in the guestroom, Ben and Lois both heard the sudden falsetto shriek, and the reporter cursed as she raced out of the room and down the stairs. Jason had just come downstairs with Gazeera, so it wasn't him; Lois dashed past and into the living room.

Richard held Captain Jack by the scruff of the ferret's neck, reaching out to touch Lana's shoulder reassuringly with his free hand. The way the redhead was holding the neck of her blouse closed told Lois exactly what happened. Captain Jack must have tried to jump straight down her shirt, which explained how she'd gotten from seated on the couch to standing behind it, probably in one shocked leap. *Jeez, we have a psycho dinosaur and a lecherous weasel. Thanks a lot, Perry.* "Lana, are you okay?" Lois asked, everyone else echoing the question.

Her green eyes were still wide and wild, but Lana managed to answer in a slightly faint voice, "I'm fine, I've just never had a weasel in my cleavage before."

Lois snorted and stared at Richard, but he wasn't paying attention to her. "Kala," he said sternly, "this is why Captain Jack is supposed to wear his leash when we have company."

"I'm sorry!" Kala replied, stretching both hands up toward her bewildered-looking pet. "Daddy, gimme! You're hurtin' 'im!"

"Not like I want to hurt him," he muttered, handing over the ferret. Kala immediately cradled Captain Jack and started cooing to him as she carried him to her room to get his harness and leash. Jason, who had heard the whole thing, had already gone back upstairs for Gazeera's leash.

Richard sighed, giving Lana an apologetic look, and then caught Lois still staring at him. "What?" he started to ask, then remembered Lana's dazed reply and growled at his ex, "*Shut up.*"

Keeping several juicy replies behind her smirk - most of them along the lines of *She'd better get used to having a weasel in her cleavage if she's gonna be with you* - Lois patted the redhead on the shoulder. "Welcome to the family, Lana. You're not really one of us until you've starred in your own episode of *When the Lane Kids' Pets Attack*."

"Oh, lovely," Lana said, the traumatized look finally leaving her eyes. "I didn't know sororities hazed initiates, much less that the hazing involved being assaulted by wild animals. Just peachy."

Once again, Lois just looked speculatively at Richard, one eyebrow raised and with her trademarked smartass grin. He happened to be looking at her that time, and she hadn't even managed to open her to comment before he snapped, "Didn't I tell you to *shut up*?"