

Little Secrets

by Kala Lane Kent

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Rating: T

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All That Was

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Regrets and New Beginnings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lies, first to last.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Avoiding the Ghosts Of Heroes Past

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

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

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

And now this...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Painful Perceptions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was just a case of finding out how.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Return

"Why is it that a technologically-advanced civilization, capable of designing spacecraft that are undetectable to radar, did not think to include landing gear?"

That thought, drifting through Kal-El's mind as he pushed open the hatch, told him more about his kryptonite-weakened state than even the trembling in his limbs. Disoriented, staggering through the smoke, he wasn't even sure if he was headed toward the house or toward Oklahoma, and then he saw the spaceship again. In front of him.

Just as Kal realized he had walked in a circle, he saw movement near the ship. Ma. Thank God. He had just enough strength left to reach her, to touch her shoulder, and then the world went black. Ma Kent caught him as he fell, cradling him in her arms.

The stars were green. Except for one red one, right above his head. He blinked at them for a moment before recognizing the glow-in-the-dark star shapes that had decorated his ceiling since he was a boy. Ma had kept his room exactly as it had been before he left the farm for Metropolis. It felt a little strange to him now, to be a man in this room where he had grown up, but comforting all the same. Some things hadn't changed in his absence.

It was very early; the sun wasn't even up yet. Kal-El got up and dressed himself slowly, glancing out the window. The farm had looked just like it always had last night ... except for the track burned by his landing. But now, as the sky grew lighter, he began to see the differences. The outbuildings could've used a coat of paint, and the once lush fields were looking a little parched. A general air of disuse hung about the place, and Kal frowned slightly. Something he would have to see to.

He could barely remember yesterday morning, the first after his arrival. The sun's rays had helped him to throw off most of his weakness, at least long enough to bury the ship beneath the fields. Ma would lose some of the crop - *most* of the crop, young corn didn't take well to flaming meteors landing in it - but he would help her. After he had finished hiding the ship, he had come back inside. Ma had come into the living room while he watched television, becoming more and more disturbed. The world seemed to have literally gone to hell in his absence; crimes and disasters that even five years ago would have provoked an outcry now received only a brief mention in the news.

Her tears had surprised him - Ma had always been so strong, so sure. Kal berated himself for having left her alone, five years of waiting, wondering, hoping. And it had all been for nothing, really. Of all the things he thought he might find on Krypton, an abundance of radiation wasn't one of them. The very crystal of the planet had become lethal Kryptonite. He didn't like to think about how weak he had been, how close he had come to never making it home.

And this *was* home, he'd learned that. Metropolis itself had felt foreign to him at the end, the discovery of Krypton a welcome excuse to escape from all of the uncomfortable reminders. But the planet was dead, a shadow of its former glory, home only to ghosts of past greatness. The farm was where he had always been loved, always accepted, never had to hide who or what he was. That would never change; the Kent farm would always be his refuge. With those warm, comforting thoughts in mind, Kal went downstairs, following the scent of pancakes.

Kal froze in the hallway, his azure eyes widening. The delicious breakfast he smelled wasn't being made especially for him. There, at the head of the table, was Ben Hubbard. The older man laughed, his eyes twinkling with mischief and delight, and Martha fanned a dish

towel at him in mock warning. It was so much like the scenes that had played out in this room during Kal's youth ... but now it was Ben sitting in Jonathan's chair and flirting with Jonathan's widow. Kal felt a moment of searing, unreasoning hatred, and promptly quashed it as he had learned to subdue all negative emotion.

He could've sworn he'd made no sound, but Martha looked up with a mother's intuition. "Clark! You finally woke up. Here, darling, sit down. I've got just the thing to bring back your appetite."

"Good morning, Clark," Ben said, a trifle shyly. "I'm so glad you made it back home. Did you fly in or drive?"

"I flew," he answered coolly, applying himself to the stack of pancakes. Wonderful, fluffy batter, not at all like that Bisquick stuff in a box; butter from an actual cow; and real maple syrup, served just slightly warmed. On the side, a rasher of crisp bacon, three sausage links, and two scrambled eggs. It was the kind of breakfast that would bring tears to the eyes of country boys and cardiologists alike, though for entirely different reasons.

An awkward silence descended on them as Martha prepared her own plate. Clark could not believe that Ben - a trusted friend of the family - had moved into his father's place so smoothly. And Mom let him. Didn't she still love Jonathan?

Ben finished first. "Martha, I've got to run back by my own place," he said. "See you tonight?"

"I'll beat you at Scrabble again," she replied easily. He kissed her cheek, awkward under the eyes of her son, and left.

Now it was just Martha and her boy, silent as they had ever been. It seemed even *this* was no longer home. *I asked him to take care of the farm*, he thought, *but this is NOT what I had in mind*.

"What's on your mind, Clark?" she asked, knowing the answer perfectly well.

"You and Ben..."

"We're very good friends, Clark," she said in that no-nonsense tone. "I love your father, always did, always will. But he's gone, and this house can get very lonely, especially for a woman my age. Ben and I, we have something special. I think Jonathan would be glad he's looking after me."

Clark had to force his mouthful of sausage down. *It's none of your business*, he told himself sternly. *She may be your mother, but it's her life*. "I ... I think I understand, Ma," he said at last. "I just ... it was a shock, that's all."

She sighed. "Oh, Clark. Things do change, but you will always be welcome here, you know that."

A weight seemed to roll off his heart. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too, son."

They finished breakfast in a far happier quiet.

Shelby was waiting when Clark walked outside. The dog forgave him for losing the ball yesterday, after he buried the ship, and had brought him a new one. This time, Clark only threw it a hundred yards or so - the last one was probably in Wyoming.

The dog was getting older, too. Once upon a time, he would have gleefully retrieved the ball as often as Clark could throw it, and he could be a pest when he wanted to play, dropping the slobbery ball into Clark's lap or pushing it against his hands. But today, after only six or seven tosses, he began to slow down, walking back instead of trotting.

Old dog, old farm, old house, everything is getting older and falling apart. Not me, though - well, maybe falling apart, but I don't get much older.

At least he could get started fixing things up a bit. Some lumber, some paint, judicious use of his speed and strength, and they could have the place looking presentable again.

A large beige truck turned into the driveway, rolling past the house and on into the north field, the one Jonathan always called the Rockery. That was what it mostly grew - rocks. You couldn't plow in it, not unless you wanted to keep replacing the plowblades. They had tried growing different things there, herbs and such, trying to make the land pay for itself, but it had never worked. Now it looked as though Ma had some scheme for it. Clark wandered over, mildly interested.

The tall corn from the main field had obscured much of the activity out here, he soon realized. Deep pits had been dug, the rocks that were in them carefully laid aside. One large area and several smaller ones had been leveled. It looked almost like a construction site.

"Can I help you?" a man in coveralls asked, his tone friendly.

"Sure, could you tell me just what you're building?"

The man grinned. "Well, Missus Kent saw as how the farm wasn't bringing in as much money as it used to, so she leased out these twenty acres to a firm from Rhode Island. They're building some kind of pioneer historical center; people can come and see how folks lived in these parts back in 1880 or so. Did ya know, some of them rich folks from New York and the like will pay money to live in a sod house with no electricity? They call it 'getting away from it all.' Crazy Easterners."

"Yeah," Clark sighed, adding under his breath, "I think we're all a little crazy."

Martha had just finishing milking Nancy, the goat, when Clark walked back in. "Son, would you be a sweetheart and carry this milk in?"

"Sure, Mom," he replied, lifting it easily. "There were some things I wanted to ask you about."

"Saw the new pioneer center going up, hmm?"

He looked down at her, startled, and she laughed.

"I'm your mother, Clark, I don't have to read your mind - I already know what's going to be there. And I'll tell you this, when I signed that lease I read it over twice with a magnifying lens - then I let that nice young attorney in town have a look, too. They aren't going to bother the farm - they'll have their own driveway, and they're going to plant cottonwoods to screen the center from the house. They won't ever have more than three families down there at a time, no more than twenty people including staff."

"Still, it just seems a little ... odd."

Martha put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Clark, my sweet boy. People in the city envy the things you had growing up - wide spaces, honest work, fresh food, peace and quiet. They want to know, just for a little while, what it's like to live simply. Most of them have never seen as many stars as we can, just because they burn so much light of their own. There's a metaphor in that, I'm sure."

And it did sound so reasonable, so right. When he had lived in Metropolis, he'd flown home at least once a week, exchanging the big city hustle for some small town comfort. Every single time he woke up here, the quiet was a surprise. Oh, he could hear roosters crowing in Texas if he wanted to, but there was so much less to shut out in Smallville.

"Mom, are you sure this is what you want to do?" he asked, putting the can of milk into

the cooler.

She chuckled at him again. "Well, I *was* thinking of moving to Montana with Ben. It's beautiful country up there, great fishing, you know."

"Great ... fishing."

"Um-hmm. You should see the pike I caught last time - it was twice as big as Ben's, almost thirty pounds! Tasted pretty good, too." She grinned at the memory, then caught Clark's bemused look. "Anyway, the income from the lease will give us enough to keep the farm and maybe go on a fishing trip once or twice a year."

For the first time in his life, Clark felt lost with the farm's good soil beneath him. A bunch of greenhorns from the city, trying to get along without laptops, cell phones, PDAs, or even running water, would be a nuisance no matter what. All the carefully-researched history in the world wouldn't tell them how to milk a cow without getting switched in the eyes by her tail, or how to get eggs from under a hen who'd gone broody, or how to make biscuits from scratch and cook them in a fireplace. They would need someone like Ma for that, and since she was close by, it was Ma they would get. She never could stop herself from helping people; it was a character trait he'd gotten from her and Jonathan both, Clark reflected with a smile.

But all of this meant that his peaceful home was changing, too. Strangers on the home place would irritate him as much as they amused him. And he liked Ben Hubbard, always had, but seeing him as his mother's partner was going to take some getting used to. Until he got his mind around that, it would best for both men if he kept away from the farm.

So where on earth could he go, if not here? Walking back to the barn beside Martha, with Shelby trotting along hopefully beside them, Clark scuffed his feet in the dust. For now, there were chores to be done, repairs he could help with, but soon he would have to leave. And when that time came, he would need to decide where to go ... and *who* he would be in the larger world.

Tilting Planet

Clark's old apartment was now occupied by two bachelors and a pair of poodles; he'd gone by just for nostalgia's sake, after spending a couple of weeks fixing things up around the farm. His search for a new one was fruitless so far. Everything seemed twice as expensive as it was before he left. So on that Thursday morning, he was carrying both suitcases as he stepped onto the Daily Planet elevator, lost in thought.

They've even renovated here. Why can't anything ever stay the same? It wasn't all that long a time to be gone, but it seems as though I've returned to a completely different Earth. All those newspapers Ma saved for me - I couldn't read past the first few pages. So much crime, so much war, so much pain. Maybe Lois was right.

That article she wrote - Why the World Doesn't Need Superman - she has a point. People did depend on me, and they got out of the habit of doing things for themselves. When I left, everything was so much worse because they kept expecting me to step in and save them. Jor-El warned me, but I so loved to help people. Was it Kryptonian vanity, as he said? Or simply the joy of doing what I do best, as Pa told me?

One thing's for certain - Lois is furious with me. Well, with Superman. She has a right to be angry. I should've said goodbye. Maybe she would've convinced me not to go, but what would I really have missed? Besides the ruins of a once-great planet and a massive dose of Kryptonite poisoning.

I would've wondered, though, and I would've come to resent her for stopping me. Better this way, even if she doesn't remember everything that happened between us. I'm the one whose mission, whose responsibilities, kept us apart, so it's only fair that I'm the one who has to bear the pain.

But oh, I can't wait to see her again! I'm sure she's changed too - always restless, always driving forward, but still always Lois. She's probably into some new devilry - with Luthor in prison, she would've found some other arch-criminal whose cage she can rattle. I'll have to keep a tight hold on my reactions - she thinks I'm just Clark, and she'll wonder if her old partner acts any different.

The doors opened, and shy, clumsy Clark bumbled his way across the redecorated bullpen. New flat screen televisions, new desks, but the same old piles of work everywhere - file folders bursting with references, contact lists, notes, and other apocrypha. It had been a long time since he'd put on this particular charade, and he almost overdid it. Banging into one desk, he heard a very familiar voice yelp as an expensive camera dropped from the edge of the filing cabinet.

Clark caught it - people never seemed to wonder how such a klutz could suddenly manifest excellent hand-eye coordination. Jimmy was thrilled to see him; Clark noticed something manic about his greeting. While the younger man - Jimmy could no longer be properly called a boy - rushed off to get something, Clark looked around, trying to find one particular desk.

He didn't see it. He did, however, see the cake Jimmy had baked for him. A sweet gesture, even if someone had already eaten a slice. Further reminiscing was cut off by Perry's bellow. "Olsen!"

Jimmy all but leaped into the air. "Um, Clark, I gotta run. But, uh, make yourself at home, you know?"

Then he was hurrying away, popping Roloids as he did, leaving Clark to trail off, in mid-sentence, "Where can I find ... Lois?"

He supposed he'd have to track her down himself. For the moment, he needed to get settled at his new desk and stash his suitcases somewhere. The janitorial closet would do, though the life-sized portrait of Perry was just a tad creepy. As for the desk, it was piled high with the former occupant's notes and files, and with a sigh, Clark set about organizing them. It was simple, undemanding work, and he was thoroughly lost in it when Perry yelled for him.

"Kent! Did your hearing get worse while you were on leave? Get in here!"

He scurried into the editor's office, hiding a smile. At least some things never changed. "Uh, Chief, I just wanted to thank you for letting me have my job back," he said, trying to sound nervous.

"Don't thank me, thank Norm Palmer for dying," Perry snapped. "Now, Kent, I need to talk to you. Just because you've been on vacation doesn't mean I expect any less of you. And don't think just because Olsen baked you a cake that you're gonna get some kind of special treatment for coming back here. I expect you to work, just like before..."

The lecture rolled onward. There was no stopping Perry once he started, and Clark just let it all wash over him, looking meek and nodding at appropriate intervals. As Perry turned to look out of the magnificent window while continuing his harangue, Clark let his own eyes wander.

There were two offices, one on either side of Perry's, each separated only by a wall of glass. In one, the desk was angled to face into this office, and the nameplate read "Richard White, International Liaison." A large framed photo of a seaplane hung on the wall behind it. Some other photos were on the desk, but they were turned away so that they faced the desk's occupant. A mostly clean office, with little to divert Clark's mind. He turned the other direction.

Ah, now this was an office he could get used to. Binders and notebooks stuffed to bursting, half a dozen Post-It notes littering the desk and computer monitor, articles tacked up on the wall beside the chair. Yet there was a certain organization to the seeming chaos, a sense that whoever worked there could put their hands on a desired item in seconds. It reminded Clark of...

Lois Lane, Assistant Editor. His keen vision read the words, but his brain refused to absorb them. Lois? His Lois, assistant editor of the paper? He would be working not *with* but *for* the notoriously temperamental Lois Lane. Lois, who utterly refused to stop or at least slow down when pursuing a story. Lois, who had once sweet-talked a locksmith into opening Luthor's Porsche for her.

Shocked, Clark scanned her desk. She had turned it slightly away from Perry's office, as if she trusted the Chief to watch her back. In addition to the usual detritus of her working style, he noted a couple of packs of nicotine patches. *Thank God, she's finally quitting!* And some more framed photos. He looked closer, wondering if her sister had had another child, and got instead the shock of his life.

Lois Lane, with her arms around *two* children, maternal pride very obvious in her smile. And beside her, his hand on the boy's shoulder, was a strange man. No, the face looked a little familiar...

Almost unwillingly, Clark looked back into the other office, where the picture of the seaplane hung. Its pilot stood on one of the pontoons, grinning. The same proprietary smile, the same tousled hair, the same laughing eyes.

He didn't even think, interrupting Perry's diatribe with a disbelieving, "Lois got married?!"

Perry glanced at him, curiously. "Not yet. You *have* been gone a long time, haven't you?"

She's engaged, to my nephew, Richard. Good kid, takes after my side of the family. At least with her twins there'll finally be *one* Lane that *listens* to a White!"

Clark gaped at him. Lois. Assistant editor. Engaged. With twins.

Perry just grinned and smacked his desk for emphasis. "Progress, Kent! You gotta keep ahead of things or get left behind. Now, I want you to get out there and wrap up that story Palmer was working on. You've got all his notes..."

The editor was herding him toward the door, and Clark went, still dazed. Twins. He *had* told her she would meet someone some day, but still - if those pictures were recent, she'd had these kids about a year after he left. *She didn't wait. She didn't wait for me at all.*

And on the heels of that thought: *She's really furious.*

Just as Perry was shooin' him out the door, a dark blue blur flashed across the office in a clatter of high heels. "Lane!" the editor bellowed, and Clark's heart leaped. "Where the hell are you going?"

"Pierson's afraid of heights," she called back, snatching up her tape recorder and notepad. "He just told me. I'm covering the space plane."

"What? Lois, you can't..." She was already gone, never having noticed Clark.

He, however, had noticed her. *Oh, God, she's just as beautiful as ever. Why did I ever leave her? What made me think I could live without her?*

Idiot. If the world knows you love her, you might as well paint a giant bull's-eye over her heart. It's bad enough as it was - Jor-El was right about that. Besides, what kind of life is that for her? "Sorry, honey, I can't have dinner on our anniversary, there's an earthquake in India." We were both too much in love to let me do my duty, and too moral to shirk without feeling guilty.

But oh, that woman! Those eyes, that voice, that willpower, that temper - from the moment I met her, there was never another woman for me.

Part of him wanted to flee back to Smallville, where at least he wouldn't be constantly confronted by the woman he'd loved and lost. Then he remembered his last day there before coming to Metropolis. The first visitors to the pioneer center had been a very wealthy couple whose donations had made the construction possible. They occupied the first cabin before the facility was even complete, and on that day, after the construction crew had gone home, Ma had dropped by with one of her delicious apple pies. Clark had gone, too, for politeness' sake, but he had seen the shape of the future in the husband's casual question: "Where do we plug in the butter churn?"

A few of Jonathan's sayings about folks with more money than sense had flitted through his mind as he looked at the man's manicured hands, his perfect uncalloused fingers. Ma would help them out, of course, even lead them to appreciate this lifestyle, but for himself, if he was going to deal with big-city attitudes, he might as well do it in the city itself.

No, I really can't go home. I'd be underfoot and irritable with Ben. This is the closest thing to home I have left, and I have to face Lois. Maybe I can talk to her, find out why she chose this man, why she gave up on Superman. I owe her an apology, and maybe I can try to explain as Clark why I didn't say goodbye.

I can't just leave. Not again.

He might've stood there just outside Perry's office all afternoon, but Jimmy saw him. "Hey, Clark," the younger man said. "You look like you could use a drink."

I don't plan to fly anytime soon, and a drink sounds pretty good right now. I mean, twins... "Sure, Jimmy. You have someplace in mind?"

"The Ace o' Clubs. You'll like it - the bartender's a friend of mine."

Losing Altitude

It was almost as if she had known the call would come. And after five years of this routine, she should have. Once through all three checkpoints and having had her press pass checked each time, it was inevitable what would happen next. Just as she made her way up the tarmac, her phone chirped to life. Not even glancing at the caller-ID, Lois pulled the phone out of its carrier on her side and answered with a mix of amusement and exasperation. "Hello, Richard. Is this the standard 'Uncle-Perry-hates-it-when-you-do-this' call? Because he hired me for a reason and I won't let us get scooped because Pierson finally owned up to airsickness with no one else available on such short notice."

There was a pause before he laughed into the receiver. "Yes, well, he just burst in here and spent twenty minutes on a diatribe that included the comments that you were the bane of his existence and how it's a damn good thing that you're a good reporter even if you can be a lousy assistant editor. I figured that it at least deserved a phone call."

The roll of her hazel eyes was inevitable as she made her way up the aisle. Shaking her head as she slid into her seat, the dark-haired woman continued to argue her point, "Look, this Genesis project has the makings of being an important step in travel, but it's not without flaws. Would you rather I let the other papers carry this and buy all their propaganda, only to have them be wrong? And let the Planet go without because of Pierson and his vertigo? I think not."

"Well, I suppose it's a good thing that you don't have a fear of flying, eh?" The teasing was clear in his voice.

She had to chuckle at that. "Oh, give it a rest, Mr. White. Your uncle is all too aware that the only reason that I finally took the assistant's job was because he decided to make a spectacle of himself with that heart attack. And he knows now just as well as he did then that I don't play by the rules. I never have, I never will. Which has always served me well." Lois pretended she didn't hear the slight irritation in her own voice.

"Ah, yes. You've always been a brilliant role model, Miss Lane..."

Well, he was just being impossible this afternoon. "Hush, White. And speaking of which, I don't expect this to be over until after five. Since I'm caught up here, I'll take your turn on Friday if you'll go get the kids."

"Isn't today a half-day? It's Wednesday."

"Yeah, but they're going to spend the afternoon at Ashlyn's. Seems that little imp has talked her mommy into taking Kal and Jason to the zoo with them. Which is fine, since I made sure to give Barbara the money for their admission when I saw her Monday. The zoo's too expensive to expect her to pick up the tab alone, no matter how long the kids have known each other." Phone braced on her shoulder, Lois unzipped her purse and pulled out her recorder, noting that the plane was filling up rather quickly now. A glance at her watch told her that all would be beginning in the next ten minutes. "Alright, Richard, it's nearly show time. I have to go. And I'll be sure to have the whip and stool when I see Perry later. Don't forget to put out the beef for later. I promised Jason that we'd have something other than Chinese tonight."

"Consider it done, Lois," he said, the warmth of affection clear in his voice. "And you don't forget what I said last night."

"Richard, I told you not to get pushy," she replied with a trace of nervousness.

"I'm not pushing, Lois. Just ... think about it, okay?"

"Okay. Look, I need to go. If I don't turn this phone off before they start the engines, the plane might explode or something."

"Lois..."

"Richard, I'll think about it. That's the best you're getting right now."

"Thanks. I love you, Lois."

"Love you." She pushed the END button and sighed. He just *had* to bring it up again. Against her will, her mind drifted back five years, to a time when the twins had been in the middle of their second year, when she had just come back to the Planet. For a moment, it was almost like she was there again.

"So, what are you doing Friday night, Miss Lane?"

Lois glared at him. The editor's nephew couldn't take a hint anymore than Perry himself could. "Mixing macrobiotic shakes for the twins," she replied coolly. "Just like every night."

"You know, there's this new café called Heartworks down on Eighth Avenue. They have a lot of vegetarian food."

"The kids can't have wheat, either."

"That's fine, the menu says gluten-free options available. And no peanuts anywhere in the facility. We could try it."

"With a pair of eighteen-month-olds? Please."

"It'd be a lot easier with two adults."

She dropped the files she'd been carrying to the desk with a very final *thwack*. "Richard, do you have the first idea how to care for children?"

"No, but I'll have twice the opportunities to learn. Besides, you didn't know anything about kids, either, and everyone says you're a great mom." At her foreboding look, he amended, "Great reporter *and* great mom."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

"And hiding in your apartment won't get you anywhere, either. C'mon, Lois, it's just a date. We'll have both your twins for chaperones. I promise you won't have to knock me unconscious with a shoe."

"Oh, so you heard about that, too?" she muttered. Lombard had deserved it, but she hated the way office gossip about her was so accessible to this man. Richard was still there, as he had been for months, always friendly, always supportive, always interested in the kids.

It was the last that had gotten to her. Most men would have run when they heard she had two children, but Richard only seemed more intrigued. On the rare occasions that she brought the twins to the office, he made a point of talking to them, as if he knew they were her only weakness now.

And he was still leaning against the door of her office, still smiling. Rejected a dozen times, and still never giving up. Lois glanced at him exasperatedly, and that smile broadened. "The owner says they're usually a little slow around five."

Lois' resistance finally crumbled. "Fine! If I go out with you, will you *shut up*?!"

Richard mimed zipping his lip and shot her a thumb's-up. Then he pointed to his watch, held up five fingers, and tapped Friday's date on her desk calendar.

"You are *impossible*, Richard White," she sighed. "Now, shoo. Contrary to your uncle's belief, I have work to do."

And that first date had been a success. Over time, she went out with Richard more and more often, and he proved that his interest in the twins wasn't just a front to get into Lois' good graces. Sometimes he paid more attention to them than to her, which she found oddly comforting.

Neither of them had said anything to Perry, but the office rumor mill had made the announcement for them. The editor gave his approval by his silence, although Lois sometimes saw him smiling at the two of them when they argued over layouts or stories to pursue.

And then, the office Christmas party. That had been singularly unfair. Lois would've been perfectly content to let things continue as they were, with Richard at her place as often as she was at his, their relationship cemented by long talks - and sometimes more than talks, but that had taken a while - after the twins went to bed. But that day he caught her hands and pulled her close, pointing upward with an impish grin.

Bloody mistletoe. Lois tried to keep it to a simple peck on the cheek, but Richard had other ideas. She heard someone whistle and a scattering of applause, and glared at Richard. "Now that I have your attention," he said, still holding Lois' hand, "there's something I'd like you all to hear." Then he turned to her, dropping to one knee, and pulled a black velvet box from his pocket. "Lois Lane, will you marry me?"

Her jaw had dropped, and spontaneous cheering had drowned out any response she could think of. The only voice that penetrated the uproar was Perry's. "Great Caesar's ghost!"

Oh yes, the memories were as clear as his honest blue eyes. Dragging her mind back to the present, Lois nibbled her pen as the captain announced their liftoff. Richard had been a persistent devil, not obnoxious but always hopeful. Just the way he was being about their engagement now. Richard wanted to get married.

It wouldn't change much. They already lived together, they already shared the raising of these children. Marriage would just make it official.

Which was precisely what made her nervous. It would be *official*.

The Ace o' Clubs turned out to be one of those bars where all the regulars know each other, where the TV seems to receive only news and sports, and where the bartender has worked there since it opened at approximately the dawn of time. It was a place where lonely, weary, or unhappy men came to drink quietly, watch TV without ever seeing anything called a 'special TV movie event,' and occasionally debate the important questions of the times with other men, such as, "Can Holyfield really stage a comeback, especially at his age?" and "Will late-night TV ever show something remotely watchable?"

Jimmy took what was probably his regular seat, and Clark hesitantly took the barstool next to him. Bo, the bartender, glanced up at Jimmy and pulled the cap off a longneck; Clark held up two fingers, and the elderly man brought him one of the same. He didn't often drink, but it always comforted him when he did. As a teenager, Jonathan had sometimes allowed him half a glass of beer while they sat on the back porch and talked about so many things. Pa claimed that if his doctor recommended "a little liquor for my ticker" then it couldn't hurt the boy, either.

Remembering that phrase made Clark's heart ache, even after all these years. He wished his father was still alive; he needed someone to talk to. Apparently the bartender knew Jimmy pretty well; Clark partly tuned out their small talk as he brooded over Lois and nursed his beer. *Assistant editor. Engaged. Twins. Did I even come back to the right universe?*

He was startled into paying attention by a slap on the back from Jimmy, made hearty by a beer and a half. "Clark here has been doing some soul-searching. He saw llamas."

Llamas? Oh, wait, I was supposed to be in Peru. But before he could reply, Bo just nodded and asked, "Was it tough coming back?"

How on earth does he know? he thought, looking puzzled.

"To work," the man elaborated, obviously used to minds affected by alcohol.

Tougher than I ever imagined. Now they were both looking at him curiously, and he tried to tell the truth without telling too much of it. "Well, things change," he began. "And sometimes things that you never thought could change, would change." The bartender nodded.

"Take Lois," he said, glancing at Jimmy. The younger man was starting on his second beer. "A woman like her, I never thought she'd settle down."

Jimmy nodded wisely, but his eyes were distant, and he turned his beer bottle absently. "Yeah, I know," he said. "I used to get such good pictures. Even front page. But I guess there's such a thing as photographer's block. Like writer's block, you know? I haven't had a picture published in two months. Perry's gonna fire me, this keeps up," he sighed.

Now it was Clark's turn to comfort him. "No, Jimmy, I'm sure things will turn around soon. Just don't give up."

Just then, someone called for Bo to turn up the TV, and both Daily Planet employees looked up. "And now, live from the Genesis launch..." an overly dramatic voice began.

Clark had read about it; it was front page news. A space shuttle strapped to the back of a 777 jet, hopefully a means of cutting costs for NASA. The two craft would separate in midair, the jet taking its cargo of journalists back to earth, and the shuttle heading up to the space station. That was the story Lois had been racing to cover when she blew past him without even noticing his existence - or listening to Perry, which was nothing new.

And now Lois was on screen, the TV camera focusing in on her. She was honing in on the unfortunate press agent with typical Lane intensity. "You've said that the Genesis project may finally allow private space travel. Just how much would the 'average person' be expected to pay for such a launch?"

Bobbie-Faye, the spokeswoman, gave her a forced grin and a stock answer. Clark smiled; he'd been on the receiving end of Lois' questions more than once.

Meanwhile, not too far from either of them, Lex Luthor sighed and closed his eyes. For what felt like the millionth time, he asked himself, *Why on earth am I surrounded by such idiots?*

If Riley was any more obsessed with that camera, he'd have literally glued it to his face. Stanford was smart enough to be tolerable, and Kitty wasn't too bad either, even if Luthor was always one step ahead of her. But Brutus and Grant were typical prison muscle, and their blank looks at a moment like this made Luthor want to cut into them with several razor-sharp remarks.

Not that they would understand the verbal abuse he gave them, which Luthor had to admit was probably why he continued to employ people whose weight was more than double their IQ. Very few people in the world were smart enough to keep up with him; most were comparatively slow-witted, to say the least. It frustrated Luthor to the point of fury when he had to explain himself more than once, and he spoke cruelly when he was angry. The only people who would continue to work for him either thought that *they* were using *him*, like Kitty, or were thick-skinned as well as thick-skulled enough to let his insults pass unnoticed.

Just as he reflected on this, one of the miniature trains in the Vanderworth basement ran into Stanford's arm as he tried to place the tiny sliver of Kryptonian crystal into the lake. Calipers and crystal plunged into the water and Stanford jumped back, rubbing his elbow and looking at Luthor worriedly.

Scratch that about Stanford being bright enough to tolerate.

For a moment, nothing happened. Kitty shot Luthor a poisonous glance and said, "Wow, Lex, that's really something."

*Is it truly necessary to have a woman in my life? Every one of them tries to be contemptuous of me - of **me!** - and what do I really get in return?*

Hmm. True. Well, there are compensations. "Wait for it," he growled at her.

A moment passed, with Riley filming avidly, Stanford watching the lake with bulging eyes, and Kitty sighing melodramatically. "Wow, Lex, that's really something."

If sarcasm was lead, that remark would've dropped straight through the floor. Lex managed not to lash out at her, glaring at the miniature lake, *willing* it to do something. Anything, at this point. He couldn't be wrong. He *couldn't* be wrong. He...

He had learned to admit defeat. "Stop the camera."

"But-"

"Shut it off," Lex said sharply. They all relaxed slightly, disappointed.

The sudden darkness that descended on them should've made a noise. Its instantaneous, silent arrival spooked even the hardened criminals. "Sorry," Riley said meekly.

Now, in the pitch darkness of the basement, they could see the little lake glowing. "That wasn't you," Lex said softly, the faint light reflecting off his eyes.

Unbeknownst to them, unnoticed even by Luthor himself at the time, the electromagnetic pulse was spreading, racing outward across Metropolis, blanking out every electronic device it encountered. It also spread upward...

Although she was all too aware of the importance of this flight, as she had argued with Richard, Lois couldn't help but let her mind wander just a bit as their Genesis representative spouted Virgin Air dogma in a pleasant, modulated tone. Besides, she thought with amusement, she was sure that this Bobbie-Faye would be relieved to be left alone. After zinging her on the lack of major television broadcasting of this 'pivotal next step in travel' and questioning her usage of 'insertion boosters' just to rock her, giving her a break was somewhat due. The annoyance that broke through on that model-perfect face was like gold. It was moments like this that made Lois miss working in the field so much.

Watching the almost garish animated presentation before them, Lois couldn't help that her mind kept finding its way back to her and Richard's discussion. Or her conscience. Richard was a good man, a truly wonderful one that had been there for so long. He loved the twins. He loved her. So why was she scared to make an honest man of him? He deserved it, didn't he?

Didn't he?

Unwillingly, her eyes fell to her sapphire engagement ring from where it rested on her recorder. He did. Of course he did. He deserved more than she could possibly ever give him. He was so good to her and the kids...

And she was stalling, Lois thought guiltily. She knew it. She had never wanted to be married before, hadn't the slightest idea how to be a wife, the very idea always seeming impossible for a million little reasons.

And not the least of which being a large one who could crush coal in his very hands.

Just as she scoffed at herself in disgust, the plane's lights flickered and died even as the cartoon moaned to a stop. Startled out of her reverie, her sharp hazel eyes scanned around the plane as Lois felt the pit of her stomach go cold with *déjà vu* at the sudden lack of sound. Memories of malfunctioning aircraft past froze her to her seat then, and she tried to listen more

carefully. She couldn't even hear the hum of the engine, let alone the added rumble of the shuttle's boosters. *Something's happened. This seems too much like that damned helicopter*, something deep inside her warned. Richard and the ring were completely forgotten as she turned her gaze to the window. And wished she hadn't. The ground seemed suddenly a lot closer.

And just as she made to brace herself, the cabin brightened again and the comforting sound just outside came again. The cartoon returned to life, continuing its careful explanation of the plane's workings. But no one was listening then, the sound of the nervous press overriding it easily.

Within a moment, the jet leveled off back at its former height. Bobbie-Faye was quickly attempting to restore confidence to the frightened pack of journalists, her lightly-accented voice was soothing, but her eyes were just a bit wider when Lois met them. And she was smiling just a little less realistically. It served to calm the other sheep, all settling in again with a nervous scattering of laughter. But the blonde woman knew something was wrong, even as she continued her rehearsed company rhetoric, just as well as she could. Lois wasn't buying it. "No reason to be alarmed, it was just a minor power outage, everything is perfectly normal." *Oh, dear God. Just tell me it was turbulence. Tell me it was turbulence*, she thought around the rock suddenly in her stomach. Only to hear the shudder of the shuttle's boosters come to life, followed by more metallic groans. And the climb continued. Lois, feeling the cold prickle across her skin, took a deep breath.

They were right. I should have sent Pierson, after all. Would have served him right.

"The shuttle will separate momentarily, just before its boosters ignite. And if you're lucky," Bobbie-Faye said, grinning too widely, "you may just hear the faint pop of the sonic boom."

A sudden roar that made the entire plane shudder, seeming to shove the journalists against their seats, flung Bobbie-Faye to the floor practically at Lois' feet. The angle of ascent was markedly steeper as the plane continued to shiver, and the spokeswoman tried vainly to get to her feet.

I've flown with Superman, I know what a sonic boom sounds and feels like. Whatever the hell it was, that was no sonic boom, sister, Lois thought, unbuckling her lap belt. Even if she had been needling the woman a moment ago, this was some kind of emergency, and lying in the aisle was no safe place to be. No one else was even trying to help.

...

After a brief power outage, no unusual event in Metropolis during the summer, the coverage of the Genesis launch had been abandoned in favor of a baseball game. Jimmy was drinking his third beer while Clark sipped his second. The photographer took a long sip, then look conspiratorially at Clark. Apropos of nothing, he said, "You know, if you ask me - and you should ask me, you shouldn't ask her, because she'll tear your head off - she's still in love with you-know-who." He tried to nod and wink wisely, but two beers was clearly his limit.

No need to ask who 'she' was. *Jimmy thinks Lois is still in love with me?* The surprise lit up Clark's face.

He would've loved to follow up on that, to use his keen journalistic instincts to find out exactly why Jimmy thought that and whether his assumptions were valid. But just at that moment, the baseball game vanished from the screen, provoking groans from the bar patrons.

In its place was a serious-looking anchorwoman. "We've just received word that the inaugural flight of the Genesis space shuttle is experiencing a midair emergency."

The effects of one and a half beers seemed to melt out of Clark's veins as he stared at the screen. His mind, his entire being, seemed to resonate with one sentence: *Lois is on that plane.*

Even Jimmy had sobered up, watching in openmouthed shock as the anchorwoman continued gravely, "Sources are telling us that the shuttle failed to disengage, sending both craft rocketing toward space." He absorbed little of the next sentences, something about the blackout, while he remembered with quiet horror just who was covering the launch. Quickly he turned to Clark, his professional instincts kicking in.

"I should do some... thing..." Jimmy trailed off, puzzled. Clark was gone, leaving him with the bill. *Guess his newspapering sixth sense is a little sharper than mine.*

Defying Gravity

Gritting her teeth against the forces that tore at them, Lois finally caught Bobbie-Faye's hand while keeping an iron grip on the hand-rail beside her seat. Ordinarily it would be no great feat to pull someone as slim as the blonde to her feet, but she couldn't do anything about the disorientation that she would have due to hitting the floor as hard as Bobbie seemed to have. With a worried glance around, Lois realized that the only seat nearby was her own. *Dammit. Nice going, Lane. There you go thinking with your heart again and not your head. Just perfect. Your self-preservation instincts are at an all-time low.* As it was, she had barely managed to help buckle the woman in and start to look for another open seat, before there was another roar.

The plane lurched sickeningly, catching her by complete surprise in only four steps. Before she even knew what was happening, she was hurled to the floor with a startled cry. In an instant, Lois reached out for purchase of any kind, finding none as the force pulled her along. One more jolt and a with terrified cry, she was sent bumping and sliding to the rear of the cabin as oxygen masks dropped from their position. Even before she could catch her breath, her mind reeling, Lois was slammed brutally into the back wall of the jet. Pain shot through her like a knife as she cried out, her head an agony.

Oh God, please let us make it through this.

His mind was running in overdrive. Get out onto the street, dodge through the crowd out of anyone's direct sight, yank the shirt open ... and then force of habit failed him. There was only a plain white cotton undershirt beneath. Clark felt his heart freeze, then sharply kick into a higher gear. The uniform was still in his suitcase, in the janitorial closet.

For an instant, he considered leaving it there. But no, what would people think of Superman in a suit from Macy's? It would jeopardize his secret identity. And, unlike his red and blue suit he wore as the hero, this one would easily ignite if he flew too close to the afterburners. Not exactly the kind of 'Superman exclusive' he wanted to give the world.

Clark - *no, better get in my superhero mindset* - Superman changed course and raced back to the Planet, faster than the human eye could follow. The revolving doors whirred in protest as he flashed through them, soaring up a ventilation shaft instead of waiting for the elevator. In only a few seconds, he was flying at top speed out of the airshaft, his cape snapping behind him.

Dazed and hurting, Lois was coherent enough to realize that she was growing short of breath. And to realize that she was pinned to the wall by the force of the g's. Darkness threatened behind her eyes then. They were still climbing, going higher and higher. The air was growing thinner and thinner. The chaos inside the cabin, the screams, the prayers, were beginning to seem surreal, impossible. And her head was growing light, vision a bit fuzzy... She knew the physiological effects of too many g's, knew she was going to pass out soon if she didn't do something about it. Fighting gravity, she fought to reach for the nearest oxygen mask, fingertips just brushing the thin elastic band.

Trying to get her head together enough to make another try for it, she turned to face the side, trying to ground herself. *I'm going to lose it*, she thought with real fright. *How are we going to get out of this? How? We must be headed into space.* Feeling panic begin to seize her, Lois locked her jaw and started to make another attempt. Preparing to fight for it yet again, something made her glance to her right out the window. What she thought she saw out there in

that breathless instant had to be a hallucination, a by-product of the lack of oxygen to her brain. Her eyes widened even as her heart rose higher into her thought. *No, it couldn't be. That's impossible. You must be delirious, Lois. He's...*

And then she heard two thuds on the roof above.

He rocketed past the fighter jets, sparing a pitying thought for the pilots who must have been staring at their radar in shock. The shuttle was dragging the jet higher and faster than it had been designed to go, and the booster rockets had set the jet's tail on fire. Superman pushed himself to the limit of his speed to catch up and landed on the roof of the jet, pressing his hands to the underside of the shuttle. Three quick flashes of his heat vision vaporized the balky connectors, and he began to push the shuttle upward.

It only took a minute for Superman to feel the shuttle beginning to lift away from him, its own power sufficient to take it the rest of the way. He watched it go, breathing a sigh of relief as it escaped gravity.

Gravity.

Lois!

The jet stopped shuddering, the groaning metal gone quiet. They seemed to be floating, Lois's sense of unreality doubling as she rose gently into the air. The other journalists had gone silent as well, watching in amazement as their briefcases and note pads and cameras hovered in midair.

Wow. This is some hallucination, Lois thought. A pen was floating toward her, and she reached for it, hoping that the contact would either shatter the illusion of levitation or prove it real.

For one long, breathless moment, the remainder of the jet's upward thrust was equal to the pull of gravity, and inertia canceled acceleration. There were no noticeable forces acting on the plane and its contents, so everything that wasn't fastened down floated. But it was unfortunately true that, within the earth's atmosphere, gravity always wins.

The jet began to slip sideways. The moment that its upward acceleration was lost, it was as if gravity had suddenly noticed the errant jet and snatched it downward. Everything that wasn't secured was flung violently upward and sideways - including Lois.

As her head whacked the ceiling again, bringing stars to her eyes, Lois cried out in pain. *What now? How much worse can this possibly get?*

Her answer was to slide across the roof, smack into the overhead bins, and wind up pinned to the roof above another terrified reporter. The clouds outside seemed to be spinning past the plane like the view from a merry-go-round, and Lois' disoriented mind kicked out the reason why.

She knew, from having flown with Richard, that a plane moved in three main directions: roll, pitch, and yaw. Tilting the nose up or down changed the pitch, and dipping one wing or the other rolled the aircraft. The jet was now yawing, the nose and tail spinning around its center. Just like a helicopter's blades...

Oh, God. Now I know I'm gonna die. Helicopters. I'm jinxed with damn helicopters. I'm going to die. I'm really, truly, going to die this time.

He'd found an extra burst of speed beyond what he'd thought was his limit, chasing the falling jet, boring straight through the clouds of smoke trailing behind it. *Got to stop that spin.*

Superman grabbed the wing, trying to slow it, pulling against the force of the rotation.

The jet was massive, its surface slick. Centrifugal force whirled him out along the wing even as he forced it to slow down. The overstressed metal creaked under Superman's hands, and before he could change his grip, the entire wing broke off, spinning him along with it.

Damn! Hold on, Lois, hold on!

It had felt as though she was being squeezed against the corner where the ceiling and the wall met, robbed of her breath. The man sitting below her tried to reach up, to help her, but at first she simply couldn't pull herself down. A small, terrified voice in the back of her mind was pleading, *Just let me get home to my kids. God, please, if You're out there, let me make it home to Jason and Kala!*

Another voice, steadier in spite of the panic she found herself in, reminded her of that story she did about vehicle fatalities. *The effect of multiple skull impacts is cumulative. You've had, what, four or five good smacks? One more might be your ticket to aneurysm city.*

Then the forces acting against her suddenly dissipated, and Lois fell to the floor. She quickly hauled herself into a seat, her shaking hands struggling with the buckle.

Only a few seconds to get reoriented, but in that brief time the plane's other wing had broken off. No time to dodge; Superman shoved his fists forward and punched straight through it. The plane was dropping below him, nose down and beginning to spiral.

One more notch of speed, chasing the jet, seeing the ground come soaring up at him. Superman gritted his teeth as he forced himself past the huge airplane, grabbing its nose and pushing upward.

Not too hard, don't want to crush it. At the same time, he had to get it slowed down, and now, because they were close enough for him to recognize Metropolis by its street patterns. Shoving the jet, taking its weight on his palms and pressing it away, he felt himself being pushed toward the ground like a helpless rag doll.

Lois had just gotten her seat belt buckled when the whole plane shuddered and the overhead baggage came tumbling out. The passengers were thrown forward, only their lap belts preventing them from breaking their noses on the seats in front of them. Other journalists yelped as they were smacked by their own luggage, and suddenly a woman on the right side of the plane screamed, "The wing came off! The wing came off!"

Pushing someone's carry-on aside, Lois glanced to her left and saw that wing tear off as well. Somewhere up ahead she could hear Bobbie-Faye praying. The journalists, a more cynical group of people than average, were screaming and cursing. They were spinning over and over now, spiraling out of control as they plummeted several feet per second. The earth was coming up on them and there was no savior, nothing to stop this from happening. There hadn't been for years. The hallucination had been just that. She had seen what she had needed to see. What she had been subconsciously willing to happen even after all this time.

All Lois could do was lock her jaw to hold back her own despairing screams, both broken and enraged at the thought of never seeing her twins again. Never again to listen to Jason play the piano, so intense and determined to get it right that he would start again from the beginning if he even missed one note. Never to listen to Kala as she dressed up in her room like some rockstar, singing and trying to dance along quite badly to pop songs, acting as if she were in the Metropolis Arena. Never to listen to them squabble about the theft of a crayon. Never again

hold them during a fearsome thunderstorm. Never again hear them say, "Mommy."

That broke her and a sob slipped from her lips. *Why? Kala, Jason. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't know this was going to happen. I love you. I love you both so much. Oh God, please...* Choking down the pain in her heart, she couldn't stop the tears that ran down her cheeks. Trying to prepare herself for what was to come, Lois Lane closed her eyes.

Superman found himself praying silently, his jaw locked against the strain of trying to push upward on the jet hard enough to stop, not so hard that it crumpled. *Please, God, please, let this work. Let them be all right ... let Lois be all right. Please, I love her.*

The nose of the jet began to wrinkle with a groan, the metal scrunching up like an accordion. The sharp crack of a bat meeting a baseball, and then shouts and screams from below. From the sound, he was a lot closer to the ground than he wanted be.

Superman gave one final, mighty shove against the jet, and its metal skin rippled as the shockwave passed through it. Now he was just balancing it, having negated all of its falling speed. He let himself drift downward gently, looking over his shoulder to find the ground.

A wave of cold chills danced up and down his spine. The baseball diamond was no more than six feet below his boots; he'd stopped the jet with no more than a second to spare.

In the cockpit, the altimeter warning was suddenly loud in the absence of all the shouting, screaming, and praying. "Fly up," a mechanical voice repeated. "Fly up. Fly up."

The pilot and copilot looked at the man who was gently lowering their massive jet to the ground, and then at each other. Both were obviously badly shaken. *Dry pants first, and then a drink to steady my nerves, the pilot thought. Maybe the seventh or eighth drink will be the one that actually stops my hands from shaking.*

The fall seemed to slow down, and Lois assumed it was a side effect of dying. Her mind spun the time out, everything in slow motion, to savor the last few seconds of her life. A sudden jerk, and everyone's heads snapped forward, smacking the seats in front of them.

Then, strangely, they were stopped. Everything was completely still for a few seconds, and then the plane began to tilt gently backward from its position perpendicular to the ground. It settled to earth with a groan, and the passengers stared at each other. Lois was so amazed to still be alive that it felt like her brain was in vapor-lock.

"Thank you, Jesus," Bobbie-Faye whispered.

Then the emergency exit door was torn off the plane, and their savior looked in anxiously. At that point, the journalists might have been less surprised to see a bearded man with robes and halo than the one who hovered just outside the plane.

Lois' heart froze in her chest.

"Is everyone all right?" Superman said, his voice as deep and rich as always.

They stared at him in utter shock, but he saw one face in that crowd upon whom amazement was written rather larger. *Thank you, dear God, she's all right.* Superman savored her face for an instant that felt like forever to him. In spite of everything, in spite of what he knew, how she had moved on, she was still his Lois, still so beautiful it almost hurt to look at her. He took a few steps inside, and asked again, looking directly into her eyes, "Are you okay?"

The rest of the journalists turned to see who was getting Superman's personal attention.

Lois was rising from her seat slowly, jaw still dropped and eyes wide. She looked completely astonished, and most of the others thought that was all.

But inside the keen mind that lived behind those hazel eyes, a war had broken out, keeping her speechless.

The part of her that was still half in love with him - maybe more than half - whispered in awe, *He's here. He's really here.*

The anger that had helped her to survive her loneliness and pain, that had given her the courage to go on with her life, spat, *Took you long enough!*

He just saved my life. Again.

*You bastard, where the **hell** have you been all this time!*

Superman just smiled at her, his heart almost breaking. He could no longer try to deny that he loved her. He would never have her, not now, not with Richard and the twins in the picture, but to lose her forever was more than he could dream of bearing.

Lois saw the smile, but she couldn't even manage a weak one in response. The voices in her head were pulling her apart, one half swooning, the other furious.

If he hadn't shown up, this would really be it, I would've really died.

*How **dare** you come and save me? Now I have to be grateful after you made me a tabloid headline! You **bastard!***

A long moment passed, in which everyone in the plane watched them keenly. Superman searched for something to say. *I'm sorry, I was wrong to leave you, I'll never leave again,* just didn't seem appropriate with twenty reporters standing around. He chose to make a private joke, hoping to bring her out of her shock.

Superman glanced around the plane, raising his voice to address all of the passengers and crew. "Well, I hope this experience hasn't put any of you off flying. Statistically speaking, it's still the safest way to travel." Only his raised eyebrow indicated the line was meant for Lois.

The press nodded dumbly, and he turned away. Then they all seemed to find their voices, shouting to him, begging for a few words, a pithy quote for their papers. Only Lois was silent, her eyes still wide, half-touched that he had remembered what he said the night they met, half-peevish that he should remind her now when so much had changed. But he had gone back to the door, and the roar of the crowd in the stadium met his ears, drowning out the reporters.

Looking around at the thousands cheering for him, for just a moment Superman felt like he was home, like he'd never left. He had thought there might be accusations, but this was unadulterated rejoicing. *How could I imagine that my place, my purpose, my destiny, was anything but this?*

He flew away quickly, a grin on his face, and never saw that Lois had pushed her way past the other reporters and come up behind him. What she meant to say, she had no idea. At least part of her just wanted to fling her arms around him; another part regretted that she couldn't just cold-cock him. He was gone before she could do anything, left watching him fly away as she had done far too many times in the past.

At last her mind seemed to kick into gear as she looked out into the stadium. *Superman is back. Not a hallucination, not wishful thinking. He's really, truly, totally back. And he just saved my life literally a few feet from the end of everything. He can't know how much has changed, how much **I've** changed.*

My God, what happens if he finds out about the twins?!

That thought was one shock more than her abused mind and body could handle. Lois' hazel eyes rolled back, and she fell almost gracefully down the emergency exit slide.

Irresistible Force...

Clark hurried into the Daily Planet bullpen, his notebook full of 'man-on-the-street' reactions to Superman's return. Lois wasn't back yet; good, she had probably been forced to see a medic. She definitely looked a bit dazed. Some of that was the shock of his reappearance, but she might have had a slight concussion too.

Jimmy was still out, likely trying to snap a photo of Superman. Clark smiled a little wryly to himself; if things were going as badly for the young photographer as he'd said, he would certainly try to make sure that Jimmy got a front-page photo soon. *Have to do something showy in Metropolis soon, like the time those robbers tried to escape on a yacht and I left the whole boat in front of the precinct. That would get Jimmy back into Perry's good graces. But first I'd better make some plans to announce my return - circle the globe a time or two, rescue some people, and hurry off before people can ask questions. I'm not ready for questions yet.*

With a start, he realized that he had taken his return as a fact, not a fluke. This would not be a one-time rescue; Superman was back in business full-time. Sitting down at his desk, he wondered why.

I was so ready to give it all up, to retire Superman forever. Lois made a lot of good points in that article of hers. People came to rely on me, and after I left, they spent more time wondering where I'd gone than trying to do the things I'd done for them. I believed her; I believed the best thing for the human race would be for this savior never to return.

But there are some things people can't do, like catch a falling jet. And there were some people who were inspired by me, who kept up their work even after I left. The women's shelter is still there, so are the soup kitchens, and that project that takes autistic children horseback riding got some publicity not long ago. I guess that much is still the same: the people who are actually doing good just quietly keep on doing it. It's the ones whose job it is to find evil and expose it that think there's nothing good left, just because they see so many terrible things.

Maybe Lois was wrong. Maybe the world still needs a savior. And maybe the reason why I'm already planning my reintroduction to the world is that helping people is my cause. I may not precisely have a home here anymore, but I have a purpose.

His pleasant introspection was interrupted by a young voice asking inquisitively, "Who're you?"

Clark looked up, startled. Two children, about six years old, were standing by his desk and looking at him curiously. Their faces marked them as twins, and their resemblance to their mother and the photos on her desk told Clark just whose twins they were.

"Um, hi," he said, looking from one to the other. The girl's hair was as dark as Lois', with her same hazel eyes, and the boy had sandier hair with blue eyes. Right now they were totally focused on him. "I'm Clark. Kent. An old friend of your mother's, from before you were born."

"Really? She never talks about you," the girl said. She turned her head then, frowning slightly as she looked over at her twin, questioningly. "Has she?"

"Never?" Clark asked. *She never once mentioned me?*

"Nope," the boy replied. He didn't take his eyes off Clark even when he pulled out an inhaler and took a deep gasping breath off of it.

The little girl sighed. "Please ignore my brother; Mommy says Daddy lets him watch too many monster movies."

"Kala!" the boy hissed, glaring at her. The sudden pink in those pale cheeks just seemed

to egg her on.

"Jason, you're never gonna grow up to be Godzilla, so quit trying!" his sister replied. With this, she shook her head, rolling her eyes in a gesture that was all too familiar.

That really seemed to make him flush. For a moment, the presence of a grown-up was forgotten as what seemed to be an old argument broke out. "Mommy said that I could be anything I wanted to be, Kala! Anything! So stop being mean."

"I'm not being mean. It's the truth!"

"Says you."

"Mommy meant anything *real*! A human being can't grow up to be a *lizard*, Jason. Stop being..."

Clark's eyes flicked back and forth between them as if he was watching a tennis match. Oh, they were both so Lois - Kala's sarcasm, Jason's stubbornness.

Just when it looked like the squabbling would turn nasty, a man's voice intervened. "Kids! Jason, Kala, enough." He was tall and handsome, with an easy smile, and he offered Clark his hand freely. "Sorry, they can get underfoot a bit. I'm Richard White."

The fiancé. Clark's stomach suddenly turned sour. Now he could see Richard's lighter hair and eyes in Jason, and he assumed as many people did that Richard was the twins' real father. "Yeah, hi," he said a little weakly, shaking the man's hand. "I'm Clark Kent."

"Really? Glad you're back! I've heard so much about you."

"You have?" Clark said, with hope rising.

"Sure, Jimmy won't shut up about you." Richard's grin was friendly and open as he picked up Kala, ignoring her protests. "These two were supposed to be in my office. I didn't want them watching the news, you know?"

"Oh," Clark said. *Her kids could've seen that? I've got to give the man credit; he had better sense than to let her kids see her almost get killed.* "Oh, yeah. They're no bother, really."

"Thanks," Richard said. "We try not to bring them up here every day, but Perry says he's never going to see his grandniece and grandnephew unless they come to the office. Say, Kala, is there a good reason you're both roaming around?"

"All the fun stuff in your office is locked up," she complained.

"And you changed your password, she can't play solitaire," Jason added.

"Mr. Kent's nice, can we stay and talk to him?" Kala added.

Clark was a little taken aback. The twins seemed like the sort of children who were always into something, and he couldn't imagine how interesting such a pair of bright, curious kids would have made Lois' life. His Lois - perpetually rushing, always driven, frequently impatient, stopping a dozen times a day to answer "Why?" - the thought was almost more than Clark's mind could bear. He wasn't even sure if his super-speed could keep up with them.

Richard was saved from having to answer Kala by a very familiar voice saying exasperatedly, "Jimmy, for the hundredth time, I'm *fine*! The medics kept me long enough to sequence my freakin' DNA, and they said I'm fine to come back to work."

Kala squirmed out of Richard's arms, and she and Jason raced to the door. Several reporters looked up from their work to glance at them as they tore up the center aisle, shaking their heads or giving amused grins. It seemed as if this was a common enough occurrence. They were only a foot from her when Clark saw her eyes look their way, Jason calling out "Mommy!" With alertness he hadn't been aware that she had had before, Lois' eyes flew to the sound instantly, any anxiety draining from her face. The smile on her face was haunting in its

beauty and affection as she went down on one knee and opened her arms as both flung themselves into her. Jimmy, seeming a bit embarrassed, made his way into the bullpen ahead of her.

She's a good mother, Clark thought with pleasant surprise. Heck, she's a great mother. Whatever happened to the woman who said, "My sister has three kids, two cats, and one mortgage. Yech! I'd go bananas in a week"? Lois really has changed.

And I think I like the new Lois even more.

Uh-oh.

Lois hugged the twins so tight, she heard Jason wheeze. Choking back the pressure of tears she felt behind her eyes, she nuzzled her cheek against the cool softness of Jason's hair. The rush of love she felt for the both of them increased when she turned to kiss her daughter's forehead, catching a whiff of cotton candy. It was amazing the reaction she had to just the scent of Kala's shampoo. All of the ramifications that were now before her were forgotten and there were only the twins. *Thank you, God, thank you. Thank you for letting me come home to these two. I don't know what I'd do without them.*

Completely unaware of her mother's inner turmoil, Kala wrapped her arms around her mother's neck and returned the embrace. As soon as he caught his breath, Jason did the same, a pleased grin on his face. For a moment, their joyous reunion was silent.

Then Kala pulled back slightly and said in a scolding tone, "Mommy, you're late!"

Still locked in her unreserved gratefulness, her comment startled Lois, who looked at her with incredulous eyes before breaking into amazed laughter. She had been so worried that they had seen everything somehow, that she or Jason might have had the slightest inkling of the last two hours. That they had possibly known just how close she had come to never seeing them again. Instead, Kala's tone, not to mention Jason's curious look, implied that she had just taken a long lunch or something. It just figured. And it was better than them knowing the truth.

"Oh well, forgive me, your highness. Many apologies."

Lois stored away all of the conflicting emotions roaring through her to arch a critical eyebrow at the child, breaking them both into giggles. It was one of the wonderful things about her children, their early understanding of sarcasm. That tone would most likely worry some children that they had done wrong; hers knew that it was simply Mommy being silly. Although she was wondering if it was the best thing, as Kala was showing signs of being just as snarky and a bit of a daredevil. Jason, on the other hand, was quieter than his twin. More thoughtful, spending most of his time trying to understand everything by observation. They balanced each other out, she thought with a proud smile, ruffling the boy's hair affectionately.

Still giggling, Jason beamed and stepped away with Kala. Holding his hand out to her, he offered like a little gentleman, "Come on, Mommy. I'll help you get up."

There was another warm feeling in her chest as she daintily rose to her feet, doing the work herself as she held his small hand. *I must be doing something right. Oh, his teenage years are going to kill me.* Taking a hold on Kala's hand, the Lanes made their way into the now-even-noisier bullpen. As she asked them about their afternoon, asking first about the zoo, she clearly felt the eyes of the rest of the crew on her. They wanted to ask her about the accident, she knew, and they were dying to corner her on it, but hung back in respect of the kids. She respected how hard it was for them to force back the urge to just walk up and bluntly ask her; it would be killing her, too, if it hadn't been her. As it was, Perry would be asking soon enough. And she wasn't quite sure how ready she was yet.

"...And I told Daddy about the meerkats and how Kala was scaring them when she kept poking her head against the glass. They ran to their little house and stayed there staring at her," Jason was saying, grinning at his sister. "They were scared of her big head."

"I do not have a big head, Godzilla-breath! And Mrs. Thomas said that they're normally 'fraidy-cats. Is because of other animals' prayed drive." Kala was scowling at him, something that happened often enough not to faze the boy anymore.

"Prey drive," Lois corrected gently, squeezing her hand. At the far end of their sixth year, it always blew her away to hear the amount of knowledge that they had acquired so far. She knew full-grown adults that weren't as intelligent. "Bigger animals try to eat them if they're not careful. They have to be very good at getting away, so they tend to hide, sweetheart." Trying not to laugh as she glanced over at Jason, she said in a serious tone, "So, see, Jason, Kala's big head had nothing to do with it."

"So there, lizardboy!" Kala smiled smugly, looking over at him again from her left side. It was only when Jason was laughing that the little girl thought back on it that she realized what her mommy had said. Her outraged expression was utterly precious; it was the main reason she occasionally tweaked her nose like this. "Mommy!"

"What, sweetheart? I love your big head. More brains to put in there, huh?"

"Uh-huh. Su-ure." Jason was just loving the fact that the shoe was on the other foot for the moment. His blue eyes gleamed. "Kala and her big brain. Right, Mommy."

Still pouting, their victim gave an imperious sniff before adding as if they hadn't spoken, "Anyway, Mrs. Thomas said to tell you hello and everything. And then Daddy picked us up and we came here. He said that you wanted to see us, but you weren't here. Why not? What made you late, Mommy?"

They were drawing close to her office now and she could hear Jimmy's voice up ahead as well as Richard. Silently, Lois groaned in frustration. *Of all of the timing... Isn't that just the question of the hour? What are you going to tell them, Lo?* Her confidence faltered instantly. How could she answer this without lying to them? *Well, guys, Mommy was falling out of the sky in a burning plane and your real father saved her after being gone since before she knew she was going to have you. And he doesn't even know that Mommy still knows. But don't worry about it. Really. Mommy knows what she's doing.* Sure. Of course.

It was in the midst of this mental battle when both kids stopped. Glancing up, her eyes moved from Jimmy to Richard, a frazzled smile rising to her lips. Lois was intensely relieved to be off the hook for the question now. So much so that hearing Jimmy's ecstatic next words stunned her even as she turned her head to acknowledge the third person in the party.

"Hey, Lois! Isn't this great? Look who's back."

Then hazel eyes met cerulean.

...Immovable Object

Unable to help herself, she couldn't unlock her gaze from his. It seemed impossible, unthinkable. *Clark. Superman. Kal-El. Oh God, what next?* Lois thought, momentarily forgetting Jimmy's cheerful introduction.

For a moment, both of them were frozen. Clark had seen her running past him and being shell-shocked on the plane, both times from a little distance. Now she was right in front of him, and he felt like he was falling into those impossibly beautiful eyes ... with a very disturbing expression of horrified surprise in them.

I suppose this is a little much, he thought guiltily, giving her a shy Clark grin. *She was almost killed, Superman shows back up and saves her, and then her old partner's back too. It must feel like she's gone through a time warp. I guess it's one shock too many.*

Lois, meanwhile, had an entirely different train of thought leaping from its track in her mind. *What the hell is he doing here? Like that's no coincidence, Clark and Superman show back up **on the same day** - he might as well ditch the glasses! What kind of idiot does he think I am, anyway?!*

Her grip had gone slack with surprise, and both twins tightened their hands in hers. That brought her consciousness back. And instantaneously she felt ice down her spine. *My God, the twins! They're right here, right in front of him; he has to notice the resemblance! Oh, shit!*

"Mommy, are you okay?" Jason asked, his brow furrowing with concern. Kala just rolled her eyes, glancing at Clark as if to say, *Yes, the whole family is crazy, except me.*

Her breath was caught in her throat, once again torn ruthlessly between heartbreak and resentment as she looked into those incredible eyes. The same eyes that belonged to that small voice calling her name. As it had only been an hour ago, the urge to confront him was so strong as to be tangible, but how was up for debate. The sensible thing to do would be to ask Richard to take the twins home immediately, then pull the man before her off long enough to tell him, in no uncertain terms, just how unwelcome he was here. *How **dare** he do this? He somehow gets himself rehired behind my back, reappears to save me as if nothing happened, as if he's only been gone a day or so. And then he has the **gall** to be here waiting when I get back with that phony cornball smile on his face and acting as if this sudden reappearance shouldn't be a surprise. Damn him.*

Yet, for all of the fear in her heart, there was also the most dangerous ache in her chest. One she thought she had exorcised long ago. Just to see him here, right before her, so close that she could reach out and touch him, was its own special kind of torture.

"Mommy?"

It was Jason's voice again, effectively snapping her out of her chaotic thoughts. Lois then remembered to breathe, shaking her head slightly. She would get through this, had to get through it. Without screaming. Without losing her cool. Without vengefully breaking that promise he thought she had forgotten. For the twins, if for no one else. With a deep breath, she tightened her jaw slightly and made herself give a reasonable facsimile of her usual high-spirited grin.

"I'm alright, sweetheart," Lois reassured her son without a trace of the tumult that was nearly choking her. "It's just not every day that your best friend comes home." Somehow she managed to get herself into some semblance of control. Regardless of all of this, she had to keep up appearances. She even leaned forward to hug him quickly, bracing herself against the chaos roaring through her. "Clark. I didn't know you were coming back here. This is a surprise. Perry didn't even tell me that you two were in contact."

"Yeah, well, it was kind of a surprise to me, too," he said, remembering to sound diffident and awkward. But the smell of her skin after all these years was sweeter than perfume. "Perry pretty much hired me back the moment I called. I've got Norm Palmer's desk now." Clark paused for a second, keenly aware of the two children staring at them both, of Jimmy and Richard grinning at this happy reunion. "So, I hear you're, um, assistant editor now? And engaged?"

Oh, did that sting? I'm so sorry, Lois' angry side growled, the General's Daughter as sharp-tongued in her mind as she'd ever been out loud. Meanwhile, the romantic half of her mind was squirming with unease, seeing the father of her children standing right next to the man they called Daddy. But her voice was perfectly normal, putting a slightly cheerful note into saying, "Well, Clark, things have changed since you've been gone. I'm happy to admit that Act Two is even better than I could have dreamed. I met someone who really did need me, for once." With that, she severed the intense eye contact with Clark to look over at Richard with a smile, making an effort to show her allegiance to the man determined to marry her. Mixed feelings meant nothing in the face of the secrets she was holding back. With more confidence than she felt and in spite of some internal resistance, Lois laughed. "What is it with me and flyboys?"

"Hey now," Richard said teasingly, "don't go comparing me to *him*. I have to file my flight plans with the FAA."

Both kids perked up at that. "Him who?" they asked in unison, looking up at their mother curiously. Jason continued, "Mommy, you knew someone else who flew?"

Lois was saved from having to answer by Perry's bellow, "Everyone! Staff meeting, now!"

"Richard, could you?" she asked with a helpless smile. "You can skip out better than I can."

"Sure thing," he said. "Hey, you two, how about some fast food?" The twins squealed with joy, running to him, and he quickly hugged Lois as the rest of the staff scurried into the conference room. Clark couldn't help seeing them kiss, or hearing Richard whisper, "You're really okay?"

"I'm fine," she murmured against his lips, while her heart whispered *Liar*. "Comes with the territory. Don't upset the kids." Richard kissed her again, provoking some retching noises from the twins, and Lois raised her voice to remind him, "Nowhere that handles peanuts!"

"Yes, Mommy," he teased back. "As if I don't know by now. Heartworks Café and chicken tortillas, we know."

Just before they turned to leave, both twins had looked up at him and smiled as they waved. "'Bye, Mr. Kent. 'Night."

And until the three of them were out the door, Lois' eyes never left them.

"Lois! Everyone means you, too!" Perry roared.

Clark's face was nearly ashen as he found a place to stand in the back of the crowded room. *She remembers*, he thought, feeling ill. God, if she remembered everything, what must she think of him? To leave a good friend, one you had a romantic interest in, without a word of goodbye, was insensitive. But to leave your lover that way...

She can't remember. If Lois remembered that night, remembered who I really am, she'd be a whole lot angrier. In fact, she probably would've thrown a screaming fit and chased me out of the Daily Planet with the nearest chunk of kryptonite. Lois doesn't carry a grudge, she

cherishes one. The fact that she hasn't tried to murder me is proof that she doesn't remember.

Lois must have made the remark in reference to all the times she had sneered about the domesticated life. She was no longer the single reporter whose daring was legendary; now she was a mother and almost a wife. The second act of her life had begun, and it wasn't the maddening hell Lois had always imagined. She clearly loved the twins with every fiber of her being. And Richard. *I mustn't forget Richard - that would be a very bad idea.*

She is angry, though. And she has a right to that. But she doesn't remember all the reasons for being angry. Should I tell her? Wouldn't that harm her relationship with Richard? According to everything Jimmy said and the way he acts, he's a pretty nice guy. Should I even consider doing anything that will upset that? Should I just leave well enough alone, now that she's moved on with her life?

Oh God, what am I going to do now? he wondered.

Oh God, Lois thought, keeping her head down and pretending to make notes while Perry harangued them, *what am I going to do now?* Bad enough he was *here*, right under her nose every day, but he had seen the twins! She was torn between relief and irritation. Relief that he hadn't immediately realized just when those kids had been conceived and commenced trying to get back into her life - *which I do **not** want, I really don't want him back* - and irritation that something so obvious to her had slipped right by him.

"I want all of you on this story," Perry growled at them. "I want to know everything. Where did he go? Why did he leave?" The editor-in-chief continued to fire questions at them, singling out by name those reporters who didn't look like they were paying attention. He ignored Lois, though, presumably because of her recent harrowing experience.

Her mind had turned away from the man trying to hide himself in the crowd at the back of the conference room, Lois' thoughts avoiding him in either guise. *Right before everything went to hell, we had that power outage. That is not normal; those jets have fail-safes and backups and redundancies to prevent such a thing.*

Hmm. As I was walking in, I overheard people talking about a blackout here, too. Jimmy was saying something about a power outage at the bar he was in, too, one that knocked out his cell phone as well as the lights. What kind of blackout affects electricity, battery-powered phones, and a plane in the sky? Sounds like an EMP.

Also sounds like the real story is the blackout, not Superman.

Almost unwillingly, she lifted her head at the thought, and her gaze went directly to Clark. Their eyes met, his a little confused, a little embarrassed, hers full of that intensity that had once led her to drive all over the California desert interviewing anyone who could comment on Luthor's land deals.

Then Lois quickly looked back down at her notes, which had little to do with Perry's questions about Superman and everything to do with her own concerns about the possible EMP.

Ominous Portents

Lex was deep into research. He had books on gems and crystals spread around him, some open to a particular page, others with dozens of slips of paper inserted in their pages to mark passages of interest. At the moment, he was studying one volume intently, bent over it and ignoring the bank of televisions in the next room.

Kitty was not ignoring them. Ever since wrecking the Vanderworth basement hours ago, Lex had kept his nose stuck in a book, leaving her to entertain herself. At the moment, she was watching several different shows on sixteen different screens.

The clock ticked over to five PM, and the nightly news came on most of the channels. Kitty was immediately captivated. "Wow, he's cute," she said appreciatively.

That made Lex look up, already forming a scathing comment about 'cute' guys who didn't have his intelligence, his ambition, or his wealth. What he saw on five screens made the words die on his lips.

Superman. The damned alien was back.

The Encyclopedia of Gems and Crystals was about eight inches by eleven inches, and four inches thick. It was so massive that Lex had been using a bookstand to read it. But at the sight of that deviously charming smile, that silly little spit-curl, he snatched the book up one-handed and flung it, which shattered several screens and made Kitty screech. "Lex! I was watching that!"

"*That*," he spat at her, "is the sonofabitch who put me in jail. *That* is the damned alien invader everyone's welcoming back. He was *supposed* to die, damn him! Why can't he just *die*?! People do it every day, it can't be that hard!"

He was being irrational. He knew he was being irrational. Kitty was looking at him with that wide-eyed frightened look she liked to fake on occasion, and it made him want to throttle her. Prison had taught him to appreciate the thrill of killing someone up close, seeing the tiny hemorrhages in the whites of their eyes, and for an instant he could *feel* Kitty's smooth throat being crushed in his hands.

Don't kill the silly bitch, his father's voice growled in his ear, as it sometimes did in moments of emotional upheaval. *She's good for bait, if nothing else. That caped fool has a thing about damsels in distress. You **do** need to distract him, don't you?*

Yes, Lex thought, the rage in his eyes dying. It was only a matter of time before the big blue boy scout realized he'd been robbed. Lex stalked past Kitty into the other room, studying the remaining televisions while his mind churned.

He couldn't strangle Kitty while he still had a use for her. He'd made that mistake with Eve, abandoning her in the Arctic. Miss Teschmacher had deserved it - she had betrayed Lex, but she had also sprung him out of prison, so he had simply left her, giving her a chance to survive. Whether or not she had somehow lived in that frozen waste, Lex regretted it when he found himself in prison yet again. He'd had to court that decrepit old widow Vanderworth to free himself. Though he did have a spark of admiration for her - the crone had signed her estate to him as much to spite her vulturous relatives as to benefit her sweetheart. That kind of ruthlessness was...

"Among those rescued was Pulitzer Prize winner Lois Lane, assistant editor-in-chief of the Metropolis newspaper *The Daily Planet*. Miss Lane is a familiar figure to Superman fans worldwide; his first public rescue saved her from a falling helicopter, and at his return we find Lois Lane and another doomed aircraft..."

Lex's eyes widened suddenly. *Lois Lane*. Witness to his most inglorious defeats, snide

post-incarceration interviewer, one of those people who managed to come out on top by a mixture of animal cunning and carefully exploited good looks instead of sheer intellect ... and Superman's beloved.

Kitty had hung back for a moment. Lex had his mood swings; mostly he was all right, if you let him think he was the most brilliant thing on earth. But once in a while she saw the man who had callously condemned millions to death to advance his own fortune, the man whose cellmates seemed to commit suicide with frightening regularity. At those times it was wise to handle him cautiously, and now was certainly one of them.

She sidled up to him, wanting a look at his expression before she said anything. What she saw sent chills dancing down her spine. The news story he was looking at was focusing in on a pretty dark-haired woman trying to shrug off a medic. The look on Lex's face was equal parts hatred, lust, and revenge, all blended into a savage predatory hunger.

Kitty tiptoed back. *Whoever you are, sister, God help you. You're gonna need it.*

But when Lex turned to her a moment later, he almost looked sane - except for the manic light in his eyes. "Tell me, Katherine," he said, "do you know what Superman's weakness is?"

She withheld sarcasm partly because she valued her skin, partly because he'd used her proper name. He only did that when he was feeling a certain sadistic glee. "Kryptonite," she said crisply, like a good student.

Lex grinned. "Yes, very good. And do you know what his *other* weakness is?"

Kitty glanced at the screens again. "Those clunky boots?" she guessed.

Lex actually chuckled at that. "No, no, Katherine my dear. His *real* weakness is that reporter right there, my good friend Lois Lane. Why, he'd move heaven and earth for her. I wonder what she's doing these days."

Kitty cast a sympathetic glance at the new report, now showing footage of Lois questioning the Virgin Airlines rep. Compassion was not a large part of Kitty's nature, but she knew that tone in Lex's voice and what it portended. Of all the bad men she'd fallen for, he was the most dangerous. Not because of sheer violence, though he could get into the wetwork, but because of his mind. She sometimes envisioned his head as being full of wheels and gears, constantly spinning. Whatever he was planning for this Lane woman would wring tears from a stone.

"Have you ever been to a Pulitzer Prize award ceremony, Katherine?"

Other than gruffly asking if she was all right, Perry had left Lois alone after the Genesis incident. For her part, she tried to stay out of the office as much as possible, tracking down the blackout. Most people weren't aware that it had been really an electromagnetic pulse, a massive one at that. Metropolis and its suburbs had been affected; everything electronic had simply gone dark as the invisible wave passed by.

Questions, bribery, and harassment had gotten her the information she wanted. The first address to lose power was the Vanderworth place, and she had gone to check it out that morning (successfully avoiding the office again). No one was home, and nothing was docked at the expensively and tastelessly decorated marina.

Lois circled the estate, peering in windows. Someone had spent a lot of money on furnishings; it was a pity that whoever it had been was more pack rat than connoisseur. She saw a beautiful Louis XVI desk that had been painted - sacrilege - and placed against a wall beneath a hideous painting of two vapid-looking toy dogs; imitation Greco-Roman marble statues that weren't even properly proportioned; and horror of horrors, a *signed* painting of a

matador done on black velvet.

Please God, don't ever let me get this rich if I'm going to be this tacky, Lois thought with a shudder, longing for her home's clean contemporary lines and understated colors.

Behind the house, she noticed some structural damage to the walls. It looked like the basement was sunken or something, which perhaps explained why the owners were gone. And that was another question - who exactly owned this place? According to her initial inquiries, the title was being held up in the courts, another thing Lois meant to track down.

Something had certainly happened here, and it was damned suspicious. Lois contemplated the windows, thoroughly intrigued and burning to get inside the place.

If they can afford that kind of pricey dreck, they can afford an alarm system, her cautious side whispered. *A **good** alarm system. Probably campaign contributors for the police commissioner, too. Don't chance it, Lane.*

But oh, the story ... letting a lead slip through her fingers brought the acid taste of defeat up into Lois' throat. While she pondered, indecisive, her cell phone rang.

Incoming Call: Richard White, its little screen informed her.

She was of two minds as always where the little machine was concerned, both grateful to have such an easy and quick means of communication in case of emergencies and feeling as if she had a collar and leash at all times. And that was not a sensation she dealt well with.

At least if it was Richard, there was likely a good reason to answer. He was all too aware of how she felt about being interrupted in the midst of fact-finding. With a sigh, she smoothed a lock of dark hair behind her ear before pressing the 'talk' button. "Hello, love. I'm kinda in the middle of something, but what's..."

"And it better not be that blackout story you've been chasing the last few days," Perry barked. "It's a sorry sight when the editor-in-chief of a major newspaper has to borrow his nephew's cell phone just to get a hold of his assistant! Get back here right now, Lois."

"Perry," she began, her tone warning him of another explosive confrontation about her priorities and prerogatives.

"Lois, if you're not in your office in forty-five minutes, you won't have an office to come back to," he snapped, and hung up the phone.

She stared at the cell phone in open-mouthed shock. Perry, who had all but *begged* her to come back to the Planet as his assistant, was threatening to *fire* her? How dare he! For an instant she considered flinging the phone off the dock, and cocked her arm back before remembering why she kept the damn thing. Instant access to her kids, or for them to reach her.

Lois pocketed the phone, still seething. *I swear, the only reason Perry made me his assistant was so he could yank my chain more personally... He'd better have a damn good reason for this.*

When Lois walked back into the bullpen, all of the senior reporters unobtrusively got out of her way. Clark watched her stalk to Perry's office, fling the door open, and storm in, letting it bang shut behind her. The noise was curiously muffled; evidently the editor-in-chief had gotten his office soundproofed recently.

Not soundproofed against Clark, though. At first he simply watched through the glass walls, but when he saw Lois lean forward, smack her palms against Perry's desk, and apparently yell at him from a foot away, he focused his hearing on the room. What on earth could have gotten her so angry?

"*Superman's* the story," Perry was telling her forcefully. "Didn't we just have a staff

meeting about that? Every newspaper in this town - this *country* - is dying to get the first interview with him! Hell, every one of them has a good-looking female reporter stashed on the roof."

Clark winced. Too true - and he'd been careful not to overfly the National News building after one of their reporters decided to sunbathe topless.

Perry hadn't let Lois get a word in yet. "And he hasn't given any of them more than a wave as he flies off somewhere else. Does that tell you something, Lois?"

"He's trying to make himself look good to make up for having abandoned us?" she said coldly, and Clark winced again.

Perry glared at her. "He wants to give that interview to the paper and the reporter that have always represented him best!"

"Tough," Lois spat. "Perry, you're missing the point. I'm busy with another story. Let Polly have his press release."

"You have the history with him," Perry said, "and you're gonna interview him. I'm still your boss, Lois."

For a moment, Clark just saw Lois' jaw lock up and her eyes glitter with outrage. He hadn't seen that livid expression for almost seven years, but he knew it better than most.

"Don't even start," Perry warned. "Lois, you're on Superman as of now. *That's final*. Give Kent your notes on the blackout story and let him run it down. He's never had any luck finding Superman anyway."

Absolutely the wrong thing to say to a strong-willed reporter who had the bit in her teeth about a completely different story. Clark tuned out the ensuing argument as Lois' voice rose; soon it was even audible in the bullpen, although fortunately no one could hear her exact words.

Richard came in with both kids, who ran to Jimmy's desk to raid his candy jar. They knew that whatever was in the glass jar would be safe for them to eat. Richard smiled indulgently at them, then realized what was going on in Perry's office. He flinched, taking his gaze away from the spectacle of his fiancée bellowing at his uncle, and his eyes happened to meet Clark's.

"They tell me she was always like this," he said weakly, coming over to Clark's desk.

"Well, Lois has always been, uh, intense," Clark said.

The twins appeared at Clark's side, watching their mother's tirade in the other office with interest. "Wow, Mommy's really mad," Kala observed nonchalantly.

"Yeah, kids, your Mom can be a real fire-breather on occasion," Richard said, ruffling Jason's hair.

"See, Kala?" the boy said excitedly. "Mommy can act like Godzilla, so can I!"

The two men let the kids argue and looked at each other with a moment of perfect understanding. *Lois is pretty much Reporter-zilla when she gets her teeth into a story, but we both love her for it.* "I bet my uncle would rather deal with Godzilla than Lois on a rampage," Richard joked.

"Godzilla doesn't sell as many papers," Clark replied.

Richard chuckled. "True. You know, as much as I love her, I don't think I'll ever completely understand her."

Join the club. "Lois is, um, pretty complex," Clark offered.

"You know what Perry told me?" Richard said, seeming not to have heard him. "He told me to quit thinking of her as a woman. Can you believe it? I mean, look at her. But he had a point. When Lois wants something, she doesn't wait around for somebody to give it to her-"

"-she goes out and gets it herself," Clark said, nodding.

"Exactly," Richard agreed. "She's darned tenacious. You have to respect that, you know? And not just because she's a woman, you have to respect that willpower in *anyone*." He paused, reflecting, and added, "Of course, then Perry told me no man will ever *really* understand a woman, so I'd better just live with appreciating her."

That momentarily stunned Clark, hearing his father's advice coming from Richard's lips. He realized abruptly that he could have really come to like the man; they would've been good friends, if Richard hadn't been Lois' fiancé.

Evidently Richard thought they *were* friends. He clapped a hand on Clark's shoulder and said, "Looks like she's winding down. I'd better get into the bomb shelter; he borrowed *my* phone to call her."

He underestimated the speed of wrath, though. Lois was zeroing in on him before he could flee, Perry's office door swinging shut violently behind her, and for once she didn't even notice Clark or the kids. "You, sir, are never going to let Perry borrow your phone again, are we clear?" she said, poking her finger into his chest.

Clark felt his heart leap into his throat. She was so splendid in her rage, so vibrantly completely alive, that he couldn't help falling in love with her again. How had he ever thought he could live without this woman?

"Mommy, Kala's calling me a lizard again!" Jason whined.

And Clark saw an amazing thing then. Having known Lois for years, he would've expected her to turn that razor tongue on Jason, too, in spite of his age and the fact that he was her son. But instead, she looked blankly at him for a second, then sighed heavily and brushed his bangs out of his eyes. "Honey, *Godzilla is a lizard*."

"See, Lizard-boy?" Kala crowed.

"Kala, don't tease your brother," Lois said automatically. "Richard, go talk to your uncle. If I yell at him any more he might have another heart attack, and I don't want to be editor."

"I love you, honey," he said.

"Love you," she replied, "but I'm still pi... peeved." At that moment, she noticed Clark, and her eyes narrowed for a second. Just an instant. "Kent, if Richard can't pull a miracle, you get the blackout, and I get to join the legions of attractive female journalists loitering on rooftops. Joy."

"Um, Lois, I think that..." his voice faltered in the face of her steely glare. *I really have to get to the bottom of this with her.*

"Here's an idea," Richard said. "How about you, me, Jimmy, and Clark stay late. We'll get the blackout put to bed first - we can get more done with the four of us working the phones. Then we can all devote our time to tracking down Superman. If both stories get done, how's Perry gonna argue about who did which one?"

"But the twins," Lois began.

"It's your night to make dinner, so we're having takeout anyway," Richard said. "Besides, they like hanging around here."

Jimmy had walked up halfway through the conversation, meaning to ask Clark if he could borrow a pen, and he was perfectly willing to be included. The first good-quality photos of Superman could save his career. "Sure, I'd love to stay and help, Miss Lane. I mean, Perry's kinda hung up on Superman, but that blackout was really weird and probably really important."

All eyes turned to Clark then. "Of course I'll stay," he said with a shrug. "Perry would

make me work on the blackout anyway, and Lois and I always made a great team in the past."

"So that's settled," Richard said, beaming. "We're in covert rebellion against my uncle, and we're going to have Mexican tonight."

"Yay! Burritos!" Kala and Jason yelled in unison.

Neither they, nor the men, saw the narrow-eyed look Lois was giving Clark. *In the past*, she thought angrily. *The past **you** took from me. This is the present, and it's not exactly a gift.*

Confrontation and Reminiscence

After six o' clock, the Planet bullpen was largely deserted. Even Perry had gone home; his cardiologist insisted that he keep to a regular schedule. That left the office to Richard, Lois, Jimmy, Clark, and the twins. The four adults had polished off a second pot of coffee while trying to track the complicated paper trail attached to the Vanderworth estate; the two children were trying to entertain themselves. Coloring books, a deck of Old Maid cards, and even Mommy's computer games had lost their appeal, and the twins were ominously quiet.

"Holy..." Lois said, catching herself. "That dock I saw? It's not just a yacht, it's a freakin' baby ocean liner. Listen to these specs: 1400 tons, 65 knots maximum speed, 12, 000 horsepower, 58 foot beam, and here's the kicker, 300 feet long."

"Wow," the three men said in unison.

"And it's got a glass bottom," Lois added.

Just then, they heard a terrifying roar. Or it would have been terrifying, if it had come from a ninety-foot lizard and not a small boy with a trashcan on his head. Kala was chasing Jason with a rolled-up newspaper and yelling, "Die, Godzilla, die!"

"Rrrraaar!" Jason screamed, and ran into Perry's glass office door.

Lois had to cover her mouth to stifle her laughter, tears squeezing out of her eyes as her breath hitched and her shoulders shook. The three men just stared as Kala did an impromptu victory dance over her vanquished brother. "Yay, Godzilla's dead!" she sang, twirling.

"Oww," Jason groaned, trying to get up. The trashcan was still on his head, and Kala whacked it enthusiastically, provoking an angry yelp.

"Okay, that's enough, you two," Richard said sternly, getting up. Lois was still helplessly sniggering as she buried her face in her hands. Richard continued, "I swear, sometimes I wonder if you guys are even from this planet."

"I'm not," Jason said quickly, pushing the trashcan off his head.

"You are so!" Kala yelled. "Godzilla's just a big ugly radioactive lizard!"

"Not as ugly as your big head!" he retorted.

"Not another word!" their mother interrupted. No one had noticed until then how Lois' amusement suddenly dried up at Richard's offhand remark. "Kala, Jason, stop fighting. Right now."

They both sighed melodramatically, but didn't even try to argue.

"All right, I think the kids are a little hungry," Richard said, stroking both of their hair while he looked speculatively at Lois. "Jimmy, let's go ahead and take them out to Pancho's. It's a little early for dinner, but they've had to think about it long enough."

All animosities forgotten, the twins were dancing around him and chanting "Burritos" like it was some obscure cult. Jimmy left his notes for Clark and Lois and went with Richard and the kids.

As soon as the elevator doors shut behind them, the room temperature seemed to drop ten degrees. Almost immediately, Lois dropped her eyes back to her work, not sparing Clark a glance.

Oh, boy. She's still burned that Perry tried to give this story to me; either that, or she's mad because he hired me back without even telling her. Either way, this is going to be about as much fun as a calculus test. "Um, Lois," Clark began diffidently.

She didn't even let him finish the sentence. Without a word, she stood as she snatched up her purse. Just sitting here, just keeping up the charade when they were alone was intolerable. This hadn't been quite the situation she had expected to find herself in when they had

discussed staying late, but how could she have refused to be left alone with Clark without creating more suspicion? As it was, she was having a nightmare of a time simply remaining civil, something some people were starting to notice. Each of the last few days had been a struggle. She was avoiding the office constantly. Even old habits were returning, ones she had stopped before the twins had come.

Flashing him an attempt at a smile, Lois rounded the desks near hers and headed for the center aisle. One hand on the strap of the purse, she wasn't really watching what she was doing when she called out, "I'll be back. Just going downstairs for some more coffee." And no more than two steps later, one heel caught in the carpet slightly, and she lost her grip. Before she could attempt to catch it, the case hit the floor, spilling the contents. Swearing at fate, she snapped out, "Shit. Just great," as she quickly knelt down.

Clark hurriedly knelt beside her, and his heart caught in his throat as his glasses fell off and landed practically in her lap. Lois just picked them up and handed them back, not even looking up, snatching up her belongings with her free hand and dumping everything back in her purse willy-nilly.

Taking the glasses, Clark stared at Lois. She hadn't even tried to look. After all these years of suspecting he was Superman, after some of the crazy stunts she'd pulled...

The hideously over-decorated honeymoon suite in Niagara, Lois looking at him in the mirror, her eyes scheming. "You are Superman. Aren't you?"

He'd laughed nervously. Less than an hour ago, she'd tried to discover proof of his identity. "Lois, we've been through this hallucination of yours before. Don't you remember what you almost did to yourself, jumping into those rapids? Can't you see the tragic mistake you almost made?"

She smiled thinly. "You're right, Clark. I did make a tragic mistake. What a fool I was..." Then she opened a drawer in the dressing table and swiveled in her seat, a loaded revolver in her hand. Leveled at Clark's chest. "I bet my life instead of yours."

He backed up, eyes widening. She couldn't be serious ... what on earth would he do now? "Lois ... don't be insane... Lois, you're crazy!"

She fired. The gunshot echoed across the room.

He remained standing. What else could he do, play dead?

Her voice was full of wonder and quiet triumph. "I knew it. I guess I must really have known it for the longest time..."

Clark stared at her, defiant and resigned, and let his voice deepen to Superman's register. "You realize, of course, if you'd been wrong... Clark Kent would have been killed."

She grinned, that exultant smile that he knew and loved so well. "How? With a blank?"

At that moment, he'd felt so foolish. After all that time, the lengths he'd gone to, she had trapped him so easily. He sighed frustratedly.

Lois just looked at him with a soft smile. "Gotcha."

A moment later, while he was still in shock from her discovery, she'd dropped another bombshell on him by saying she was in love with him. "Then we'd really better talk," unable to hide the little tremor of joy, relief, and new anxiety in his voice when he said it. And after that the Fortress, his explanation, the loss of his powers, that wondrous night ... and waking up from their dream of paradise to find themselves in a hell of conflicting loyalties.

Clark shook himself a little, bringing his mind back to the present. The glasses were replaced. He started helping Lois toss her things back into her purse; she certainly carried a lot more stuff than she did when they'd first met.

Pen, backup pen, Kleenex, recorder, Nicoderm gum, steno pad, cell phone, inhaler for the kids, backup inhaler, change purse, makeup compact, eye drops, wallet, Epi-pen in case one of the kids had an allergic reaction, pack of M&Ms, bottle of Zyban ... everything seemed to be there. Then Lois picked up her purse, and both of them saw the last item lying beneath.

A pack of Djarum Lights cigarettes.

Flushing against her will, her eyes briefly flickered up to his. The next instant, having seen his gaze light on them and know them for what they were, Lois snatched up the pack and slipped them back into their former hiding place. All of the things that had happened between then and now, and she was ashamed that he knew she hadn't completely stopped smoking? *What the hell is wrong with you? It's your lungs and your anxiety. What right does he have to judge? Especially after almost seven years.* Sounding both terse and defensive, Lois rose to her feet quickly, now avoiding his eyes. "I'll be back." Glancing back only briefly, she was gone up the grey carpet, disappearing quickly on her way to the elevators.

His eyes followed her as she slapped the call button, her shoulders tense. Clark felt like his gaze had been captured as he watched her get into the elevator, the doors transparent to his vision, watched it rise slowly...

Rise? She said she was going downstairs, not up. What could she want up there?

The answer was an instant in coming. *Back then, she used to go up there to smoke. I thought she quit, but it looks like she just switched brands and cut down.*

The way things have been going, this may be my only chance to catch her alone. Good thing I started wearing the suit again...

And swifter than sight, he vanished from the bullpen. Only a moment later, he was on the roof, watching Lois from the concealing shadows.

She sighed, glaring up at the night sky, then turned her back on Metropolis' skyline and took out the pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Lois held the cigarette in her lips while she tried to get the lighter to work, but as soon as the flame popped up, Superman sent a puff of his breath across it.

Eyes narrowed, Lois tried again, and again Superman blew out the flame, a little more forcefully. She whirled around, seeming taken aback to see him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," he said, floating off the parapet toward her.

Although she had seen him consistently for the last several hours, she felt that full-body freeze she had on the plane. Why was it that his sheer presence threw her for a loop, even more so when he was in the suit? The instinctive feeling of awe, of the history between them rose in her, the very thing that led Perry to his orders. And, against her will, she felt her heart tug at her as she felt her gaze lock with his again...

Only to tear them away a moment later. What was she doing? What, she could forget the last half dozen years that quickly for a pair of blue eyes, a perfect face? And what about the way he had left her? And the twins? What about them? Suddenly, Lois' anger was nearly palpable. "You didn't startle me, anymore than earlier," she said rather coldly. The edge of sarcasm in her tone was clear. "I just wasn't expecting you."

For once in his life, he was completely at a loss. Superman always pretended perfect confidence, always made it seem that he knew everything, could do everything, but behind that movie-star smile anxiety and doubt often lurked. He worried, sometimes excessively, if he was doing the right things, if he was helping people or just providing them with a handsome primary-colored crutch, and Lois' article had given those thoughts more power to gnaw into his mind. But in spite of that, he could generally still *act* like he knew what he was doing and

everything would be okay. That was why people still trusted and adored him; inside every adult is the child they once were, and those children had not yet learned that this particular adult was as fallible as themselves.

Not now. Lois knew him better; Lois' faith in him had never been blind. In the time between his first rescue and his departure for Krypton, they had had many talks about the world, his responsibilities, and his image. She had helped him to understand people, playing devil's advocate, pointing out different viewpoints. Lois knew, as no other human being did, how his deep commitment to aiding his adopted planet spurred him on and sometimes tormented him. But that meant that she could not be mollified by some simple explanation; unlike the rest of the world, Lois was not going to settle for rejoicing that he was back. She clearly felt betrayed by his abrupt disappearance, and he would have to answer for that.

In the face of her cold anger, Superman drew himself back a bit. *Let's start with the public, then we can get to the personal*, he thought. "I know that people have been asking a lot of questions about me," he said, trying to keep his voice level and calm. "I think it's only fair that I answer ... those people." *And you - I answer to you first and foremost for everything I've ever done. You're my chronicler, my critic, my best fan, and best friend. You're also the only woman I've ever really loved, and if I ever lost you I think my heart would just die in my chest.*

Those eyes he had learned to read so well only widened and the look was absolutely incredulous. When she spoke, it was clear by the disbelief in her voice that that had not been what she had been expecting. "So, you're ... here for an *interview*?"

Wait, you have an opportunity to explain yourself, and you're not even going to use it? her romantic nature wondered. The General's Daughter, however, merely snapped, *Un-frikkin-believable*. Lois didn't give him a chance to respond, snatching up her recorder out of her open purse and flicking it on. Even the way she held it out was abrupt and angry, and her voice dripped sarcasm as she said, "Well, you're back, and everyone seems pretty happy about it." The set of that delicate jaw was clear.

"Not everyone," Superman replied sternly, trying to keep this from turning into a confrontation. "I read the article, Lois."

"So did a lot of people," she shot back. "Friday night they're giving me a Pulitzer for it."

"Why did you write it?" he asked, and now there was a hint of pain in his voice. Of all the people to write such an article, Lois, the one he loved best...

Lois had built a wall between herself and him, every brick made of anger and mortared with betrayal. Behind it were her pain, loss, and loneliness, but as hard as she tried to hold those feelings back, they seeped out a little. "How could you leave us like that? You didn't even bother to say goodbye!"

An awkward question, especially given what he had found. "Saying goodbye ... would've been too hard."

That flipped Lois back into outrage. "What's hard about it? 'Goodbye!' 'See ya!' People do it all the time, even you. How hard can it be? I mean, this is just me. It's not as if there was anything between us to make that difficult or anything." She could feel acid in her throat as she spoke.

"Lois..."

She cut him off instead, no longer willing to offer him an opportunity to explain. *Get the damn interview, then you can go back to ignoring him.* "So, where'd you go?"

"To Krypton..."

She seemed a bit startled, then suspicious. No, wait, he had told her... "But you told me it exploded."

"It did, but scientists thought they'd found it, and I hoped..."

Lois interrupted again, "What did you find there?"

Superman was finally annoyed. He'd had tough interviews with her before, but this on top of all the shocks he'd had in returning, on top of the cold, distant way she had treated Clark, was too much. His tone was nearly as snappish as hers when he replied, "A graveyard. Full of kryptonite, at that."

Blinking in surprise, Lois couldn't entirely rein in her sympathy. *Oh God, that's why he went. And why he went so quickly. To have been faced with that... What that must have been like, to have gained hope that he might not be the last of his race, only to discover himself an orphan again...*

Before she could even consider comforting him, a fuming voice abruptly interrupted those thoughts. *He didn't have to go. What was he thinking, after all of this time? And that doesn't even begin to explain why the hell he couldn't have the decency to give you a by-your-leave, especially if there was a chance that he'd never see you again. That's what he's trying to tell you, isn't it? He planned to disappear forever onto a home world he doesn't even remember, leaving you behind with nothing better to do than stand around wondering. Never mind that he stopped being the last of his kind eight months after he took off. But, then again, why not? Near as you're supposed to remember, you were only his press agent, you know? A few stories, a little tension, and a little flirtation. Nothing more than that.*

"Lois ... if I had known, I would never have left. I shouldn't have gone at all..."

"No, you shouldn't have," Lois said sharply. She had to get this under control again, and quickly. "Well, so tell me what you've been doing since you've been back. When did you get in? Why the new suit? Have you meet anyone? Were you waiting for something showy to save or were we just lucky you showed up when that plane fell?"

She sounded just like Perry, except for that last. Superman realized that he was quickly losing the chance to explain to her, not to win her back but to even win back the possibility of ever having civil conversation with her. He reached for the one thing that had always helped before, the one thing she had never been able to resist.

Holding out his hand, he said softly, "Lois, come with me."

She turned slightly at that, the expression that flickered across his face more than she could bear. Despite her barrage, it was impossible to miss the affection in his eyes. And that was something she just couldn't take. Not when she had seen it before and much more intensely. Despite her own painful betrayal, and loyalty to the twins, she felt herself weakening.

The first time, that moment of incredulity, startling her into saying, "You mean I could fly?"

He had chuckled. "Well, I'll handle the flying if it's all right with you." He had taken her hand before she could talk herself out of it, putting an arm around her shoulders. The gentlest push, and they left the ground, moving slowly off the edge of her roof.

It was unlike anything else she had ever known, his grip on her so light, and the canyons of Metropolis' streets yawning below her. She felt frighteningly unsupported, clutching him desperately, hiding her eyes.

*Superman had been amused, but he had only chuckled softly and made her turn her head to look. All that **space** below her, seeming to pull greedily at her, **wanting** her to fall so far.*

Fear like nothing she'd ever known had overwhelmed her then, leaving her shivering.

But she didn't fall, and a few minutes later, the fear subsided, leaving her brimming with wonder. It was almost as if she really was flying on her own, his touch was so light, his strength so great that he could support her with one hand. Soon she was laughing with delight, arms spread wide, the entire city soaring by beneath her.

And then she did fall, and he caught her, and she was staring into those blue eyes from inches away. That was the moment she lost her heart, and Lois remembered thinking later that this was precisely how falling in love should be: terrifying, exhilarating, and wondrous.

For that instant, Lois' anger was lost as she fought off that traitorous memory. "No," she whispered then, shaking her dark head, those amazing eyes haunted. She had replayed that memory over and over, wounded by it and fate on many long nights after he was gone. And even now the pain was still fresh when she remembered all of her silly fantasies following that night. Going with him was the most foolish thing she could do. "No. What purpose would it serve?"

"Lois, please," he said. There *was* something more than anger in her feelings to him, and though the pain in her eyes wounded him as bullets never could, he reached for it, his own voice full of longing and loss. "Fly with me."

She struggled then, a part of her yearning for this more than she had for anything in her life. It was only the space of a couple of feet, an instant's walk, and she'd be in his arms. Even as the other side scorned her for these hopeless naïve thoughts. This was the real world. He knew what he was doing. His memory of their first flight was probably even better than hers, damn him. All of his memories, for that matter. He'd never forgotten any of them, had he? *Had he?*

That was enough to strengthen her resolve. Her delicate jaw set then, feeling the burn return to her blood even as she fought back tears. "I can't," Lois said firmly. She couldn't do this, not now. He didn't know, didn't even suspect why. And, in a way, it made it all the worse. "It's been a long time since that night; too long. I have two children now, and a fiancé. I'm Perry White's assistant. I have *responsibilities*; I can't just go off gallivanting around at all hours like I used to."

For a moment, just a moment, he'd almost had her. Superman had seen her take one step toward him, then abruptly turn away, venom in her voice. Her body language was as clear as a slammed door. "Lois," he began again, moving toward her.

Still not facing him, Lois said in a matter-of-fact tone, "No. Richard's a good man, and you've been gone a long time." A traitorous voice in her mind whispered, *Yeah, he's a good man, but are you in love with him? Or is he just comfortable and good with the kids?*

*Shut up, her anger snarled. At least Richard's **reliable**, and I do love him. I do.*

Who are you trying to convince?

Suddenly, she felt sick to her stomach. This had to end soon; this was getting too hard. As much trying to escape that final thought as end this, she turned her head to look at him, straight into those blue eyes she knew so well and not at all. It was a struggle to keep her voice as calm as it was as she murmured, "A very long time. And I've moved on. We've moved on. Besides, let's not make this more than it was. Why should you have felt beholden to me, or the rest of us for that matter?" With a shrug, she turned away, wanting to run as she moved to pick up her purse. "Besides, you're back now. If you still want the *Planet* to exclusively cover the stories, I'll see if I can work it out for one of our best to represent you. I'm not a beat reporter anymore." With that, she switched off the recorder and put it away.

Speechless, Superman watched her walk to the stairwell that led down to the top floor. She was opening the door before he realized that she really meant to simply leave without another word, and he found his voice again. Regretfully, he murmured, "Goodnight, Lois."

She hesitated for just a second, her hand on the open door, as that soft voice seemed to lacerate her heart. Not trusting herself to reply, Lois went into the dark little stairwell and shut the heavy door behind her.

No one was supposed to have access to the roof except the maintenance crew, but Lois had long ago finagled a key to the door below from one of them. She had been going up there, to smoke and to think, for a long time. Most of the staff wouldn't even have known where the roof-access stairwell was, much less that both doors were lead-lined.

But Lois did, and knowing that he couldn't see her, she slammed herself back against the door, biting her lip to stifle a sob. Why did he have to be so handsome, so kind, so attractive on so many levels? Why did this have to be so goddamned *hard*? She slid down to the ground, arms wrapped around herself tightly to try and hold in the pain that was gnawing at her.

Outside, all Superman saw was her walking away, apparently unconcerned. He sighed, and flew slowly back to the air shaft where he had left Clark's clothes, moving as if he carried the weight of the entire building on his shoulders.

Lois only allowed herself a few minutes in which to break down, then attempted to repair the damage as best she could with only a tissue and a compact mirror. When she thought she was at least presentable, she headed down.

Richard and Jimmy and the kids were already back, distributing the food across two desks. Jason looked up at her curiously, but Kala seemed confused. And there in the middle of them, his face rather paler than normal, was Clark, not so much eating a veggie burrito as staring it to death.

At the sight of him, she flinched slightly, the sharp edge of incredible hurt cutting her again. Oh, this was too much. It was a shot to the gut to see him again this quickly, even if Lois knew that it was the only thing he could do. *Couldn't he have just pulled one of his famous disappearing acts? That would have been at least merciful; now I have to sit here and pretend like nothing at all happened. Dammit, go away! This is the last thing I can handle right now. Go the hell back to Krypton, for all I care.*

But none of this left her lips as she strolled up to the gathering, only the swish of her skirt giving her away. Except for *him*, of course. She was sure he had known the minute she had entered the elevator, hearing the *ding* the moment the doors had closed. Clamping down on all emotion, focusing all of herself solidly on Richard, she walked up to them silently. Running a hand affectionately over Jason's hair as she came up behind him, she peered over his shoulder. The little boy looked up, grinning. In a voice that was eerily cheerful, she leaned forward to look through the feast, commenting, "Smells good. Good choices tonight, love." In truth, she had never felt less like eating in her life.

"Thanks, hon," Richard said with a smile, and Lois was perversely gratified to see Clark flinch a little. She called upon everything she'd learned in high-school drama classes, and sat down between the twins, teasing and joking with them. It took every ounce of Lois' will to pull off that performance, and even so, she felt it was a little flat. The kids seemed to notice, Kala more than Jason, but Richard and Jimmy were oblivious.

And Clark? He barely touched his food, answered when spoken to, but seemed very deep in thought. Which he was, his mind spinning fruitlessly around the same topic. *She won't even*

give me a chance to apologize. How on earth can I explain things to her? Why won't she even give me the benefit of the doubt? Just then, Richard said something that made the twins giggle in unison, and the happy domestic picture seared through Clark's heart like his own heat vision. *And why am I even trying? She's **happy**, she doesn't need me, why am I even thinking of intruding on the life she's built? Why can't I just let go? I've **lost** her.*

Of course he knew the answer already. *Because I'm still in love with her. Even if I can't have her, I need to try and make things right between us. I owe her an explanation. I **owe** her, and Ma and Pa raised me to pay my debts.*

That sounds so... It's true, though. I wonder if people would find it funny that an alien with superpowers was given his moral instruction by a couple of Kansas farmers?

As the twins split the last chicken tortilla, Richard and Lois started cleaning up. Clark started to help, but Richard insisted the dinner was their treat. He caught Lois by the trashcan and whispered, "Clark doesn't look so good, does he?"

"Maybe something disagreed with him," she murmured back, glancing at Clark over her shoulder. *Good.*

Everyone was moving a little more slowly with a full meal inside them, the twins yawning, when Lois paused by the desk and sighed heavily. "You know, my mind is fried," she began.

"The last seven years or so," Jimmy whispered.

"Shut up, Olsen," Lois said affectionately. "Anyway. We have all this information, and none of it is making sense. I was trying to clear my head up there, and I'm just too tired and too stuffed with data to do it yet. How about we all go home and sleep on it?" She was looking at Richard, and glanced pointedly at Clark.

Jimmy raised an eyebrow, but he didn't argue. "Sounds like a good idea," Richard said tentatively, and watched her curiously.

The four adults managed to shepherd the sleepy twins downstairs, the silent tension between Lois and Clark unnoticed by the others, and Jimmy caught a cab to his apartment. Clark turned to go back in, having left his coat, and Lois sighed with relief.

It was only a few blocks to the garage where Lois and Richard kept their cars, so they walked, each carrying one of the twins. After they got them both buckled into the back of Richard's car, Lois started to slide into the passenger seat, but Richard caught her hand. She looked up at him questioningly.

"Hey," he said softly. "I didn't want to call you on it in front of Jimmy and Clark, but Clark said you went up to the roof. I know you used to, when you were smoking, so I have to ask..."

She had an instant to realize how Clark had betrayed himself with that remark, and to be annoyed that Richard had appointed himself her personal stop-smoking watchdog. And then Lois smiled with deceptive sweetness, leaned forward, and kissed Richard deeply.

Surprised, he ran his hand into her hair, forgetting everything else for a moment as he always did when she was in his arms. The kiss lasted long enough that the twins would have been making retching noises if they were awake, long enough for the hair at the nape of Richard's neck to prickle.

Lois drew back with a wicked gleam in her eye and purred, "You tell me. Does it taste like I've been smoking?"

He grinned and got in the car.

Aftermath

Several hours later, Richard was still awake, but just barely. He propped himself up on one elbow in bed, looking at Lois' face in the moonlight. Her eyes seemed a little shadowed as she slept, but that could simply be the fact that she hadn't been sleeping well this past week. Lightly, Richard stroked her cheek, running his hand possessively over the curves of her shoulder and hip.

She hasn't been that passionate since ... I don't know if she's ever been that passionate, he reflected. He was usually the one who began things, though Lois had never been any less than responsive. And of late, they seemed to have settled into a comfortable routine, physical affection given tenderly but with little spontaneity. Part of any long-term relationship, he supposed. But tonight... *Now I know why she wanted to go home,* Richard thought with a chuckle. *Lois has never quit early on a story before. I guess I have to buy Mexican more often, if it has this affect.* Considering the slight soreness he felt in every muscle, he reconsidered that. *Not too often; I don't want to exhaust myself into an early grave.*

But oh, what a way to die, he thought as he snuggled down beside Lois, sliding one arm around her waist to pull her close. She murmured sleepily and leaned her head back onto his broad chest. Dozing, Richard let his mind drift back over the last few hours.

After they got the twins in bed, he had gone upstairs first, taking off his tie. Lois had followed him into the bedroom and stood in front of him while he unbuttoned his shirt, still smiling that strangely predatory smile. "Are you really all that tired, Richard?" she had asked huskily.

"Not really," he'd replied, leaning forward to kiss her again. It was just as searching this time, just as hungry, and when he drew back for breath, she had caught the front of his shirt and yanked it open.

One button spanged off the bedside lamp as she pushed him down onto the bed, sliding into his lap with that grace exclusive to women in desire. Lois had been aggressive, almost frightening in her intensity, driven by some unfathomable need. He surrendered control to her then, taken by surprise. Richard didn't question his good fortune, just gave all that she asked for.

And now of course he had the souvenirs to prove it. Her nails had scored his back, something he hadn't even felt at the time but which now stung slightly. And there was a darkening bruise on his shoulder where she had clenched her teeth in her ecstasy, stifling a cry that would've frightened the twins awake. Kala, especially - she had the sharpest hearing of any child Richard knew, which meant that his romantic encounters with her mother usually took place while the kids were out of the house.

Not tonight, though. He had the feeling Lois wouldn't have stopped unless the house had been on fire, and perhaps not even then. That had taken him totally by surprise, but then, even after five years, Lois still could surprise him fairly easily.

Richard was under no illusions regarding her, but in spite of college flings with pretty girls who liked pilots, he did have some experience with strong-willed and independent-minded females. He had been fascinated by flight all his life, and had spent high school summers volunteering at a facility that rescued and rehabilitated birds of prey. By the summer before he went into the Air Force, he had been allowed to handle some of the more predictable raptors, though always with the caveat that they were wild animals, inherently dangerous.

Lois reminded him of a particular falcon, an indescribably beautiful creature that was nonetheless a ruthless predator; newshawk was an apt term for the woman he loved. Like the

falcon, Lois never faltered in her hunting, never hesitated to swoop in for the kill; and like the falcon, she returned to his glove for reasons of her own, not because she was commanded to. Giving orders to the bird or the woman tended to get results that were only amusing after the stitches came out. Yes, Richard was perfectly aware that he did not own Lois. She might at any time simply fly away and never look back.

Which was why he kept that faint but insistent pressure on her. If Lois married him, Richard would have some assurance that she would stay. He wouldn't press too hard; you couldn't cage a hawk, a raptor that could never fly was not a raptor, and liable to turn viciously on the fool who caged it.

It was a surprise that he had won her at all. That same delicate, patient pressure had finally brought her to him, in spite of her views on office romance. Lois had once been heard to proclaim, "I never miss a deadline, I never let anyone else get to the scene first, and I *never* sleep with anyone I work with." That particular line had been quoted to Richard many times during his courtship, along with teasing about him trying to steal Superman's girlfriend. Lois had told him that it wasn't like that, but she was so touchy on the topic that he sometimes wondered.

Was it even worth asking, when the answer might not be one he wanted to hear? Superman had returned, and if Lois *had* been his girlfriend, Richard knew he was no competition for the Man of Steel. Honestly, no man on earth was. But if ever a woman was a match for him... Drifting to sleep, Richard snuggled a little closer to Lois, burying his face in her wavy night-black hair. Whatever else came, this woman was the most exciting, the most intelligent, the most provocative, the most determined he had ever met. The past five years with her had been a constant source of amazement for Richard, and even if she didn't belong to him like his college groupies had claimed they did, he loved her intensely.

Lois woke first the next morning, almost purring with pleasure as she lay curled in his strong arms, his warm skin against hers, his breath stirring her hair gently. In a moment, she'd roll over and those amazing blue eyes would open, that perfect mouth would curve into a smile just for her, and she could run her fingers through that thick black hair...

She gasped, sitting up suddenly. Richard murmured in his sleep, but he was far too tired to do more than that. Lois looked at him with her mouth hanging open, her eyes huge with mingled horror and guilt. *Oh. My. God. I cannot believe I did that ... was I thinking of **him** the whole time? God, no - I came in here meaning to prove to myself that I wanted Richard and only Richard. I couldn't...*

Get real, Lane, you even ripped his shirt open. Hello, who does that remind you of? Geesh!

There was absolutely no way she could face Richard. He probably didn't even realize how he had been used, intended to exorcise her feelings for another man and ultimately becoming a mere stand-in for him. But Lois was too ashamed of herself for having done it - for having *enjoyed* it so damn much - to look into his eyes and try to pretend that everything was normal.

*Normal? After **that**? Like he's not going to notice the difference between the last five years and last night. Right, Lane.* Just then, she caught sight of the reddish-brown spots on his side of the sheets and winced again. *Dammit. The last time I sank my nails into someone's back, he was a lot harder to hurt. I really hope that isn't as bad as it looks.*

She had to get out of here. Richard could handle getting the twins to school; Lois got up quietly and slunk into the shower, careful not to wake her fiancé or the kids.

At the office, Lois came through the door tense with guilt and the anticipation of a Perry White tirade. But the editor-in-chief only grinned at her and waved her by. *Okay, that was spooky, she thought, tiptoeing into her office. Why on earth isn't Perry shrieking at me for not working on ... Superman...?*

And there on her desk was the answer. All of the old files on the Man of Steel had been pulled and neatly stacked, some of her old notes scattered across the desk, and a typed list of potential questions laid atop them. Lois just stared for a moment, and then for the second time that morning she blushed so deeply with guilt that even her ears turned crimson.

Clark. He didn't really leave his coat, he came back to bail me out. After the way I treated him...

*Not that he didn't **deserve** it! Have you forgotten the twins?*

Still, while I was rutting with Richard to forget him, he was making sure I didn't get yelled at this morning. Just like old times. Oh, God, he still doesn't realize I know. Please, please don't let him try to be my best friend. I just can't take it. Not like this, not anymore.

Clark, meanwhile, had arrived at his customary early hour. He saw Lois come in, pale and unusually quiet. She didn't pause to speak to him, or anyone else for that matter, but he saw the look on her face when she walked into her office and knew she saw that he had covered for her.

Was it the right thing to do, in the end? Or did the interview questions in particular come too close to revealing himself? In the old days, when he had interceded between her and Perry, he could expect a grateful hug or at least a thank-you. Now, Lois was in her office, seeming tense as she rifled through her desk drawers. Clark watched her surreptitiously, wishing he could somehow discover what was going on in that raven-haired head. Not even his powers were equal to that task, however.

After a few minutes of fidgeting, Lois' frustration seemed to come to a head. Snatching up her purse, she headed for the elevators, walking right past Clark's desk without even glancing his way. He frowned as he watched her ascend. *Smoking again? I wonder if I should... No. Leave her alone. She always hated me nudging her about the cigarettes, in either guise. I suppose if it's just one or two a day it can't be too bad, especially since she's not smoking around the twins.*

Whatever's upsetting her now, I'll know about it soon enough anyway. Lois has never been one to suffer in silence when she could share the misery with everyone unfortunate enough to aggravate her.

This high, the breeze over Metropolis was almost clean. It was certainly refreshing coupled with the view of the skyline. Lois started to shake a cigarette out of the pack, then put it back. Six years ago she wouldn't have been able to resist the siren call of nicotine, but she'd quit for the twins. Mostly quit. There were some times when she really, really needed a smoke, but this morning it would only serve to remind her of times gone by.

Lois strolled to the parapet and looked down sixty-five stories at the traffic swarming like ants. The height didn't bother her, not anymore; back before the giant globe had been put up, when there was still a helipad up here, she'd fallen most of that distance...

And that brought to mind memories she'd rather not think about. Lois leaned into the breeze, letting it comb through her hair and blow the cobwebs from her mind. Almost thirty minutes later, she finally felt as though she could face life again. And as she was walking back

to the stairwell, a thought occurred to her. *I really don't want Richard to know the interview happened last night. I've been up here almost as long as I was then; if I go downstairs and type it up, everyone will assume it happened this morning. Perfect.*

No one bothered her when she went back downstairs, a determined look in her eyes and a tape recorder in her hand. Lois closeted herself in her office, typing up the interview, tweaking a few things to make it less obviously a personal confrontation. She was so focused that she didn't even see Richard come in, exchanging typically friendly greetings with everyone he met, and head for her office.

Lois heard the door open, but didn't glance up. Whoever it was would soon realize she was busy ... and then Richard came up behind her and bent down to kiss the back of her neck.

Every nerve seemed to wake simultaneously, a shiver running down her spine; that was one particularly sensitive area, as another man years before had been delighted to discover...

Kal-El, for that was the name she had begun to call him, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her shoulder, then the back of her neck. Still sleepy from the night before until that moment, Lois woke with a shiver and a soft moan as the touch of his lips seemed to burn itself into her memory, arching her back against him...

Lois let the shiver become a shudder, and shook her head to get those memories out of it. "Richard," she hissed, shoulders tensing, "don't *ever* do that at the office again."

"Whoa, sorry," he murmured, but she heard that faint pride in his voice and could have smacked him. As it was, she swiveled around and turned her hazel glare on him until he looked away. Even his expression, part wonder, part surprise, and part overwhelming satisfaction, was too familiar.

Stop thinking about the past, Lois told herself sternly. "You're forgiven, flyboy," she said to Richard, smiling.

He returned the grin and bent to kiss her, almost chastely this time. As if to remind herself exactly who she was kissing, Lois touched his shoulder lightly as their lips met. An instant later, Richard flinched away, looking chagrined.

"Are you okay?" Lois asked, worried.

Richard actually blushed a little. "You mean you don't remember?" At her blank look, he continued, "Let's just say I might need a tetanus shot."

Of course, she remembered then, and her own face colored guiltily. "Richard, I..."

"I'm not complaining," he said quickly. "You're welcome to have your wicked way with me anytime, Miss Lane."

"Shut up, White," she muttered, playing along, guilt gnawing at her. "Quit teasing and get out of here before I have to ravish you in a closet."

Backing toward the door, he said playfully, "I'm trying to decide if that would be a bad thing or not."

Lois shot him another cool glance before turning back to her work. Time to ice this down. "Considering that the only closet on this floor has a life-sized portrait of your uncle on the wall, I'd say it's a very bad thing."

"When you put it that way..." The next thing Lois heard was the door closing behind him.

Richard headed back to his own office with an extra spring in his step, and Clark watched him go by with a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but he'd seen Lois jump and wondered what had startled her. Now he wished he didn't have super-hearing.

So that's why she wanted to hurry home last night. She sees me, and immediately she wants him. No matter how you look at it, that can't be good. The thought of Richard and Lois, together... Clark had only felt this miserable when he was suffering from kryptonite radiation.

Struggling to reason with his feelings, Clark reminded himself that Lois hadn't exactly been a virgin when they'd met. She had led the first dance between them, that night in the Fortress, her greater experience making her the teacher. Although by the end of the night, he proved a very quick student indeed...

The lovers she'd had before him didn't matter, though. For one, he never had to see or think about them. For another, Clark couldn't have expected her to remain chastely waiting for her soul mate to appear. His own celibacy had been as much a matter of necessity as choice. He did not trust his great strength in such a situation, had even been nervous after the loss of his powers...

Lois' warm smile spoke of mysteries his to discover. She caught his hands and pulled him close, erasing his hesitancy with a kiss that stole his breath. "You won't hurt me," she murmured, and her confidence in him was perfect, her skin so smooth and warm...

Clark pulled his mind back to work with an effort, but his thoughts of Lois could not be entirely banished. The thought of Richard bothered him in a way those long-ago lovers of hers did not; Richard was *here*, under his gaze every day, and scenes like the one he'd just witnessed could not be too uncommon. Clark would be reminded all too often that Richard knew Lois better than he did: the taste of her lips; her soft, breathy gasps and murmurs; even the indescribable wonder of her hazel eyes, widening at the penultimate moment. This could very quickly become intolerable...

Lois typed in the very last line, let the spellchecker run, and then swiveled her chair around to look out the window while her article printed. The sky was unusually clear for Metropolis, just a few skinny white clouds far away, and her mind began to drift backward in time again.

It seemed unreal that this was happening, after so long imagining. But this was no dream. He was here, truly here in her arms, not even a breath from her. The feel of his skin pressed to hers, with no barriers, so warm, her fingers tracing the lines of muscle across his back, the softness of that dark hair against her cheek. The feel of his quick breath ruffling the hair at her temple. No dream, real. As real as the words he had spoken to his father. And he was hers.

Although still cautious, it seemed he had understood that she trusted him after she had whispered it to him. There was only the vaguest chill in the air as he gently ran the back of his hand over her cheek, causing her to shiver in reaction. As she looked up at him with darkened eyes, that blue that had held her ever since they had first locked eyes, was full of emotions she had never expected to see. "I won't break, I promise. You won't hurt me, Kal-El."

Little did either one of them know it, but at that moment they were thinking of exactly the same thing, the same moment, the same breathless kiss and what came after it. He remembered kissing the hollow of her throat, even as she remembered curling her leg over his hip while he did so. And after that...

Lois felt eyes on her in the present, drawing her out of her intense reverie in spite herself, and turned to look out into the bullpen. She caught Clark's eyes, and blue and hazel were both haunted. For a moment, each believed the other could read their recent thoughts, and it was

almost as if there were no secrets between them at all...

"Lane! Kent!" Perry's bellow cut through the fog of memories past, and both reporters hurried to his office, unable to look each other in the eyes. The editor-in-chief was in one of his impatient moods, and started barking before they even sat down in his office.

"Lois, are you going to work on the Superman story or not..." Perry trailed off as she tossed several typed sheets onto his desk. He read, grinning wider and wider, and finally slapped the interview onto his desk with unmistakable glee. "Wonderful! I knew you could do it, Lois, even when no one else could! Remarkable!"

"Thanks, Chief," she said quietly, eyes lowered, trying to keep from glancing at Clark. Even the air was stifling and she could feel the heat in her cheeks, all too aware that he was only a foot away. If he happened to read the look on her face correctly ... that was trouble she didn't want.

"Got your dress picked out for the Pulitzer?" Perry asked, and Lois only nodded. At this moment, the last thing on her mind was that. Frowning at her a little, he turned to Kent. "What about the blackout, Kent? You got anything on that?"

Clark quickly forced himself to concentrate. "Um, it all started at the Vanderworth estate, which is tied up in probate right now. The widow Vanderworth had at least three different wills, and now they're all sealed documents being used as evidence. *Something* happened there; there's structural damage to the basement, but everyone is being very close-mouthed. I've got Jimmy working on a source at the Clerk of Records who might be able to cut through the red tape and tell us who owns it while the relatives fight about the will."

"Jimmy?" Perry said, then he quickly crossed to the door, flung it open, and roared, "Olsen!"

Jimmy hurried in, carrying a stack of photographs behind his back.

"What's this about you working the blackout when I assigned you to Superman photos? When did you become Kent's flunky?"

Paling until his freckles stood out, Jimmy just said, "Mr. Kent's not the person to, um, court this source, Mr. White. She's closer to my age."

"She?"

"Works in the Records department, and we know she filed the documents," Jimmy said. "Dinner and drinks at Chez Chantel in exchange for copies of the wills being probated. It's sort of a bet she has with someone else that works there." Glancing at Clark, he added, "Mr. Kent's paying for it, though."

"And renting your suit," Clark muttered.

Chez Chantel? Just mentioning the restaurant's name caught her attention. Realizing what they were discussing, a memory not quite so distracting came to her mind. Lois was hard put not to smile slightly as she continued to avert her gaze, staring at the wall, thinking, *This from the man who took me and my eight-hundred-dollar evening gown out for burgers. Riiiiight. Think you took the clueless nerd act a little far that time.*

"Well, that's lovely," Perry said. "And pictures of Superman? You got any of those? Better than that blur you were showing me Monday."

"I do have these," Jimmy said modestly, laying the eight-by-tens on Perry's desk. Clark and Lois both bent forward to look.

The photos showed Superman flying with a dark-haired woman, pretty in a brittle way. In the best one, the upturned faces of the crowd were clear in the foreground, and the woman's car was visible resting in Centennial Square in the background.

Perry just grinned at Jimmy. Clark winced; the woman ("*Call me Katherine,*" *she'd said breathlessly*) had insisted she was hurt and begged to be taken to the hospital. But once there, she was strangely cured and fishing for a date. It wasn't the first time a woman had tried to ensnare him, although her screams were genuine when she discovered the brakes wouldn't work.

And Lois sneered. "When was this? I don't recall hearing about this rescue."

"That was last night, Miss Lane," Jimmy said. "The lady's brakes were out and she almost drove into one of those sidewalk cafés before Superman came and saved her."

"Oh, really?" Lois said drolly. A second glance didn't improve her opinion. "Some lady. From what I heard on the wire this morning, the Metropolitan Museum was robbed around the same time Superman was saving this hooker. Fine use of his precious time there."

"Never noticed your eyes were so green, Lane," Perry said gruffly, making Lois whip her head around and glare at him.

Ignoring Jimmy and Clark chuckling, Lois spat vindictively, "I had better things to do last night, Perry, as your nephew well knows." And had the satisfaction of seeing Clark wince and look pale. *But I am so not mentioning anything else that happened last night.*

"Lois, can it," Perry said warningly.

She rolled her eyes at him. *Well, then, stay out of it, old man.* "Anyway, it may be of interest to Superman to know that the only thing stolen in the museum robbery was a meteorite. From Addis Ababa."

Clark had to stifle a gasp of surprise, which Lois sadistically enjoyed. "You mean someone's stolen what might be kryptonite?" he said faintly.

"Who wants to bet it's Luthor?" Jimmy said.

Clark sat forward suddenly. "Lex Luthor's in prison ... isn't he?"

Lois turned that glare on him next. "What's wrong, Kent, they don't have newspapers in Peru? Or was it Tibet? Some country with no telephones, anyway."

"Lois," Perry said incredulously. "Something you want to get off your mind?"

"No, Chief," she replied sweetly, knowing that she had gotten her point across as Clark looked away.

"Then tone it down, will you? If it's the wrong time of the month or something..."

"Leave it, Perry," she shot back. "Being your assistant, I don't want to know I'd be like without Midol and Stolichnaya. And you also have to thank Jason and Kala for being so fond of you. If not for that, you probably wouldn't survive."

Meanwhile, Jimmy was filling Clark in. "Luthor blamed everything after his escape on the Kryptonian villains."

"But he killed that transit cop," Clark said. "And California, the missiles... Superman put him in prison for a reason."

"Yeah, but Luthor's appeals lawyers blamed everything on that guy Otis. He's the one who led the transit cop onto the tracks, he's the one who reprogrammed the missiles, supposedly he's the one who did *everything*. And he was conveniently dead by that time the appeal went in. The state called Superman as a witness, but he wasn't here, and the lawyers got Lex released because there was no 'proof' Lex had done anything. How bad do you think that pisses Superman off?"

"A lot," Clark replied. *Luthor's free. I'm going to have to look out for him as well. Wonderful.*

"Yeah, Lois tried to fight it, but they didn't even call her as a witness - she got knocked in

the head fighting with the Kryptonians and went to see a couple of doctors. Lex's people subpoenaed her medical records and showed that she was being treated for amnesia shortly after those events, and that threw her whole testimony into doubt."

"Which pisses off Lois Lane a lot, too," she put in quickly. Even now, it infuriated her to no end. "Anyway, Perry, someone should check into Luthor. With Superman back, you know he isn't going to just slink off into retirement."

"You're not gonna be the one who does," Perry warned. "You've got history with Luthor, and he'd love to kill you almost as much as Superman."

Jimmy snickered. "Um, Chief, you might wanna reword that. It sounds like you're saying Superman would want to kill her too."

Clark and Lois avoided each other's eyes, Lois' back stiffening, but Perry just chuckled. "Which reminds me, we're all going to the Pulitzer on Friday night."

Hazel eyes went wide at that statement, going from her editor to her former partner and back. Oh, no. *No, no way. He can't do this to me. Not now. You've got to be kidding me!*

"What?" Lois said aloud, attempting to sound more blasé than she actually felt. "Chief ... I don't even know if I want to accept the thing. After all, the article I wrote is titled 'Why the World Doesn't Need Superman,' and every paper in the country is headlining 'Welcome Back.' Cat Grant even said it the other night - 'Superman is back in all our lives, and we sure needed him.' I mean, Perry..."

"Lois, Pulitzers are like Oscars," the editor-in-chief replied. "After the open bar at the acceptance party, no one's going to remember what you won it for. All that's important is that you got one."

"Perry..."

"You're going, Lane, if I have to bribe your kids with candy to get you there."

"Guess I'd better rent a tux," Jimmy muttered.

"Um, Mr. White," Clark began. "I really don't think..."

"Good, don't," Perry said. "No arguments. Show support for Lois; I've got my best team back, and I want to present a united front to those scandal-mongers at the Star."

Helplessly, he looked at her. Could he really stand to see Lois accept a Pulitzer - the award she'd hungered for since high school - for an article about how she no longer needed him? Especially when the evidence was all around them that she'd taken her own advice and moved on. Her gaze only skittered away.

Perry leaned forward, glaring at them both. "You do not have a choice, people. You're both staying here Friday until it's time to leave for the ceremony, too, so you can't conveniently get stuck in traffic, Kent." Lois couldn't help giving Clark a snarky look at that; now that she knew *why* he kept missing so many important events that Superman just happened to arrive for. Perry continued, looking at both of them now, "And don't try calling in sick. I'll drag you both out of the city hospital in wheelchairs and tow you behind the taxi to the Pulitzer if I have to."

Neither Clark nor Lois could defy him after that; when Perry's mind was set he was a bulldog, and no one in recorded history had pried him off of something he was truly determined to have. In another bit of synchronicity, the same thought flashed through both reporters' minds at the same instant: *Just how on earth am I going to survive this?*

Mother Knows Best

It felt rather strange to be leaving the office at midday, but even Perry had insisted that she needed a break. It wasn't exactly something she could dispute, having felt under siege almost constantly of late. And wonder of wonders, it was Perry who caught her on her way out the door.

Quietly, Perry said, "Remember, Lois, you're just taking the kids to the museum. Don't get into a car chase, don't eat anything that'll make you sick, don't catch the flu, don't try to interview any crooks, and if the museum gets robbed again, *don't* get taken hostage. You are not gonna miss the Pulitzer tomorrow."

Lois just rolled her eyes. Times like this, his worry was endearing. "Yes, Mother."

Perry glared at her, but it was all too clear that his bluster masked a strong affection for this headstrong young woman who was almost a niece to him. "Tell Elinore I said hello while you're at it, Lane."

"I will, if I can be heard over the kids telling her how much they miss Nana," she said.

"See you tomorrow, Lois."

Sighing, she replied, "Message received. Yes, Perry, I'll be here. With the dress and all accoutrements."

On the way to the elevators, adjusting her purse strap and honestly relieved to be getting away, she ran into Clark. Literally. He stepped out from the side door leading to maintenance at the same moment she left the office, moving just a bit too quickly. It was the absolute last thing she needed on top of all the stress since the interview.

"Gosh, sorry, Lois," he stammered, reaching for her shoulder to steady her.

Lois jerked away, her irritation rising anew. How could he be so careless, especially being who he was? He hadn't even checked to see if anyone was in sight first! Now that she knew his true identity, the signs seemed obvious, and it infuriated Lois that she had been so blind for so long.

"You really ought to be more careful," she snapped, releasing the frustration of the past several days on Clark. *Why can't I avoid him for more than an hour at a time? He was gone all the time before, always found some excuse. Even claiming to be locked in the janitor's closet. What makes it all so different now?* "I mean, look where you're going! It's not as if you can't see, Clark! God!"

Clark flinched. He'd always known that Lois used the sharp side of her tongue in self-defense, and this was more proof that something in her life was hurting her, something she couldn't escape. He only hoped it wasn't him ... either persona. But either way, it wounded him to hear the pain beneath her anger.

"I really am sorry, Lois," he said more softly, his voice dropping down almost to Superman's register as he strove to make his sincerity clear.

Just that subtle shift, so slight that no one else would have even noticed... Lois halted, having to pause for breath before turning a terribly hurt and haunted look on him that went through him like a knife. "It's too bad you couldn't have said that five years ago," Lois said tautly, and swept away to the elevators to escape him.

Clark was frozen, watching her. All this time, he had worried about how she felt about Superman - not that her anger wasn't justified. Now he began to realize that it wasn't only Superman drawing her ire. He hadn't thought about her reaction to Clark leaving ... he had always thought that Lois had a sisterly fondness for him in that guise, nothing more. And yet, to have one's partner, one's friend, sometimes one's confidant simply leave without a word,

postcards or no postcards, certainly justified a little more of Lois' behavior toward him the last two weeks.

His mind churning, Clark went quietly back to his desk, hoping that no one would notice how dispirited he suddenly was. Perhaps it was best if he got out of the office...

After finally convincing Jason that the thirty-foot-tall robotic Tyrannosaurus would still be there after lunch, Lois and Ella managed to herd the twins down to the museum café. Choosing something for lunch wasn't as daunting as they had expected; the Metropolis Museum of Natural History carried a wider variety of foods than most. Both kids were disappointed, however, that they couldn't have astronaut ice cream, and had to settle for dehydrated cinnamon apples.

"Where to next?" Ella asked as she finished her salad.

"Dinosaurs!" Jason said happily after gulping down his mouthful of chicken wrapped in a corn tortilla.

Kala sighed heavily, rolling her eyes in a way familiar to both Lane women. "Boys are so dumb. Mommy, why are boys so weird?"

"Just 'cause they don't have any meerkats," Jason began, but Lois' arched eyebrow silenced him quickly.

"They have a planetarium," Ella said quietly.

Both twins perked up. "What's a planetarium?" they chorused.

"It's a room with a special machine like a movie projector, only it projects stars and planets instead of movies," Ella told them, not noticing how Lois paled. "The roof is round, so they can make it look just like the night sky. Or at least, how the night sky would look without smog."

Kala and Jason looked at each other for a moment. In spite of their bickering, they did tend to consult each other when making decisions. "Sounds okay," Jason said with a shrug.

"Anything but dinosaurs," his sister replied.

It was Jason's turn to roll his eyes. Although any sarcastic expression failed when he glanced over at Lois. "Mommy, are you okay?"

Lois had turned away as this discussion had worn on, counting under her breath. *Just a bout of nausea, nothing more*, she told herself. God really did have a sadistic sense of humor lately. *Dammit, Mom, of all the things...* Hearing his voice, and the worry there, she looked over with a smile she hardly felt. "I'm alright, sweetheart. I guess my salad didn't agree with me very much. Ready to go see the thunder-lizards?"

"Yeah!" he said, all enthusiasm returning instantly. Grinning, he caught her hand and started pulling her out of the restaurant, Lois stumbling along with him, unable to stop herself from laughing.

From behind them, as Ella took Kala's hand and strolled, the little girl asked curiously, "How can you get sick off of salad?"

"Your Mommy just has a delicate stomach," Ella said, curious herself.

"She ate two pieces of chicken last night and that didn't make her sick," Kala replied.

"Chicken is very good for sickly people," Ella told her. "That's why you eat chicken soup when you have a cold."

Kala nodded wisely. "Jason should eat a lot more chicken, then. He's sick in the head."

Ella couldn't help chuckling. "That isn't nice, Kala. While your brother's mesmerized by the dinosaurs, do you want to go look at the artifacts they've pulled out of Hob's Bay?"

The little girl thought that over. "Do they have any pirate stuff? Swords an' doubloons an' stuff?"

"Maybe," Ella told her. "We'd have to look to find out."

"Anything's better than dinosaurs again," Kala finally said, and after getting Lois' attention to point to the sign for the maritime exhibit, they hurried off to explore.

Everywhere Clark turned in the blackout investigation was somehow a dead end. That only intensified his determination to get to the bottom of it, however. The Kents had instilled in him a deep desire to finish anything he began, and that doggedness served him well in his chosen career.

After spending an afternoon in the Public Records department, however, even his eyes were blurring. Some information he couldn't get, because of the pending court case (and even the names of plaintiff and defendant were sealed at that point, most unusual), but what he had been able to uncover seemed to show that the Vanderworths were very wealthy indeed. They had also sheltered their fortunes by keeping most of their assets in corporations, which were in turn owned by other corporations, and the same names kept cropping up on the boards of those companies. The late Gertrude Vanderworth had replaced her husband as president on most of them, and five individuals whom Clark had painstakingly learned were her doctors and lawyers filled the other chairs. It all looked like the typical financial finagling of the rich, nothing particularly interesting.

However, he'd overflowed the estate on his lunch break, and his x-ray vision had clearly showed the structural damage Lois had noted when she visited. It looked strangely familiar somehow, but Clark couldn't place it. The destruction seemed most like a few explosions he'd seen, though different, less concentrated. It was very puzzling indeed, and strongly suggested a link between whatever had happened in the basement and the EMP.

His run-in with Lois on his way back from the flight had unsettled him badly enough that he had made the trip to the records department mostly to escape, and now he was back in the office again. Clark's mind felt full of disconnected bits of information, and he knew from experience that prodding at it wouldn't help much. What he needed was a break from this case, a change in perspective. Sometimes even a brief walk would jog his mind enough.

Thinking along those lines, Clark headed down to the break room, a dingy linoleum-tiled room where the scent of over-boiled coffee had seeped into the very walls. The bulletin board was covered with the usual notices: free kittens, furniture for sale, solicitations for various charities, and a notice about the office blood drive. Clark scanned over them anyway in the hopes that someone would be subletting an apartment in the area, but had no luck.

That was about as much break as Clark could stand with the EMP story seething in his brain. He turned to leave, and saw Ron Troupe walking in. "Hey, Kent, long time no see!" Ron said warmly, shaking his hand firmly. "Man, we missed you! Perry been keeping you chained to your desk or something?"

"No, things have just been a little, you know, hectic," Clark told him. "How is Lucy?"

"Delightful, as always," Ron said with a grin. He had married the younger Lane, and in days gone by, he and Lucy and Clark and Lois had often met for dinner after work. It wasn't quite double-dating, but Clark was startled to realize that he deeply missed Lucy's sunny charm and Ron's sincere friendship. *I left behind a whole lot more than I thought.*

"So, how's life over there in Metro? Has Mount Lane erupted and rained fire on anyone yet today?" Ron asked wryly.

"Um, Ron, Lois is under a lot of stress right now..."

The handsome black man dropped his voice a little. "Honestly, I think it was that plane crash. Or almost-crash. Did you know, she actually unbuckled her seatbelt to help that girl from Virgin Air, Bobbie-Faye? Our Lo got Bobbie buckled back in, but when the secondary boosters kicked in she was still unbelted. During most of it, Lois was getting slammed around inside the plane, bouncing off the ceiling and stuff."

Clark's eyes widened in horror. While he had been catching the plane, he'd assumed Lois was in the relative safety of a seat. To think of her being flung around the cabin while the plane spun and rolled... "No, I didn't know. She didn't say anything when she got back, just went right to business."

He shook his head in amazement. "She's one tough lady, that Lois. But anyway, I think she might have hit her head a little too hard. Ever since that day, she's been very short-tempered - more than usual. And she was never this mean before - she doesn't quite hunt people down to yell at, but you'd better not screw up in front of her. I worry about her sometimes."

"Me, too," Clark said quietly. He knew now that Lois' personality change wasn't caused by some head injury; it was the result of a heart-injury, of seeing him back so suddenly, both Clark and Superman.

"Could you kind of keep an eye out for her?" Ron asked. "I mean, you two have always been really close. If something was wrong, she wouldn't tell Lucy - can't worry the kid sister. And Richard, well, he's a good guy, but he doesn't know Lois like you do."

Clark had to glance away briefly. It hurt to be reminded of how close he and Lois had been, before, but it was a strangely pleasant kind of hurt. They had had an almost magnetic attraction when he was Superman, but as Clark their relationship had been very deep and caring, in spite of its rocky beginnings. He missed both sides of her - the bossy, temperamental, protective Lois that Clark knew, and the wide-eyed romantic that only Superman had seen. "Of course, Ron," he said. "You know I'll always watch out for Lois."

"Good man," Ron said, smacking his shoulder affectionately. "Look, we're still in the same house. Drop by for dinner some time; you don't have to call or anything."

"Thanks, Ron," Clark said, smiling. "Oh, hey, speaking of houses - do you know of any apartments for rent nearby? Reasonable?"

"Reasonable? In Metropolis?" Ron chuckled. "Hell, even Lois sold hers."

Clark winced. One more memory gone - he'd never land on that balcony again and see her turning to look at him with wonder in her eyes. "Wow. Where is she living these days?"

"On the river out in Bakerline," Ron told him. "Nice place - they have a dock for Richard's plane and everything. Of course, Lois has been living in terror that the twins will somehow drown themselves. I never thought of her as a hysterically overprotective mom before, but knowing those kids of hers..."

Clark had to smile faintly. "Godzilla always swims away after he's done stomping Tokyo, doesn't he? Maybe she's justified."

"Ah, so you've noticed Jason's career plans," Ron chuckled. "And I see you're still defending Lois. That woman just doesn't know ... nevermind. Listen, I gotta get some coffee and get back to work, but don't be a stranger, okay?"

"I won't," Clark said, and headed back to his desk. The conversation with Ron hadn't helped the Vanderworth investigation at all, but at least Clark knew that he was the cause of Lois' problems, which explained her behavior to him. What he needed now was advice.

In the past, he'd often gone to the Fortress and consulted Jor-El. But he had not been back since his return, and didn't plan to visit any time soon. Jor-El had been very displeased with his decision six years ago, and he would be even less happy to hear that his son was still obsessing over the same woman who had caused him all those problems.

*My father tried to plan for every possibility, but I don't think he really understood what it meant that I would be raised by humans, raised **as** a human. No, I don't need to talk to Jor-El about this; I need Ma. If anyone can help me patch things up with Lois, she can. I'm overdue for our weekly dinner anyway...*

In the end, Lois couldn't escape the planetarium. She sat beside Kala, Ella flanking Jason on the other side, and tried to calm her queasy stomach as the darkened room and the projector created the illusion of stars dancing overhead. It didn't help her nerves any to realize that both twins were utterly rapt. They had never been both conscious and completely quiet for half an hour before, and when Lois glanced at Kala to see if her daughter was awake, she saw the whole glorious Milky Way reflected in Kala's wide eyes.

It was even worse after the program ended, when their guide called for questions. Both twins raised their hands immediately, but it was Kala whom the man pointed at. "Can you show us the planet Superman went to?" she asked excitedly.

Lois slid down in her chair, the salad rebelling. To hear it said aloud by her own daughter...

Oh dear God. How did they learn about him already? That question sounded so naïve the moment she thought it. Although she had known full well that the news was out, had been for almost a week, hearing that name on her child's lips was like a resounding slap. He had been on every medium since his return; none of it his idea, she was sure, but there none the less. How long did she think it would escape their notice, no matter how much she monitored their television viewing? They were in school, for God's sake.

Kids talk; it's no different now than it was before, Lois tried to comfort herself, forcibly ignoring the ice in her blood. And there's nothing they love more than a hero. Someone who can do fantastic things. Someone they think they can look up to. So they know his name and a bit about him. Breathe, Lane. The kids don't know. They didn't guess. No one else on the earth knows; how could they possibly?

The docent smiled. "Very good question," he said. "Krypton is very far away, so it's hard to see, but I can show you where it with the laser pointer - right there, between this star and this bright one." The twins watched the circling red dot of the pointer as if fixing the planet's position in the night sky. The man continued in pleased tones, "You're the first one to ask, and I'm glad to see you keep up with the news."

"Mommy *is* the news," Jason replied, and the crowd chuckled. Lois slunk even further down in the seat, letting her long wavy hair fall forward over her face. *Please don't let anyone ask their name, or recognize me. That's all I need, a gossip-page headline in the Star: Lois Lane's Kids Curious about Krypton - Wonder Why? God help me.*

*You knew you should've avoided the planetarium, Lane, why are you complaining now? How could they **not** wonder about their Daddy's home planet?*

*Shut up, Lois told herself firmly. He's not their Daddy, they don't even **know** him. He doesn't even know they're his. And he won't, either - my kids don't need a father who would abandon them for six years without even saying goodbye to me.*

You can't abandon what you don't know exists...

He abandoned me! Lois yelled in the confines of her own mind, momentarily drowning out both the General's Daughter and the Romantic voices in her mind. Question and answer time was over without the twins having volunteered any more incriminating information, thank God, and the museum was closing soon. Lois and Ella managed to get them into the car with a minimum of fuss, other than the children worrying about Lois' upset tummy.

Ella kept glancing at Lois with cool interest. Something was definitely up with her eldest, and she meant to get to the bottom of it.

After work, Clark called Martha to let her know he was coming, then changed into his Superman uniform and flew high and fast to Smallville. He dropped down into the middle of the cornfield quicker than any human eye could follow, and changed back into his regular clothes.

"Perfect timing," Ma told him with a smile, handing him a paring knife and some potatoes. "By the time you get those peeled, boiled, and mashed, the roast should be done."

Clark inhaled deeply, and sighed contentedly. "Smells like rosemary and red wine. Ma, you're the best cook ever."

"Well, maybe not *ever*," she said with amusement. "It doesn't take a genius to figure out that red meat and red wine go well together. Don't touch that pie on the windowsill, Clark."

She'd caught him eyeing it, and he smiled. The two of them worked easily together in the kitchen from long practice. Clark had learned to cook fairly young, following the typical Kent family division of labor: everyone eats, so everyone should cook.

It wasn't long before they were sitting down to a delectable meal, just the two of them, just like old times. Clark had forgotten how much he needed this, as well, the glad silence of two people who know each other better than words can express, and who incidentally have their mouths full of delicious food they'd prepared together. The roast was melt-in-your-mouth tender, the mashed potatoes creamy with just a hint of garlic, and the corn was from their own fields, fresh and flavorful. You just couldn't get a meal like in the city.

Ma chuckled at him. "Son, you look like you've been living on sawdust and just had your first real meal."

"Some of the hamburgers in Metropolis taste like sawdust," he replied.

"Hmmp. Feedlot cows full of antibiotics and God knows what else. That beef there is from Henderson. I can drive up the road and see what they're eating, so I know good old-fashioned grass-fed beef is tastiest."

Clark sat back in his chair, feeling absolutely content for the first time since his return. Ma brought in the pie, giving him a slice with ice cream on top, and shattered that contentment when she asked, "So what's been bothering you, son?"

His pleased smile fell as he remembered Lois and all the troubles he had. "Everything," he sighed, poking at the pie with the tines of his fork.

"Mm-hm. And would everything happen to have dark hair and a tape recorder?"

Clark glanced up suspiciously. "Are you sure you're not psychic?"

Martha Kent smiled at her only child. "I'm your mother. They tell you mother knows best, but they should tell you mother knows everything. It only stands to reason, Clark. You called me all of a sudden, flew out here in a hurry, and you haven't mentioned her or work once. So tell me what happened - and eat that pie, don't play with it."

"Yes, Ma," he replied, and ate the first forkful. Flaky crust, crisp apples, and ice cream sweetly melting ... how could anyone be upset with something that delicious on their palate?

Gradually Clark explained the situation to Martha - Lois' reactions to the first sight of him, her anger at both personas, and the way she had moved on with her life. "So now I'm working for her, and she hates me," he concluded. "And she's completely in love with this guy Richard, and she has his children, but I'm still in love with her."

"Does she know you love her?" Ma asked gently. "Either of you?"

Clark opened his mouth to say *Of course*, and stopped. Did she? "I ... I don't know. I mean, I think she knew that Clark ... but she never took me seriously. But Superman, she knew, but she ... things happened, the Kryptonians, and it hurt her to remember, so I ... I made her forget."

"You made her forget?"

"It was a power I didn't know I had. I made her forget finding out who I was, and telling me she loved me, and everything that happened ... after."

One silver eyebrow crept up. *That* was a loaded pause if ever Martha Clark Kent had heard one. She kept her questioning gaze on her son until he looked away, faint roses blooming in his cheeks. "I see," she said quietly.

Clark glanced back at her. For a moment, he felt like a child again, dreadfully afraid that he'd disappointed his mother. He'd been raised with a higher moral standard, and to have Martha know that... "I intended, you know, to marry her ... it wasn't supposed to be a one-time thing, it was supposed to be forever... I even gave up my powers because Jor-El said that was the only way to be with her..."

Martha folded her napkin decisively. "Clark, you know I'd never want to speak ill of your birth parents. But you have to remember that what you know as Jor-El is just a recording. The man doesn't know you, not really. He made plans for a baby, one he probably thought would grow up to be just like him. But if you're like anyone, it's Jonathan."

Clark blinked. After all these years, that comparison could still touch him, a tiny wound of grief that his father hadn't seen the man he grew up to be, and what an honor it was to hear that he was so much Jonathan's son.

Martha wasn't finished, though. "So Lois found out who you are, and you two were in love, and all of this happened while the Kryptonians were trashing the White House? And after you got your powers back and defeated them, you erased Lois' memories of everything?"

It sounded so ... irresponsible when she said it like that. "Yes."

Martha looked at her son for a long moment. Circumstances meant that he knew even less about women than most men, the majority of whom were clueless about the feminine mind. "Clark ... you may have erased the memories, but I doubt you erased the feelings. And then you left her without saying goodbye. The goodbye is more important than the fact that you left."

"I couldn't ... I wouldn't have been able to leave, if I'd spoken to her one more time. And if she'd kept me from going, I think I would've resented that eventually."

"Oh, Clark," Martha sighed. "My boy. Life is harder for you, isn't it, in spite of all the things you can do?"

"It isn't easy for me, being who I am, keeping secrets," he replied sadly. "Trying to balance my mission against my heart."

"I could smack that Jor-El for telling you that you couldn't have both," Martha said a trifle sharply. "He was married, wasn't he? He had a wife, a partner, a lover - how dare he tell you different?"

"He wanted me to be a savior..."

"But you're a man first," Martha argued. "And my son. I want you to be happy, I want you to be able to have a life, not just a cause."

Clark just sighed. "But is it possible for me to have both?"

"I don't see why not," Martha replied. "It's going to take a very special woman, though, and she'll have to know the whole truth. Speaking of which, are you sure this Lois is the right one? Maybe that's why things are so difficult with her, maybe it isn't meant to be."

His incredulous look was all the answer she really needed. "Ma - she's the *only* one."

She couldn't help but smile. *Oh, you poor boy - you've fallen hard for her, haven't you?* "Well then, are you absolutely sure she's happy with this other man?"

"She seems to be," Clark began, then thought about it. *Love you* instead of *I love you, too*, the way she'd snapped at Richard about the phone, a few other little things. "I'm not sure - I think she was more in love with me. But I can't just go steal her back - that isn't fair to Richard."

"No woman in these times would let you steal her without her consent," Martha told him. "But no, you can't just go wooing someone else's love. First you have to let her get over being angry at you. *Both* of you."

"How do I convince her to forgive me?"

"You can't," Martha said. "She will or she won't, in her own time. And if you try begging for forgiveness, you'll just make her angrier."

"I have to be around her every day - Perry's making me go to the Pulitzer with her tomorrow. She won a Pulitzer for an article about how much she doesn't need me!"

"Which only proves she loves you," Martha replied wisely.

Clark looked at his mother for a moment, astonished. "I will never understand women."

"You and every other male on the planet," Martha said. "Don't worry, we don't understand you men either. We just pretend we do."

"So what can I do?"

"Be her friend," Martha said. "Be kind to her. And resist the temptation to yell at her when she acts nasty to you."

"I'd never yell at Lois," Clark said, affronted.

"That'll change," Martha said wryly, and ate the last piece of her pie, effectively ending the serious part of their discussion.

"I see you got your interview. So, have you told him?"

Lois froze in the act of pouring a glass of water. The twins were in the other room, their good behavior guaranteed (for fifteen minutes at least) by brand-new coloring books. Ella was standing behind Lois in the kitchen, arms crossed, and asking a question that made her daughter's queasiness return threefold. *Of course Mom doesn't know, but still, God...* "Yeah, I told him exactly what I thought of him."

Elinore's eyes narrowed as she saw her oldest flinch. Her answer was delivered without turning around, too, another indicator. "That isn't what I meant, Lois, and we both know it. *Did you tell him?*" she repeated with emphasis.

Lois finally turned around, hazel eyes wide. "Tell him what?"

"Lois..."

"What, Momma?"

Ella looked pointedly at the door to the living room, where Kala had burst out laughing. A thin trickle of icy sweat ran down Lois' spine. "Yeah, he knows I have kids and he

knows I'm engaged. I made it *very* clear it's over."

Ella sighed heavily, fighting down the urge to spank her daughter for what seemed deliberate misunderstanding. "Darling, Lois, dear: did you tell him *whose* children you had?"

Lois went very, very pale, but she braced herself against the counter and replied, "Why would I tell him about an affair I had in France? That would be kinda rude."

Her mother just closed her eyes for a moment, and Lois had a horrible moment of feeling like a little girl again, caught in a lie. Then Elinore simply walked over, grabbed her wrist, and hauled her into the guest bedroom on the other side of the house.

"Mom!" Lois cried, pulling back.

"Hush, the twins'll be fine for five minutes," Ella said, closing the door. "Now you listen to me, young lady. I looked into your eyes the morning you were born, and I've known you ever since, loved you every moment. You can't lie to me. Your father, your sister, your boss, the rest of the world, but you can't lie to your mother." She dropped her voice to a whisper and asked sharply, "*Did you tell Superman about his twins?*"

Lois' mouth dropped open in shock, and if not for her mother's tight grip on her arm, she would've fallen. To hear it spoken aloud, when not even she had ever done so ... and by her mother, the only family member whom she wanted to impress... "Momma ... I ..." *really don't know what you're talking about*, was on her lips, but died there. There was no point. She'd only make herself look like more of a fool.

Ella relented, stroking Lois' hair as she guided her to sit down on the bed. "Hush, baby. I understand. I knew how much you loved him the first time you called home to tell me about the interview. I'm your mother. I know you had boyfriends, lovers, before him, but you never lost your heart until he came along. And he's the only one I could imagine you having been careless with."

"Careless..."

"Lois Lane, you were not a lily-white virgin before those twins were conceived," Ella scolded. "But you never managed to get yourself in trouble until them. And once you knew what had happened, you never even tried to ... do anything ... about it. That tells me their father was a lot more important to you than some one-night stand in Paris."

There was no immediate reply. Her daughter just sat there as if under impossible weight, leaning with her head down, the long fall of her dark hair hiding any expression. It was amazing how quickly Lois broke now that she couldn't run. Her arms creeping up around her own shoulders, needing the comfort. Ella didn't need to see her eyes to know that they were closed, Lois' breath having begun to shudder just faintly. It seemed an eternity before her child whispered in a painfully defeated tone, "Have you known all this time? Have you, Momma?"

I've been fairly certain since I talked you into coming back to Metropolis, Ella thought, but lying to one's children was a parent's luxury, especially when it spared them pain or shame. "I had an idea," she said calmly, cradling Lois' head on her shoulder. "But I didn't really know until he came back, and I saw how you felt. Especially today at the planetarium."

Remembering that moment, Lois lifted her head, her haunted eyes full of pain when they met Ella's. The expression on her mother's face wasn't the disappointment and disapproval that Lois had feared; her face was full of love and acceptance, as it had always been. The tears that had threatened since Elinore first spoke his name now spilled over, and Lois managed to choke between sobs, "God, Momma ... what am I gonna do? What the *hell* am I gonna do now?"

Ella hushed her, and held her, stroking Lois' hair and humming to her. No one else ever got to see this child of hers break down; Sam had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams in

making her tougher than any man. Only her mother knew about this vulnerability ... her mother, and one visitor from the stars. And Ella was fairly certain he'd never seen Lois this lost and wounded. Burying her face in her mother's neck, Lois continued, "... I'm engaged to Richard, and he doesn't know ... *he's* back now ... the twins don't even know ... oh, God, the twins ... I have to see him every day..."

A revelation dawned on Ella then. "You're still in love with him," she blurted out.

And immediately regretted it. Lois pulled away, flinging her hair out of her eyes defiantly. "I am not," she snapped, that old-time General's Daughter tone, the I-don't-need-anyone attitude that had kept her sane throughout her adolescence. "I'm not even certain if I was in the first place; I shouldn't even be able to remember it, after what he did."

Ella stifled a sigh of defeat. Life would be so much easier for her oldest if Lois would just let down her guard more than once in a blue moon. The love and heartbreak was plain on her face, but she denied it so strongly that she would eventually convince herself it had never been. "What do you mean, after what he did?"

And then Lois had to explain, the loss of his powers, the threat to the world, and their breaking up, at first mutual. Then when it tore at her too much, he'd erased her memories and disappeared. During her pregnancy, she'd begun to remember, and by the time she delivered the twins, she'd known everything again. Lois sighed, scrubbed at her eyes, and finished, "So that's how I became a tabloid headline, Mom: 'Fearless Reporter Gives Birth to Superman's Half-Alien Babies.' You could probably get on Jerry Springer with the 'I'm an alien's grandma' angle."

"I'd say they act like perfectly normal humans, but they're half yours, Lois," Ella said, completely deadpan.

"Mother!" Lois snapped, coming out of her bitter melancholy mood at last. For a moment they just stared at each other, then both Lane women burst out laughing. And if that hilarity had a touch of hysteria in it, neither would ever admit to it.

In the living room, Kala paused in coloring *The Little Mermaid*, looking toward the hallway with a frown. "What?" Jason asked her, and she just shook her head worriedly.

Much later, after Richard got home, the twins very solicitously told Daddy that Mommy had been sick most of the day. Beyond a questioning glance, he wouldn't have questioned it, until Jason said in a whisper he thought Lois couldn't hear, "Mommy's been sick *a lot* lately. D'ya think she's gonna have another baby?"

That had turned Lois' skin so pale, no one argued with her decision to skip dinner, take a hot bath, and sit out on the dock in the cool air. She could hear, faintly, her mother and her fiancé talking to the twins; Ella firmly shot down the notion of Lois being pregnant, to Richard's disappointment.

The sun set spectacularly, as if to make up for the rest of the day, and Lois began to feel a little relaxation. It was nice to have one person who knew the secret, someone she could talk to, and she felt guilty for not having told Ella earlier. But there was only one thing that could really settle Lois' nerves just now.

Glancing guiltily at the house, Lois' hand went to the pocket of her robe. She really did need to be as calm as possible for tomorrow - that was going to be a trial. *I resisted temptation on the roof earlier this week*, she thought, *don't I deserve to indulge now?*

The deep craving said yes, her wounded heart said yes, and even her tired mind relented. Lois shook a cigarette out of the pack and slipped it between her lips. A moment's hesitation

when she lit it, then she shook her head and did it anyway. This one small defeat was something she could deal with.

And the first drag tasted so damn good. Lois held the smoke in her lungs for a long moment, feeling the nicotine percolate through her brain, soothing the tension and worry. Then she tilted her head back to blow a stream of smoke into the air, and saw him.

Overhead, flying back into the city, almost obscured by the darkness, but there was nothing else in the sky that could be shaped like a man in a cape. The sweet clove was suddenly bitter on Lois' lips, and she coughed in surprise.

A moment later, she surrendered, watching his leisurely flight. He didn't seem to have glanced down at her, for which she was grateful, and soon he was a dwindling dot in the distance. Lois took another deep breath of scented smoke, and closed her eyes, wondering, *Just what am I going to do about all of this? The bloody lung cancer he kept warning me about would be easier.*

Moment of Truth

"She *what?*" Lois exclaimed, her nerves jangling.

"Lois, calm down," Richard said worriedly. "Mrs. Thomas just left the doctor's office. She's got the flu, she can't babysit the twins tonight. She's really sorry to do this on short notice, you know she's always reliable..."

The tensions of the day, spent avoiding Clark and trying not to smoke, suddenly rose up and smote Lois. Her expression went from disbelief to anger to determination. "Fine. My mother ... damn, that's right. Mom's car is in the shop, she can't get here." Not quite panicking, she dialed her sister, and her face fell. She hung up only a minute later after a few brief words, thinking, *This is payback for that cigarette last night - God hates a smoker.* "Lucy and Ron are out, and I don't trust their sitter with the twins. Richard, what about your parents?"

"Sorry, hon, they're in Florida this week on that vacation-home-exchange thing. And we don't have time to drive the twins out to your mom's place." He sighed heavily, glancing out into the bullpen where the twins were doing their homework unconcernedly. "I guess that means I have to stay home with them."

"What? No! Richard, I don't want to go without you."

"Relax, kids," Perry said, patting Lois' shoulder awkwardly. "Loueen and I will watch the brats."

"No, Uncle Perry," Richard said firmly. "It's *your* paper and Lois' article; you two have to be there. I'm just the accessory. I'll stay with them, it's no problem."

"Richard..." In the privacy of Perry's office, Lois let a hint of pleading creep into her tone, catching his sleeve. "Please, I don't want to go alone. We can bring the kids with us..."

"Honey, no," Richard said, petting her arm. "They're going to be so bored, Jason will do his Godzilla impression in the middle of the keynote address. It's all right, I'll stay. I'm not too keen on rubbing elbows with the rich and famous, anyway. Besides, you won't be alone. Perry and Jimmy and Clark will be there - if Clark ever gets here."

"He will," Perry interjected. "About two minutes before we have to leave."

You're missing the point - I don't want to be alone with Clark. "Guys ... I don't even want to do this," Lois said, pacing the floor. Her satin gown flowed behind her, a deep rose gray like water at midnight, and Richard's eyes followed it unconsciously. "Maybe I should just stay home and let Perry accept the damned thing on my behalf."

"No the hell you don't," Perry began, and just then the office door opened. In came Jimmy, uncomfortable in the Armani tuxedo. Upon seeing Lois, her long gown with its embroidery and its deep décolletage, he froze with surprised wonder.

Lois caught sight of him, and had to smile. "Well, well, look at you, Mr. Olsen," she said playfully. "You look very handsome."

"Th-thanks," he stammered. "You look really good, too, Miss Lane."

"She looks like some 1930s oil tycoon's wet dream," Perry barked, ignoring Richard's yelp of protest. "And she's going to the damn Pulitzers if I have to tie her on top of the car like a trophy deer."

"Try it and die, White," she snapped. "You only get away with saying stuff like that because people think you're getting senile."

"Uncle Perry!" Richard said in affronted tones. "Can't you see Lois is already nervous? Don't rattle her cage!"

Nervous? I'm not nervous, I'm about to have a complete mental breakdown, that's all, Lois thought, resuming her pacing. If not for the upswept hairstyle, she would have been

running her hands through her raven locks ceaselessly.

Perry just gave his nephew a despairing look. "Boy, the angrier she is, the better she'll handle her nerves. And the better she'll look, too."

"Stuff it, old man," Lois snarled. It was all the worse because he was right. "You may as well quit looking, you couldn't handle me even if you were ten years younger and had a bypass."

"See what I mean?" Perry said genially. "Jimmy, isn't she splendid when she's mad?"

"It's damn hard to see splendid with two black eyes, Perry," Lois shot back. "Don't make me commit elder abuse."

"Ouch," Perry chuckled. "You've wounded my fragile vanity, Lane. If you're any nastier to me, I might have another heart attack. Which would leave *you* as acting editor, since you're the only person in the room who knows CPR and you said you'd never resuscitate me again."

"After the last time?" Lois whirled on him, poking him in the chest to punctuate her words. "Here I am, panicking, the closest thing I've got to a decent father turning blue on the floor, and after I summon up everything I learned about first aid in Girl Scouts, you finally come around. Only to look at me and groan, 'It's Lane, I must be in Hell.' Thanks a frikkin' lot, Perry!"

By that time, Jimmy had seated himself on the couch, keeping silent out of her line of fire. Richard tried to rub her shoulders to calm her down, saying, "Darling, it's okay. You don't have to do much of a speech or anything; all you have to do is say thank you and head for the bar."

"It's not the speech!" Lois snapped, jerking away from him. *It's CLARK, you idiots! Can't you people see ... nevermind!*

"Then what is it, Lane?" Perry barked.

"*You just made me get the interview of the century, he's on every channel including Bravo and ESPN, every magazine and newspaper is cheering him on, and people have been getting drunk every night to celebrate the fact that our savior hath returned!*" Lois yelled, her voice rising. "And now I have to get a Pulitzer for an *editorial* about how we don't need him! It makes no sense!"

"You always wanted a Pulitzer," Richard began.

"For *investigative reporting*," she shot back. *Not for essentially flipping off my ex in print!*

"It's an important editorial," Perry said sternly. "Lois, people needed to hear that - you made a very good point. We were spending too much time wailing and gnashing our teeth over his disappearance instead of trying to help each other. I'm sure Superman himself would realize that if he read..."

"He *did* read it," Lois retorted. "And probably took it as a kiss-off speech." *Especially when he found out I'm engaged with kids.*

The sharp rap on the glass door nearly startled her out of her skin. Of course, with his usual impeccable timing, there was Clark. He came in shyly, avoiding Lois' gaze. Unfortunately that meant he saw the dress first, saw how it clung perfectly to the curves of bust and hip and thigh.

Clark couldn't entirely hide his reaction, but tried to play it off by simply saying, "Wow. Nice dress, Lois."

For a moment she couldn't reply. The suit ... oh, the suit was perfect. Even with the glasses on, there was no denying his attractiveness. Dragging her mind back from memories she really couldn't deal with, Lois rallied enough to reply, "Nice suit, Kent."

The awkwardness wasn't lost on the other three men in the room. Jimmy just tried to look anywhere but at them; Perry's and Richard's gazes met, confused and a little worried. They both knew how snappish Lois had been around Clark the last two weeks.

"Well, children, it's time to leave," Perry said. Lois had turned away from all of them, staring out the window, so no one saw her go pale. The editor-in-chief turned to Richard and said, "Are you sure you don't want me to stay with the kids?"

"No, it's all right, Perry," Richard replied. "It's not every day the Daily Planet wins a Pulitzer. You should go."

Clark turned to Jimmy, asking, "What's going on?"

Like you didn't hear the whole conversation from down the block, Lois thought, trying to control her nausea.

Jimmy filled Clark in. As soon as he got to the part about Richard staying behind, Clark turned to the Whites. "Really, Richard, I'd be happy to watch them for you. I mean, it's not like I need to be at the award ceremony."

"Like hell," Lois said flatly. "Clark, you know absolutely nothing about children, much less mine."

Those words silenced everyone in the room, and Lois turned around to look at them. Clark's expression was more wounded than she'd ever seen it, even more pained than when he realized that the Kryptonian villains had taken over the world while he was with her in the Fortress. In that moment, and little though she knew it, Lois was as beautiful as she had ever been, and her cold remark was more devastating than kryptonite.

That hurt in his eyes was more than she could bear. "I'm sorry, Clark," Lois said quietly. "They're very fragile, and I'm pretty overprotective."

"Just a smidgen," Perry grumbled. He'd been shocked by her nastiness, and even more so by her apology. Lois Lane did not apologize to anyone. But he quickly recovered, and said, "No, Kent, I want my best team on this. You're going even if I don't."

"Uncle Perry, you should go," Richard said firmly. "Look, you guys go way back. I'm the newcomer here, and I really don't mind staying with the twins. It's not exactly my kind of party. It just makes sense for all of you to go and me to stay."

It seemed as though Perry and Clark were both persuaded, and Lois finally confronted the inevitable. She was going to a black-tie awards ceremony, with the man about whom she'd written the editorial, and without her fiancé. Wearing this dress.

Suddenly, it was just too much. "Excuse me," Lois muttered, and fled the room. Leaving Richard to get the kids, the other three men followed her worriedly. The banging of the ladies' room door told them all they needed to know.

"Wow, she really *is* sick," Jimmy said nervously.

Richard, Jason, and Kala were walking up behind them in time to hear that, and Jason said curiously, "Mommy's sick again? Are you *sure* she's not gonna have a baby?"

Richard was caught out by the question, in spite of what Elinore had said last night. Perry answered for him. "No, Jason, she's not," he said in his customary gruff tone, then softened as so few people had ever seen him do. "Your Mommy loves you and Kala so much, she doesn't want any more babies to take away her time with you two. So she had an operation, and she won't have any more children."

Richard's eyebrows went up. "She had a..."

"Tubal ligation," Perry told him, as the twins, their curiosity satisfied, went to pester Jimmy for candy. "Not long before she came back here."

"I knew she was on birth control, but..." Richard was torn between disbelief and indignation, at a loss for words.

Perry shrugged. "She never wanted kids, Richard, and those two were a surprise. Now she's sure. The surgery can always be reversed if she changes her mind."

Overhearing the conversation, Clark wondered how Richard could not know something like that. The next moment, the twins decided he must have something delicious and quasi-forbidden tucked away in a pocket somewhere, and their wheedling kept him from pondering what he'd heard further.

In the ladies' room, Lois rinsed her mouth out and spat. Her stomach still roiled, but there was nothing left to bring up. Being sick always brought tears to her eyes, but she blotted them carefully with a tissue, sniffing a bit as she tried not to smear the makeup. Which was hard to do when she couldn't even bear to look at herself in the mirror.

She had told herself all day that she had it all well in hand, having spent yet another long sleepless night planning exactly how to go about the evening. Difficult as it seemed, she had told herself that she could put her feelings aside for the evening, make herself forget what was between her and Clark, and enjoy the fruits of a job well done. She had won a Pulitzer Prize, for God's sake. That was something to celebrate. For one night, everything past and present did not exist, only this moment of triumph.

Only it didn't feel anything like a victory now. Richard wasn't going, leaving her on her own. Without armor. And the award was beginning to feel like so much ash in her mouth. Rather than be proud of it, too much thought made her all too aware of the article's undertone; all too aware of how quickly the people were already forgetting its overriding message. Even, to an extent, she was herself.

Get a hold of yourself and stop the pity party. You'll get through this, she told herself sternly, forcing her eyes up to make a few quick repairs with lipstick and powder. So will he; might even remind him of a few things. No one will be the wiser. It's just one night. You'll survive. You've been through worse than this. Why am I acting like this is the end of the world? If something happens, it happens. Either way, there's nothing to be done about it. It has to end eventually. Better now than later.

Unfortunately, her stomach didn't seem to agree with that bit of wisdom. Pressing her lips together, Lois rode out the cramp with small breaths, closing her eyes. This was going to be impossible if it kept up. *God, you truly have a sick sense of humor. Why the hell did Perry have to do this to me tonight of all nights? And why is it that I win the one thing I've dreamed of so long, only to feel guilty as hell for winning it? Not like Clark's reaction out there wasn't completely unfair. I want to hate him for it, but that scared the living hell out of me. God, what an offer. Did he have to look so damn wounded? And did it have to hurt to see it?*

Why did it hurt to see it, is the better question, a quiet voice in her head murmured. And why are you so constantly striking out at him, even when he doesn't even say a word? You're angry with him, but that only accounts for some of it. I think you're scared, and you do, too, whether you want to admit it or not.

Scared? the other half of her feelings snarled. *Sister, the **last** thing I am is scared. If anyone around here is afraid, it should be **him**. If he knew the whole truth, he wouldn't dare show his face...*

*But he **doesn't** know, came the insistent reply. You won't tell him, because if you did, you'd have to tell it **all** - that you remember, that the twins are his, that you still love him...*

*I do **not** still love him! I don't think I ever did, it was just an infatuation!*

Oh, put a sock in it, you liar!

Lois pressed her fingertips to her temples, her eyes tightly shut, and muttered, "Shut up, shut up, shut up," under her breath. *Dammit, he's the one with multiple identities, not me! If this keeps up they'll be fitting me for a straitjacket.*

Mercifully, the General's Daughter fell silent, leaving only a faint murmur from the romantic. Lois finally made herself look in the mirror; other than a bit of strain, she didn't look too bad.

A quick rap of knuckles on the door. "Lois, for once you're the one making us late," Perry said gruffly, but she heard the worried undertone.

Summoning up a ghost of that old-time Lane feistiness, Lois replied, "Coming, Mother." She stalked out of the door, keeping herself cool and collected by force of will alone.

Richard looked at her dubiously. Arguing with her could wait - but they would *definitely* talk about this later. For the moment, he simply asked, "You sure you're going to be fine, honey?"

"Of course," she replied blithely, smiling, and kissed his cheek quickly. The twins came in for a quick hug, and then the old team was headed downstairs together. Just like old times.

The three men were watching Lois with a hint of anxiety. Her mood seemed to have done a complete about-face, and of all of them, Clark was the most concerned. *She's almost chipper*, he thought with dismay. *Lois only gets like that when she's very stressed and can't go to a kickboxing class or something. Oh, dear.*

I wonder what exactly has her so wound up? It's not accepting a Pulitzer in front of a thousand people - Lois has never had stage fright. Could it just be winning the Prize for that article? Clark brooded all the way to the limo Perry had hired, but he was no closer to understanding how Lois' mind worked than he had been the first day back at the office.

Perry wasn't exactly sanguine, either. Lois had been in a fury before she got sick; since then her mood was light, almost flirtatious, as if she'd managed to vomit out some essential parts of her personality. She was even gently teasing poor Jimmy now, the boy unable to look at her in that dress. It was almost like the old days, before Kent left and Lois ran off to track down Superman.

Ah, the good old days. Perry was almost overcome by nostalgia as they rode to the Centennial Hotel, where the awards would be presented. He watched as Clark cautiously tested Lois' mood, first speaking softly to her, then gradually becoming more relaxed. By the time the limo had threaded its way uptown, they were bantering again.

Clark and Jimmy both seemed to have accepted Lois' apparent time warp and were behaving as they had six years ago. Peregrine White was rather more wary than either of those young bucks, however. He also understood Lois better than they did; not that anyone seemed to take his advice regarding her.

Lois was a lot like him, in a lot of ways. She'd had a rough childhood, though in her case it was caused by a too-demanding father, whereas he'd had a good family with a chronic lack of money. Lois had come out of it with an indomitable will and a tendency to use anger for self-defense, just like Perry himself. He had mellowed with age, and more than a few of his employees suspected that the Monday Morning Massacres and all the other harangues were just a front, obscuring the fact that he really did care about them all. Lois was still young, still a firebrand, and as yet most people believed that the sharp-tongued hothead was all there was to

her.

Idiots. She's just as much a sentimental fool as I am, she's just hiding it better.

When they were sitting down, he carefully placed her between himself and Clark. Even though she was acting as if nothing was wrong, Perry knew perfectly well that something was. *What* exactly remained to be seen, but if he had his way, he'd get it out into the open tonight. Once revealed, it could be dealt with one way or another, but until then, Lois was just going to simmer until she boiled over. If that had to happen, Perry wanted it to occur under semi-controlled conditions and on his watch. Someone would have to do damage control.

While they sipped ice water and waited for the keynote speaker, Perry glanced at Lois and Clark surreptitiously. Try as he might, he couldn't imagine a reason for her to be as angry as she had been since he got back. *Of course, she's always been a proprietary soul, and Clark was hers from minute one. Her friend, her partner, her puppy-eyed follower. Could she really be this pissed because he ran off on his own? Or is part of it because I hired him back without asking her, and she's taking that out on him because I don't give a damn if she's mad at me?*

The keynote address finally began, and the assembled journalists, writers, musicians, and hangers-on paid attention, when they weren't preening for photographers' cameras. Perry noticed something terribly amusing; once Lois fixed her eyes on the podium up front, Clark started taking these tiny little glances at her. Nothing horribly obvious, but he was noticing every detail, and his gaze darted her way as if magnetically drawn. *Ah, Clark, you poor devil. You're still carrying a torch for her, aren't you?*

The speech was soon over, and the chairman of the Pulitzer Prize award committee came to the microphone. As he announced each name, the winner had to walk down and receive their plaque, smile for cameras, and say a few words into the mike. Most of them were simply thanks to the boss, the spouse, and sometimes the people who'd caused the story. The foursome from the Planet applauded along with the rest as each name was read out.

"And the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished editorial writing goes to Lois Lane of the Daily Planet, for her article 'Why the World Doesn't Need Superman,'" the chairman said, and for a moment Lois seemed frozen. Perry worried that he might have to prod her out of her shock, but then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and rose to accept the award.

It's a damn shame you're winning this for that article, Perry thought rather sadly. You deserved it so much more on so many things, but the sheer shock value captured the committee's interest, I'll bet, and here you are.

All eyes turned to her when she stood up, but Lois only saw a pair of amazing blue ones looking up at her. The agony in them was a knife through her heart, regardless of the armor she'd painstakingly surrounded her troubled self with. She could not even summon any of the General's Daughter's bitter delight in revenge; this just hurt.

She had been the picture of cool confidence since stepping into the elevator back at the Planet; even walking in to the hotel, red carpet and velvet ropes, Lois had looked as though she were on a runway. There'd been no hint of her turmoil then, and now as she walked down to accept the award she still appeared calm and collected.

Lois had managed that feat thanks to drama club back in college. Quite simply, she was acting as if the last six years hadn't happened. It was the only way she could possibly get through the night. But when she saw the gleaming plaque elegantly engraved with the title of that damned article, the act started to unravel.

The Chairman of the Board shaking her hand, cameras flashing in her eyes, and a microphone thrust in her face; Lois could only mutter an uncharacteristically humble "Thank you," before fleeing the stage.

As she escaped back to her seat between Clark and Perry, Lois could think of only one thing: *God, I need this evening to be over. But since I doubt that's going to happen anytime soon, I need a drink.*

The bartender smiled appreciatively at the black-haired beauty who approached him furtively. "What can I do for you, miss?" he asked as suggestively as he dared while on the job.

"Do you have Stoli Vanil?" she whispered, her eyes raking the room.

"I certainly do," he replied, leaned against the bar. "How do you like it?"

Straight, and without insinuations, she thought, narrowing her eyes for a second. Then she was fluttering her lashes charmingly and asking, "Can I get it on the rocks in a water glass?"

The bartender poured slowly, grinning all the while, and said softly, "Seems like a lot of vodka for a little thing like you."

Lois gritted her teeth behind a fake smile until the drink was in her hand, then drained half the glass at one swallow. "This little thing can out-drink you anytime, anywhere," she said sweetly. "And if you're scared of being drunk around me, I can out-curse, out-shoot, and out-box you too."

His astonishment was satisfyingly obvious, sweeter than honey, and Lois finished off the vodka. Holding the glass out for another, she added, "But thanks for the 'miss.' It's nice to know I can still rob a cradle anytime I feel like." The bartender couldn't even think of a reply, so he poured in wide-eyed silence.

Well, that was delightfully vicious, she thought, sauntering away with a full glass and a snarky smile. *Of course, he's probably only six or seven years younger than I am, but it's the thought that counts.*

By the time she made her way back to Perry, her nerves were thoroughly soothed. "There you are," the editor said, looking suspiciously at the glass. "What on earth are you drinking, Lane? Smells like ice cream."

"Flavored water," Lois said innocently, her eyes wide and so sincere. "The vanilla's my favorite, but I like the raspberry too."

Perry seemed willing to accept that, and turned aside to greet an old friend. While they were absorbed, Jimmy asked curiously, "They make it in vanilla now?"

Lois had absolutely no qualms about kicking his ankle. "Hush, Olsen."

And then Clark was at her elbow, frowning at the drink. "Is that *vodka*, Lois?"

The look she gave him was hellfire, just as scorching as it had been in the old days. "I *am* over twenty-one, Kent, and I'm not driving tonight."

"That's neat vodka?" Jimmy hissed.

"No, it's got ice in it," she whispered back.

"But everything else besides the ice is vodka? Jeez, Lois."

"Shut up, Jimmy," she growled, taking a bigger gulp than she should have. *Thank God it's triple-distilled or I'd be coughing it everywhere.*

Clark looked as though he was going to add something, then reconsidered. "Drink plenty of actual water so you don't get a hangover," he said.

"My God, has Mr. Midwestern Morality actually shown some lenience toward my

hedonistic ways?" Lois purred, and then Perry was back among them.

"Why the hell are you all standing around about for?" he asked.

"We don't play well with others," Lois said, snickering. *No more vodka for you, Lane, the last sober part of her mind mused. And especially no more vodka on an empty stomach, when you haven't been drinking like this since before the twins.*

"Has it occurred to you people that you're hanging around like the ugly girls at the prom?" Perry chided them. "Get out there and dance!"

Both boys looked slightly horrified, and Lois rolled her eyes, sighing, "I'd rather be a wallflower, Perry, but thanks."

"Please," he scoffed. "That dress was made to waltz in, and I've never known you to pass up a chance to show off. Get out there and dance, Lane."

"Who with? One of these two?" She chuckled at him, even though faint alarms were ringing in her mind. *Clark would trip over his own feet - I doubt Superman's had time for dance lessons - and Jimmy ... that really would be robbing the cradle. I'd probably give him a complex.*

"Lois, get out there and dance," Perry told her, taking the now-empty glass and passing it off on a waiter. "I insist."

Oh, dear. "Fine, I'll dance. C'mon, Chief, show a girl how it's done." Lois gave him a genuinely affectionate smile as she offered her hand.

Perry stared at it like it was a cobra. "Lois, there're photographers running loose here. If my cardiologist saw me dancing with a woman your age, he'd shoot himself."

"Has he met your wife?" she challenged.

Clark blinked in surprise, and glanced at Jimmy with a raised eyebrow. "He married Loueen," the younger man whispered.

He actually startled back at that. "She's a year younger than Lois!"

Jimmy just shrugged.

Meanwhile, Perry was explaining to Lois, "There's a big difference between you and Loueen."

"Such as?"

"For one, that dress. I can almost see your bra."

Lois quirked an eyebrow at him challengingly. "What bra?"

"Good God! That was something I didn't need to know, Lane!"

"Relax, it's a corset," she replied, rolling her eyes.

"As if that's any better," Perry grouched. "Anyway, the main difference is, Loueen's a good, loving, kind, wonderful woman, and you're Lois Lane."

Once again, Perry owed his continued life and health to Russian vodka. Lois merely folded her arms and glared at him as the slow, bluesy music continued to play. "She also used to be your secretary," Lois said eventually. "Fine, old man. I'll get you for that little remark later. In the meantime - Jimmy, let's dance."

She caught him by surprise, and the redheaded photographer shook his head quickly. "Nuh-uh, I don't dance to old people music."

"*Old people music?*" Lois said in disbelief. "Jimmy, that was Diana Krall! I own that CD!"

The younger man shrugged, looking a little embarrassed. "Like I said. I can't dance to that."

Lois was still astounded by his complete lack of appreciation for classic jazz - the hottest,

most forbidden music of its time, and miles away from the tame, insipid stuff they called modern jazz. So she couldn't prevent Perry from catching Clark's arm and saying, "Go dance with Lane, Kent. I'm sure they still teach dance in Kansas."

"Um, Perry," Clark began, looking very uncomfortable indeed.

No. Absolutely, completely not, Lois thought. She'd never understood before that the expression 'heart in your throat' could feel so literal. That sleek, unruffled look was gone now, replaced by something akin to a deer in headlights. *I can't get that close to him. No way.*

What would it hurt? a persuasive voice murmured to her. *Maybe you can finally convince yourself - and him - that you're over him. Dance with the man, Lois - it's just a little slow dance. Ella Fitzgerald never hurt anyone.*

Perry had literally shoved Clark over to her. "You two at least look decent together," he said gruffly. "Go, dance. It won't kill you two to be civilized for another five minutes."

Then he was standing in front of her, looking as trapped and panicked as she felt. "Um, Lois..."

Courage, Lane. This is only supposed to be Clark, the clueless goof you've always known, your best friend; you have to treat him like you always have. "C'mon, Clark," she said. "Papa won't shut up until we dance."

He laughed - he couldn't help it, it wasn't his shy little chuckle but that other, richer laugh - and then they were on the dance floor, and Lois was in hell. She'd forgotten how warm his skin was, how very safe she felt in the circle of his arms. And how intensely he affected her in close proximity. Being so near to him filled her with a craven desire to forget herself for an instant and just snuggle up to him, rest her cheek on his broad chest, and wait for him to make everything better. She actually heard herself sigh as the last of her defenses began to dissolve.

It was no easier for Clark. For six years, he'd slept in the spaceship, and his dreams had been haunted by this woman, her body so delicate, looking so fragile, but her mind and will so formidable, stronger even than the steel that bent like putty in his hands. Now, one hand on her waist, holding her hand with the other, only this little distance between them, and he was nearly overwhelmed by the desire to pull her closer, press his lips to her hair and let all the rest of the world fade.

After she'd learned the truth all those years ago, after she confessed her love, his joy had nearly overwhelmed him. He'd known he loved her from the moment he looked into her eyes on that first flight, but never until she spoke the words did he realize that love was reciprocated. He had almost stuttered that they would really need to talk, too startled to simply say, *I love you, too, Lois, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.* There was a moment when they simply looked at each other, the paradigm shift so overwhelming, and then he had taken a hesitant step toward her. Lois rose from the chair and came to his arms eagerly, the first kiss fulfillment of all the unspoken truths between them.

Then they had both moved back slightly, about as far apart as they were now, in fact, and they had simply stared at each other, both wondering how such a perfect soul mate could exist and marveling that they had found each other. If he could just kiss her like that now, let the press of his lips speak for all the things his heart couldn't say...

I can't. That's over now; what I want doesn't matter. Her happiness does.

But oh, God, the last time I held her like this...

"Lois," Clark whispered, and her name was a prayer.

"Don't," she replied almost as soon as he spoke, that pained pleading tone that only he had heard. "Just ... don't."

"Lois, I'm so sorry I left." And that was the only thing he could say, the only way he had of trying to lance the anger and hurt between them.

She finally looked up at him, and her gaze was terribly torn, that dark brow furrowed, all of her emotions plain in spite of her resolve. "How could you? How could you just up and... nevermind, I forget how little I seem to have meant to the men in my life. You and Superman both, gone just when I needed you the most."

"I never had any idea I meant that much to you," Clark protested. And in truth, he hadn't; not as Clark, anyway.

"Yeah, 'cause I tell details of my life to every guy in the office," she snapped back. "And I ask them to go out with me to dinner after work with my sister and her husband. Sure, that sounds just like me." Her eyes managed to be both scornful and wounded. "Clark ... how could you be so blind?"

He stiffened a little. She couldn't mean... "Lois ... what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you were my best friend, the only one I could trust completely! I'm saying best friends don't just disappear! We had to call your *mother* to find out where you were! I thought you were dead in the West River, for God's sake!"

Watching from the sidelines, Perry smiled with self-satisfaction. From the looks of things, they were finally talking about whatever it was between them. *Good. Get it out of your systems, kids. I want my two best reporters back in action, not scurrying under desks hiding from the sight of each or snarling like wildcats.*

They really were a handsome couple; Clark was an oddly graceful dancer, given his klutziness around the office. It seemed like the more he concentrated on Lois, the more fluidly he moved. *She's a good influence on you*, Perry thought with a grin, and glanced at Jimmy, watching them with a wistful look.

"You were always so hung up on Superman, I didn't think you'd notice I was gone."

Her eyes narrowed coldly as Ella Fitzgerald crooned, *"Heart and soul, I begged to be adored; lost control, and tumbled overboard."* Lois had to bite her lip to keep from saying sarcastically, *You didn't seem to mind 'overhearing' how much I cared about you then.* "Clark, I had a crush on him. Maybe a little more than a crush," she said through clenched teeth. "And yeah, I was furious when he left. But I was much angrier at you. Clark, I *cared* about you, you should've known that. I've told you secrets that I've never shared with another soul. And you up and left without a word. How do you think it felt to have both of you abandon me *at the same time?*"

Clark winced, accidentally pulled her closer when he did. The pain in his voice was all too clear as he said, "I'm sorry. I can't undo the past six years. I made the worst mistake of my life when I left." His blue eyes were so troubled behind the magnified lenses of those stupid glasses that she couldn't doubt his sincerity. "Lois... I don't know what to say."

The words echoed through time, back to that morning after their world fell down, and both of them flinched as they realized it. Lois' eyes were suddenly as wide with imminent tears as they had been in her office all those years ago, and Clark's expression was as lost in regret.

"But now I see, what one embrace can do. Look at me, it's got me loving you ... madly. That little kiss you stole, held all my heart and soul..." The singer's voice was husky and soulful, full of love and tinged with pain. Lois' world had turned upside down; her righteous anger had bled away during the dance, and she was no longer immune to his presence, to the

overwhelming unconscious magnetism between them. *Just say you love me*, a small lost part of her heart cried in response. All of those stifled emotions, locked away and jealously guarded, were seeping out like a loosed tidal wave. She was being drawn to him the same way she always had been.

Lois fought it, looking down away from him with every ounce of her self restraint. She knew what would come next, what had to happen next. Knew those lips, the feel of them on hers, the feeling of that soft hair curled around her fingers as her world narrowed to just that moment and she forgot everything else... The Romantic in her mind rose up, all compelling murmurs and sweet persuasion. *Just say it, say those words and kiss him, everything will be all right. Kiss him, let those five words only you both know tell him the truth, you know it will heal your heart if you do, kiss him...*

Lost, so very lost in nostalgia, regret, and the love she could no longer deny, Lois lifted her head, her searching eyes meeting his for only an instant before slowly lowering. Unable to bear the ache in her chest, to deny the draw between them any longer, she gave a soft sigh of emotion as she surrendered.

Lois braced her right arm more against his shoulder as she rose on her toes, their lips only a whisper apart...

Oh, how that hurt, to realize just what he had said ... to see the pain in her eyes too. Clark bit his lip, feeling like such a fool. *Whether she remembers it or not, those words caught her, too. I just do not know how to act around this woman anymore. Why is it she completely ruins me every time?*

But when he looked at her again, Lois stole a heated glance and let her eyes slip closed in that hauntingly familiar way. She looked like ... it couldn't be. She couldn't possibly intend to kiss him.

Why would she... Oh, God, please. She hates me, she's...

Lois leaned up to him as if she'd done a thousand times, not six years ago. The look in her eyes was lost and full of the love he'd seen in them before.

I shouldn't do this. She's engaged to Richard. This is absolutely the last thing I should do...

Helpless as she was, Clark bent his head to kiss her...

*Hey! **Hey, stupid!** If you're gonna cheat on your fiancé, try doing it someplace with less than a **thousand witnesses!***

Lois jerked back, horrified. The General's Daughter had spoken up just in time; she could almost taste his lips, only a breath away. *Oh, my God. What the hell did I just do?*

Clark was staring at her, looking as confused and uncertain as she felt. Choking back a sob, Lois thought, *I can't do this. I can't take this anymore. It's tearing me apart.*

Two rare tears fell as she whispered sadly, "I think you should leave ... Kal-El."

Repercussions

"Great Caesar's ghost!" Perry rasped, feeling his heart shudder to a halt in his chest. Lois Lane, actually rising on her toes to kiss Clark Kent? Not a friendly peck on the cheek, either; that looked like an imminent lip-lock he might need a fire extinguisher to break up. For one moment he feared that she had precipitated another heart attack, and then it began to beat again. The shock, however, showed no signs of vanishing so easily.

Lois abruptly came to her senses, only an instant away from passionately kissing Clark. She backed away, leaving Clark looking poleaxed, said something Perry couldn't decipher, and fled like Cinderella when the clock struck twelve. At the moment, her boss was in no condition to run her down and demand an explanation. He did catch her eye, and saw her flinch; for the first time since he'd known her, Lois looked scared.

And then she was gone.

"Holy-" Jimmy whispered, and Perry elbowed him savagely.

"You didn't see that," he growled. *Well, at least I know what the hell is wrong between them. How long was **that** going on? And how did they ever keep **me** in the dark about it? And what am I going to tell Richard?*

After a moment's reflection, he came to a difficult decision. *Nothing. Telling Richard will only hurt everyone I care about. Besides, she didn't actually kiss him. If she had, I'd have to tell Richard, but as it is ... maybe it was just a fluke. I didn't think that was flavored water she was drinking. Maybe that explains what just almost happened.* "Jimmy, don't ever mention that you saw that, not even to me," he said quietly, and the boy just nodded, driven speechless by shock - or Perry's elbow in his ribs a moment ago.

Clark's mind was whirling as Lois turned and disappeared into the crowd. *Kal-El. She called me Kal-El. There's only one way she could know that name... Lois knows **everything**. She remembers all of it.*

In spite of his turmoil, he managed to get himself off the dance floor. *Oh, God, now I know why she's been treating me this way. Look what I did to her! Lois has a right to be furious.*

*But why did she start to kiss me ... why did she **stop**? I wonder if... She couldn't be ... even if she **does** still love me, she's still engaged to another man. Richard. Perry's nephew, Richard. Oh, God, **Perry** saw that!*

Clark glanced guiltily over at his boss, and saw him and Jimmy both staring after Lois. He winced again; there went Jimmy's admiration for him, too. As Superman, he had faced all sorts of dangers, even survived the effects of kryptonite. But at that moment, he couldn't stand to see the dismay on the faces of his friends. Feeling like a coward as well as a heel, Clark fled the scene.

Lois escaped the hotel ballroom and fled to the second floor, locking herself into the ladies room. Both halves of her heart, the bitter and the sweet, were berating her for what she'd done, and her own guilt scourged her as well. She hated the sobs she was choking back, hated the angry, hurt tears that wouldn't stop flowing.

*What the hell was that?! the General's Daughter demanded. What did you think you were doing? He **left** you, pregnant and mind-wiped, and here you are trying to smooch him! You lovesick little twit!*

*You love him, the Romantic insisted. Admit it, you've never known a love like that before or since. Richard's a good man, but you still love Kal-El. And you always will. Why do you keep fighting and hurting yourself **and** him? You saw his face; he still loves you, too!*

*How can you ever trust him! came the snarled reply. No, he screwed around with your mind - your **mind**, dammit - and there's no forgiveness for that! He didn't know what he was doing or how long it would last when he erased your memories. I'm pretty sure he meant it to be permanent, which would've been a **real** surprise when you found out you were pregnant! **That** would've driven you crazy for sure!*

*I'm **already** crazy; I hear voices in my head, Lois thought, kicking the faux marble trashcan across the room savagely. I just gave up my advantage; he knows I know, how long before he figures out about the twins? And when he does, of course he'll want them. He's the last of his kind except for them. Regardless of his father's disapproval of what we did, I can almost guarantee what that damned hologram would say. And if Jor-El tells him it's the right course of action, how the hell can I keep them from him if he decides to take them?*

*Let him try and take them, the General's Daughter hissed. Over my dead body will **anyone** get my children from me.*

He would never do that to you, Lois, and you know that. How could you even think that? The Romantic sounded horrified at the mere thought.

*Yes, well, I never thought he'd steal away more than forty-eight hours of my life, either. Forty-eight **important** hours, mind you. She hated how weak and repetitive this statement was beginning to sound, despite the truth of it.*

*He **deserves** to be in their lives, the Romantic argued as if she hadn't spoken. He **is** their father, and he's been alone all his life. Not to mention, **they** deserve to know **him**. There's no one else on Earth who can understand what their childhood is like, especially if they wind up taking after him. You know what I mean.*

*What about Richard? **He's** the one they call Daddy, he's the one who's been there with them since they were toddlers. Are you just going to toss him aside and go running back to the man who betrayed you? Richard loves you, you can rely on him, the twins can rely on him. That counts for a lot more than the one night of passion that got you pregnant.*

*What **about** Richard? You aren't in love with him. Look what happened the **last** time you tried to persuade yourself you were! You never even actually said you'd marry him; he tricked you into that. The Romantic, usually only a persuasive whisper, was getting stronger and stronger in her mind. Lois looked up at the mirror, seeing her tear-stained eyes and the conflict behind them.*

So you're going to send Richard packing like a placeholder when the real thing comes back? You can't just do that to him; he deserves better. The General's Daughter goaded her with honor and responsibility.

*You're right, he does deserve better, came the swift reply. He deserves a woman who will love him with her whole heart, not watch the sky at night for someone who's gone. And he deserves to be more than 'Superman Light.' You **do** realize that he's just the closest thing you could get to the man you really wanted, right? Hel-lo, he's even a pilot!*

*Is that what I've really been doing all this time? Lois wondered, unable to simply toss this thought away as much as she wished to. Have I really been waiting for **him**, making do with a substitute? I mean, the attraction is undeniable, but it was more than that tonight. Am I really still in love with him?*

If you have to ask, you already know the answer... the Romantic muttered.

That doesn't mean you have to go running to him! He screwed you over, remember?

That sounded like another internal argument gearing up, and at the moment, Lois couldn't handle it. Not on top of the knot of cold horror in the pit of her belly, not after these disloyal thoughts about Richard. "Stop it," she hissed aloud, glaring at her own reflection in the mirror. "Stop it! Just stop it! I can *not* deal with this, not now!"

Those hazel eyes, so full of pain and love and loss, mocked her with their resemblance to her daughter's, to the child that was both hers and his. It was all suddenly too much for Lois. Snatching up the box of tissues from the counter, she flung it at the mirror with all the pent-up frustration, guilt, and conflict bearing down on her.

Thankfully, the glass didn't break, but the porcelain box-cover did shatter. Lois jumped, startled at the volume of the sound, and could've kicked herself for losing that much control. The best thing she could possibly do now was to just get out. And, for once, she wouldn't call herself a coward for running away...

Clark had just managed to get away from the Pulitzer ceremony when he heard the alarm and the sirens. *Third one today*, he thought worriedly, dashing through the hotel's lobby at super-speed. When he emerged, he was in uniform and flying rapidly toward the sounds, glad for a momentary escape from his troubles. *What is this, National Bank Robbing Day? Or are all of them connected somehow? With Luthor out of prison, I'd better stay on my toes.*

Not far ahead now, he could see a host of squad cars clustered around the National Bank building. Just then, the heavy thudding of automatic gunfire; several of the cruisers were perforated. Looked like the robbers had some kind of chain-gun on the roof, and they were perfectly willing to target cops.

I'll stay on someone's toes, anyway, he thought angrily, zooming up to the roof. A couple of Metropolis' finest were coming out of the stairwell, and fired at the maniac wielding the big gun. Unfortunately, he was wearing a bulletproof vest, and he whirled to aim the weapon at them, squeezing the trigger before he'd even brought it completely around.

The cops had one instant in which to realize their fate, and then suddenly they were spared. Bullets ricocheted off Superman's chest, puncturing the helicopter the robbers had planned to use for a getaway vehicle. The machine gun's magazine clicked on empty before the crook even had time to recognize just who stood in front of him.

Superman stepped forward. The cops had wisely gotten behind the door to the roof and had the other robbers covered; now he could deal with this one. All the while an insistent little voice was muttering, *This makes no sense. Helicopter, Kevlar vests, chain gun, crane to mount the gun on - their equipment costs more than they could possibly make on this job. It has to be a distraction. But I still can't ignore it.*

The bank robber glared at him, yanking a .45 caliber from its holster. He fired from point-blank range, and watched dumbfounded as the bullet flattened against Superman's eyeball and bounced off. They both glanced down to see the insignificant little piece of squashed lead land on the rooftop.

Even when everything else is going down in flames, I can always count on a moment like this. Superman smiled slowly. *I love my job.*

Lois leaned against the second-floor balcony, watching warily for a flash of blue and red. The sweet, fragrant smoke filtering through her lungs was beginning to relax her, and she took

a last drag off her cigarette. Yet another betrayal of Kala and Jason, this covert smoking. *Okay, I'll go back on the patch tomorrow, no excuses or arguments. But I needed that. What's one more defeat tonight?*, she thought with a sigh, crushing the butt against the wrought-iron handrail.

"Fancy meeting you here, Lois. Loved the article."

She froze. She knew that voice, knew the cheerful tone overlaid on anger and violence. And it was coming from *right behind her*. Whirling, Lois started to bring her hands up, ready to claw for his eyes if he...

Luthor struck like a rattlesnake, slamming her back against the balcony. Lois had to grab the rail behind her just to stop herself from going over the edge. Lex pinned her there, smiling that slow, satisfied smile. "Well, well, well. Looks like I've finally got the drop - if you'll pardon the pun - on everyone's favorite fearless reporter. Just what are you going to do now?"

Dammit! If I'd still had the cigarette I'd stick the lit end in your eye! Bastard probably waited there in the shadows rubbing his hands together until I finished just for that reason. And he's got me pinned so I can't knee him - smart son of a bitch. I wish it was it was easier to hide a gun in ladies' evening wear; I could save us all a lot of trouble... All she said aloud, however, was, "Lex Luthor. You came out of hiding just to see me win a Pulitzer? I'm touched."

His laugh sounded like it had gotten rusty in prison. "Just checking up on an old friend. Remember all the fun we had in the Arctic? Oh, wait, you had amnesia - you *couldn't* remember. My lawyers proved it. Darn."

"I remember who sat in Perry White's office and told the Kryptonians how to use me as bait," she growled. "I remember you giving exact directions to Superman's home. And I remember Superman beating you yet *again*." The look she gave him as she spoke, her left brow raised sardonically and her expression showing just how unimpressed she was by his taunts, was just the same as it had been during their prison interviews. "Why don't you just give up, Lex? Every time you mess with me or him, you lose."

Lex chuckled again, leaning in close, his eyes locked on hers. "Maybe I have something special in store for him, a welcome-home present, if you will. As for you..." His voice dropped to a whisper... "Tell Jason and Kala I said hello."

That broke through her condescending attitude in an instant. Lois' entire body froze in absolute horror. The last of the vodka seemed to burn out of her veins that instant, and her shock gave Lex a moment in which to step back and shove her hard. She'd been braced for just that move since the moment he pinned her, though, and kept her balance. But Lex managed to vanish before Lois could even begin to think about following him.

How did he...? When...? Dear God, I've got to get to the twins before he does...

Perry had been trying for the last quarter hour to find Lois; she and Clark had both disappeared after their near-miss kiss. He was just heading for the lobby again when she came barreling out of the stairwell right past him, without even noticing he was there.

Grabbing Lois' shoulders, Perry spun her to face him, and saw the look of wide-eyed terror on her face, the paleness of shock. Before he could even begin to ask what the hell she thought she was doing, she gasped out, "Oh God, Perry, Luthor's here! He threatened me - he knows about the *twins*! He knew both of them by *name*, Perry!"

Perry switched gears mentally without wasting a second. He yanked out his cell phone and speed-dialed. "Lieutenant Sawyer, I realize this is pretty irregular, but I need your help,"

he said gruffly. "Can you have the boys in blue send a car to the Centennial Hotel and escort Lois Lane home?"

Lois couldn't hear the reply precisely, but she heard the disbelieving tone. Leaning in, she spoke into the mouthpiece with a voice that was just beginning to tremble, "It's Luthor, Maggie. He was here at the Pulitzer ceremony; he just cornered me. Please, he threatened my kids. I need to get there and make sure they're okay, Maggie, please..."

Both reporters heard the reply. "Be there in two - meet me at the front, Lane."

Lois looked up at Perry. Lots of unanswered questions there, but this *definitely* took precedence. And despite her bitterly mixed feelings on the topic, she had to warn *him*, make him aware of the situation. "Perry - warn Clark. And you and Jimmy be careful, too. If the bastard comes to my house after I get there, we won't have to worry."

"Lois - take care." Perry confined himself to that remark and a quick squeeze of her shoulder, then she was disappearing for the second time that night, leaving him to think, *Now all I have to do is find Clark to warn him...*

Lights flashing, siren whooping, the black-and-white screeched up to the front of the hotel only moments after Lois shoved through the doors. Lieutenant Margaret Sawyer herself was driving, and pushed the passenger side door open just in time for the reporter to fling herself inside without losing any momentum. "Drive, for the love of God," Lois gasped, slamming the door.

Maggie peeled out without a word, tires squealing, and roared off to Bakerline, weaving skillfully in and out of traffic. She glanced at Lois, taking in the too-wide eyes, the rapid breathing, and the death grip on her door. It was a side of Lane she had never seen in all the years the two of them had been acquainted. Luthor really had gotten her where she lived. "Easy, Lois, I already sent two units to your house," she finally said, her voice trying to soothe.

Lois forced herself to loosen up a little, but the strain still showed. She was very nearly on the verge of panic, and that wasn't a state Maggie wanted her kids to see her in. And the lieutenant knew her almost as well as Perry did. "You know, Lois, all the times I envisioned you in my cruiser, I always thought I'd have to read you your rights first."

The black-haired woman turned a cool look on her, and asked with complete nonchalance, "Why, Maggie, what makes you think *I'd* break the law?"

That startled a bark of laughter from Maggie. "Knowing you for almost a decade, that's what. Crossing a police barrier without clearance ring a bell? Breaking and entering? Or maybe inciting a riot? Never thought I'd be playing Sawyer's Chauffeur Service."

Lois sighed. "You know perfectly well I've never been caught in anything illegal."

"Not yet, Lane," Maggie told her, grinning. "Just be glad you got an escort at all tonight, okay? Three banks in the greater Metropolis area have been robbed today. The last one was only a few minutes ago. I was on my way, but Superman turned up and gift-wrapped the crooks for us, so my unit wasn't needed." She casually whipped into an oncoming lane to pass an ice truck, and continued, "Something's weird about these robberies. They're going through an awful lot of trouble for a pretty small take, and they're fairly obvious about what they're doing. Almost like they want the cops there."

But Lois was staring out the window and up at the blue velvet sky, her stomach doing somersaults in spite of herself. *Clark ... with everything that just happened, he still has his job to do. No wonder he was late leaving for the Pulitzer...*

Clark snuck back into the awards ceremony, adjusting his glasses. The robbery was still bothering him, but he couldn't skip out entirely - he still had to face the music here. Honestly, he'd rather be dealing with a crime spree than with Lois' revelation at the moment...

And right on cue, here was Perry, grabbing his arm. "Where the hell have you *been*, Kent?" he barked.

"I, um-" Clark began, but the editor cut him off.

"I sent Lois home with the cops," Perry said sharply.

"What? Why?!" *Oh God, what did she do?*

Perry didn't notice the question, scanning the crowd. "We'd better get out as soon as we can find Olsen."

"Here, Chief!" Jimmy materialized beside them, practically dancing with impatience, cell phone in hand. He'd completely forgotten about the dance floor incident. "My source at the department of records called - you'll never believe it..."

"It's Luthor," Perry said to both of them. Clark stiffened, but Jimmy slumped.

"Well, if you already knew, why'd I have to take a girl with seventeen facial piercings to *Chez Chantel*?" the photographer complained.

Perry started to speak, then furrowed his brow. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Luthor," Jimmy said exasperatedly. "Lex Luthor married Gertrude Vanderworth while he was in prison. It was her lawyers and her money that got him out. When she died, she left the whole estate to him. The relatives are fighting it, but it's clearly her signature on the latest will and Luthor has control of the assets while they debate it in court."

"Just what we needed," Perry growled. "Luthor was *here*. He threatened Lois, threatened the twins. The fact that he *knows* about the twins is too much for me. I sent her home with Lieutenant Sawyer; they've got more cops at her house. The three of us better scam, too."

Luthor, Clark thought, his gut turning to ice. *Every time I turn around, it's Luthor again. He has to be behind the robberies. I was right, they were a distraction. But Lois' twins...* "Um, Chief, you and Jimmy take the limo," he said diffidently, his mind racing. "I'll get a cab; my hotel is the opposite direction."

"Be careful, Kent," Perry told him.

"I will," he replied. *I just hope I'm not needed where I'm heading.*

She bailed out of Maggie's cruiser before it had even come to a complete halt, running up the front steps past two startled officers. Even Richard, standing in the foyer with a third cop, couldn't slow her down. Lois took the stairs two at a time, hair flying, her calf muscles screaming about the high heels, and barreled into the twins' room. Only then could she finally stop, nearly tripping.

They were both in their beds, sitting up and blinking dozily at her. "Mommy? Kala said sleepily.

Lois let out the breath she hadn't known she was holding, ignoring the sob that came to her lips. They were both here, they were both safe, she'd gotten home in time. Wordlessly, she crossed to Kala's bed and swept her into a tight hug, reaching out for Jason as well. He slipped out from under the covers and padded to her, putting his arms around her neck and Kala's shoulders. *Home safe*, Lois thought, and all the quarrelling voices in her heart and mind were silenced in a sigh of relief. For what seemed the millionth time tonight, she was fighting back tears as she covered them both in kisses. Only these tears were grateful ones. *My babies are home safe. Thank God.*

Maggie, Richard, and the young cop he had been talking to came to the doorway, glancing in. The lieutenant felt a sympathetic twinge, thinking of her own Jamie, and gave them their moment of peace. Richard's heart ached as well, but for different reasons. Lois and the twins were so clearly a family - one single unit - and in their tight embrace there was no room for him. *You're being ridiculous*, he told himself. *She's just scared; you knew all along that the twins were fine, but she had to see it to believe it.*

The rookie eventually cleared his throat, and Lois' head snapped up, her eyes wild. Almost immediately her look softened; but in that instant Maggie saw Luthor's fate if he dared approach those children. *I hope we get to you before she does*, she thought. *Hard to press charges on a corpse.*

Lois kissed Jason's forehead and Kala's cheek before pulling away slowly. "Mommy has to talk to the other grown-ups for a minute, sweethearts. I'll be right back."

Jason yawned hugely. "Kay. You look really pretty, Mommy."

She chuckled then, ruffling his hair affectionately. "That's very sweet, hon, but probably not true. Mommy's exhausted." One more kiss for each of them, another hug to reassure herself once again, and she went outside to talk to Richard and the police.

And oh, did Richard look like he was bursting with questions. But Maggie jumped in ahead of him. "You gonna press charges on Luthor?"

Lois sighed, raking her fingers through her now fallen hairstyle. "What good would it do? I've got nothing concrete. No witnesses, no real evidence, just my word against his. And he's got better lawyers. As we've proven before."

Maggie nodded, keeping her face calm but seething inside. For her, this was the worst part of police work; *knowing* someone was going to do something, and unable to stop him until he did. "We'll keep a unit at the house tonight, and the rest of the week. Beyond that..."

"Beyond that, remember whose daughter I am and just what I'm capable of in his case," Lois replied matter-of-factly, and the icy wrath that flashed in her eyes startled Richard and the younger cop. "Luthor won't find me or the kids defenseless. That I can promise you, Maggie."

Sawyer punched her shoulder lightly. "Leave me enough to prosecute, will ya? It's bad enough the corrections system dreads you; don't give us a reason to worry."

Lois grinned at her. "Tell the corrections boy to keep the bad guys safely behind bars when I come to interview them, and I won't have to put my spike heel into anyone else."

"Only thing stopped you from nailing his foot to the floor was the sole of his shoe," Maggie remembered fondly. "Be good, Lane."

"Or good at it," Lois retorted, provoking a chuckle.

Watching this exchange, Richard saw the shadows under Lois' eyes, the tension in every muscle. She was trying to play 'Relieved Mother' for Sawyer's sake, but underneath it, she was strained to the breaking point. *Much as I want to call her on the tubal ligation - and a couple of other things, too - Lois needs a break. If I push her too hard, she's liable to try to hunt down Luthor and either commit murder or get herself killed.*

As the police left, Richard wordlessly wrapped his arms around Lois, holding her. For a moment, she stiffened under his touch, then relaxed with a heavy sigh. The evening had been altogether too much, leaving her desperate for comfort. Her forehead dropped to his chest as her arms crept up around his waist. They stood like that for a long moment, each silent with their own thoughts loud around them, and Lois looked up. "I need to be with them tonight, Richard," she said quietly.

"I know," he replied. "We need to talk, later... but tonight, just try to get some sleep, hmm?"

"Thanks," she sighed.

The young cop kept glancing curiously back at the house as they left. Maggie watched him from the corner of her eye and finally stopped him near his patrol car. "What's on your mind, Davis?"

He didn't bother to ask how the lieutenant knew something was bothering him. "Ms. Lane. She just ... I read all her stories, you know, and she doesn't seem the type to..."

"She's a mother," Maggie told him, a trifle sharply. "Any mother in her right mind would die to protect her children - or kill. Lois is a tough cookie, and she wants you to think she doesn't give a damn about anything except the next story, but she's a lioness about those kids. God help Luthor if he *does* try anything."

Davis nodded, perhaps remembering that Sawyer was a mother, too.

Above them all, hidden in the shadows of the tall pine trees surrounding the Lane-White house, a pair of deep blue eyes tracked them with a worried frown. Superman saw Maggie leave after giving a few parting instructions to the cops that would remain, saw Richard and Lois push the twins' beds together while Kala and Jason looked on bemusedly. He looked away, scanning the property for anything amiss, while Lois slipped out of the Pulitzer ceremony dress, and glanced back to catch her curling up in the slip she'd worn underneath it. Her arm was around both twins, and they went back to sleep quickly.

Lois, for all that she looked and acted exhausted, didn't follow their example. She lay awake in the near-dark for a while with the dim reach of the nightlight illuminating her clouded expression, once looking up and seemingly right into his eyes. Superman flinched, then felt like a fool; he could clearly see her through the roof and ceiling, but she certainly couldn't see him. Still, that glance ... the look in her eyes ... he was relieved when Lois finally drifted off to sleep.

Richard was downstairs, pacing through the darkened house. The officers outside were covering the road in both directions. Everything looked safe, but Superman still floated there, keeping watch through the night. *You can never be too careful where Luthor's concerned...*

Unfortunately, the silence and inactivity let his thoughts come crowding back. Alone in darkness, memories haunted him. So many little things about Lois that he loved; the way she'd shove her hair back behind her ears when it got in her way; the way she had watched his very movements over the rim of a champagne glass; that swift walk, all determination and sharply striking heels; her scowl of concentration, her dazzling, mischievous take-my-picture grin, and the slower, sweeter smile he'd known in those brief days, the one with lowered eyelids that was so often followed by a tender kiss, one hand sliding through his hair.

I can't believe I'm thinking about this when her family is right there for me to see. Look, you fool, this is what you would destroy by coming back into her life: her fiancé, their children, their home, their life together. Why am I even torturing myself with this?

Because it could've been me down there, those kids could've been mine, I could've been the one to wake up beside her every morning, I could've been the one who gets swatted when I try to get her to open her eyes, I could've been the one laughing at the way she grumbles and whimpers until she gets her caffeine fix ... if only I hadn't left.

Lois felt utterly wretched the next morning other than waking to see her children there with her; too much vodka, extreme stress, leaving her makeup on all night long, and sleeping in an unfamiliar bed were not a good combination when a somewhat early morning was added to the mix. She would have been even more irritable had she known just who had hovered over her house until dawn. But she levered herself out of bed, groaning, because the twins were up and eager to make the most of a Saturday. "Mommy, why are you so unhappy?" Jason asked cheerfully.

"I'm not unhappy, I'm just out-of-sorts and grumpy," Lois said, and yawned. "C'mon, you two, time to get moving."

The morning routine was comforting in spite of its complexity; Lois supervised the brushing of teeth, choosing of outfits, and swallowing of pills that preceded breakfast, somehow managing to get herself showered and presentable in the process. Richard was still asleep, and from the look of the covers, he'd tossed and turned late into the night. Lois didn't wake him, heading downstairs quietly.

Saturday mornings, the twins got to choose their own breakfast, no matter how weird it might seem to their parents. Kala was already making one of her infamous pumpkin-butter-and-pickle wraps, something Lois always felt must have been horrifying to the corn tortilla. And Jason was eating organic oatmeal with slices of jicama on top, a vegetable Lois had never heard of until her then-four-year-old son snatched one up without warning and started eating it in the grocery store.

"Want some?" Jason asked politely, offering her a spoonful.

Lois shivered. "No, honey, but thank you. I'll stick to toast."

"Boooring," Kala groaned, rolling her eyes, and making her brother giggle. After a minute, she asked apropos of nothing, "Mommy, who's Lex Luthor?"

Lois almost dropped the bread. *Damn, her ears are sharp*, she thought, and sighed. "Lex Luthor is a very bad man," she began tentatively. "Back before you two were born, he did some things that would've hurt a lot of people, if Superman hadn't stopped him and put him in jail."

Unbeknownst to her, Richard had come downstairs. Hearing Superman's name, he stopped in the hallway, listening.

"How come you're scared of him?" Kala asked, making her mother wince again.

"Well..." *How am I going to answer that without telling more than I want to?* "Lex Luthor is really mad at Superman for putting him in jail, even though he deserves to be there. And Mommy used to be good friends with Superman, so he's mad at me too."

"Cool!" Jason cried, his blue eyes gleaming with excitement. "You know Superman?"

"How come you never talked about him, either? Like Mr. Kent?" Kala said shrewdly.

Good question, Richard thought. *Someone inherited her Mom's interrogation skills.*

"Let me ask you something," Lois replied. "How would you guys feel if Ashlyn moved away, and never told you she was leaving, never said goodbye?"

"Sad," Jason replied, but Kala scowled at that thought and retorted, "Mad!"

"A little of both, probably," Lois told them. "I was upset and angry at him for not telling anyone where he was going, or when he would come back. So I never talked about him."

"But he's back now, an' you wrote a story about him going to Krypton and everything, so you guys are friends again?" Jason asked hopefully, envisioning an eternity of bragging rights.

"Not ... quite," Lois said, trying not to bite her lip. How could they know just how loaded their questions really were? "Things are complicated when you're a grownup. Eat your

oatmeal, Jason, before it gets cold."

"I'm never growing up," Jason said, and Kala rolled her eyes.

That seemed to be the end of the discussion, so Richard wandered into the kitchen, acting as if he hadn't heard a thing. The twins pounced on him and he hugged them both while Lois munched toast and looked on. He didn't like the narrow, speculative look in her eyes, wondering if she suspected that he'd been eavesdropping, but her next sentence seemed completely out of the blue.

"Richard, do we still have that hideous vase your cousin gave us? The one I keep threatening to drop-kick out a window?"

"That vase with the purple flowers on it?" he replied, startled. "Hmm. I think it's in a closet somewhere. Why?"

"I've got a worthy end for it," she said simply. *I had hoped that this could be avoided for a while yet, but maybe now...* "Could you fill it with water and put it at the end of the dock for me, please? I want to show the twins something."

"Is it a surprise?" Jason asked curiously.

"No, sweetheart, this is serious. Kala, that sandwich isn't going to eat itself - and no one else in this house will eat it, either."

"I *like* pumpkin butter with pickles," her daughter muttered.

By the time Richard came back inside, still mystified, the kids were done eating, and they were in the living room with Lois. What he heard and saw as he walked in froze his heart for an instant.

"Sometimes bad people do bad things," Lois was saying. "Sometimes they hurt people. It's not something to be scared of every day, but it is something to be prepared for, just in case. Like sometimes people will steal things. No one comes to this house every night trying to get in and take our TV, but we lock the doors every night anyway. Just in case. Right?"

The twins nodded solemnly. Lois continued, "Lex Luthor is mad at me because I used to be Superman's friend. He's a bad man; he might try to hurt me. So if that happens - just in case - I need to be ready. I need to be able to protect myself. That's what this is for." Her heart grieving for the loss of her children's innocence, Lois unlocked the black case and removed her stainless steel S&W Ladysmith .357 Magnum revolver.

The twins' eyes went wide. "Wow," they whispered. "Mommy has a gun."

"Exactly, and it's not a toy," Lois said. "The toy guns you see at the store have red plastic on the end; they can't really hurt anyone. This gun is real, and it could hurt someone very bad. If you ever can't tell if a gun is real or a toy, treat it like it's real - *don't touch it.*"

Ironically, Lois finally had use for her father's teachings, and the lessons she needed most were the ones she'd always hoped the twins would never have to learn. "The only way to be safe is to always treat every gun like it's loaded, all the time - even if you just unloaded it yourself. You two are never, ever to touch Mommy's gun unless I'm there and I tell you to, okay? *Never, ever.* Someday I might need to have it nearby, and it might be loaded. If you see it outside its case, you must never touch it. Someone could get hurt."

Their eyes were still wide and wondering, but the twins met her gaze and nodded. The seriousness of the matter had impressed them into silence.

Lois went through all the steps patiently, showing the twins how the gun worked. She reminded them constantly never to point it at anything, never to touch it anywhere near the trigger, never to handle it without her supervision. Richard watched all this, amazed and a little angry. *Another thing I didn't know - she never even told me that there was a damn gun in the*

house. And don't I get a say in whether or not the kids get Junior-freakin'-NRA memberships at six?

But that wasn't all. "All right, you two, I know you want to see what it does. C'mon outside." She met Richard's eyes on the way by, and her cool gaze brooked no argument. It was clear she regarded this as extremely important. He followed them, curious in spite of his disapproval.

Lois stopped in the yard. The vase was white with huge purple pansies on it, the kind of eyesore that, like fruitcakes and novelty sweaters, exists solely to be given to relatives on holidays. It looked very small on the end of their dock, and even Richard wondered if she could hit it. He also was glad that his plane was presently being serviced and docked far from home.

"Stand behind me, and cover your ears," Lois said. Kala and Jason obeyed, but leaned out around their Mom with sparkling eyes.

Lois took a deep breath as she unlocked the trigger guard, pushed the cylinder out, and loaded six Gold-Tip hollow-point bullets. She let the breath out slowly as she squared her stance and braced her right wrist with her left hand. Another breath as she lifted and aimed the gun, lining the sights up on the center of the vase.

The distance was pretty much the limit of her range with this gun; with a little .22 she could almost drive nails, but the Ladysmith was built for stopping power, not target shooting. So Lois gave herself an extra incentive to hit her target. *Imagine that flower there is Lex Luthor's right eye...*

Even Richard flinched; the thunder of gunfire was amplified by the river, a deliberate choice on Lois' part. The ugly vase leaped into the air and disintegrated, shards flying, the water inside it splashing everywhere. Both twins stumbled back, momentarily frightened.

Lois hated to scare them, but she had been scared the same way, even younger. It was the swiftest way to teach a child the respect guns deserved, and to ensure that they never handled them. The curiosity of a young child for something so sleek and metallic could be deadly, if not curtailed. Waiting until Kala and Jason were both looking at her, she blew imaginary smoke from the barrel and pushed the cylinder out to remove the spent cartridge.

Richard watched speechlessly, thinking, *Where the hell did this come from? Did I ever really know this woman at all?* And on the heels of that thought, *I don't want to argue in front of the kids, but we **really** need to talk.*

Dawn had found Clark heartsore and gritty-eyed; though he didn't actually need sleep, he found it a welcome respite at times. Even if he had not kept watch on Lois' house through the night, though, he would've found no rest. His thoughts chased each other endlessly even as he flew over Metropolis in the morning light.

I don't know what to think. She acts like she wants to strangle me - and she'd be justified - and then tries to kiss me. It's almost as if she's as confused as I am. But one thing is perfectly clear: she wants me to leave.

*Question is, did she mean her life, the paper, the city, or the planet? I can see her being mad enough to want me to fly back to Krypton, radiation or no radiation. But there are six billion other people who do need me and want me around, so even if that's what she meant, and it **does** seem rather an attractive option at the moment, I can't run away for another half-dozen years. And I'm not leaving Metropolis. If there's anything on this planet I love as much as Lois, it's that city, crazy as it often seems.*

*But I don't see how I can keep working at the Daily Planet. She's my **boss**, for God's sake. Not to mention, Perry saw us almost kiss. I'll be surprised if I still have a job Monday morning. That'd be the most original pink slip ever handed out - terminated for trying to kiss your immediate boss, who happens to be engaged to your ultimate supervisor's nephew, who **also** works in the same office. Could I possibly screw things up worse?*

Monday Morning Massacre

The weekend was still haunting Lois as she drove to work Monday morning. It had been one of those blustery weekends, a storm out in the Atlantic playing hell with the barometer and yet not actually coming ashore. The skies were overcast, thunder throbbed in the distance, and rain threatened but never delivered.

Lois' life seemed to echo the weather. She and Richard had not actually had the monstrous argument they both felt looming over them; neither of them wanted to fight in front of the kids. But they had sniped back and forth most of the weekend, mini-quarrels like brief flashes of thunder, all of their spats coming back to the same central theme. Richard seemed to think he should know everything about Lois, everything she had ever done or even thought, and she disagreed.

Saturday afternoon was the perfect example...

"I'm getting tired of not knowing anything about you."

"What on earth are you talking about, Richard?"

*"Well, for starters, you never mentioned there was a **gun** in this house. I'm really not comfortable with kids and guns, Lois."*

"You think I'd endanger the twins?"

"Lois, kids younger than them have found a parent's gun and shot themselves."

"Oh, please. It was in a locked case with a trigger lock on it, hidden in a shoebox in the top of my closet. They would never have found it."

"Still..."

"Still, nothing! They know it's not a toy, I showed them."

*"Yes, and we'll be hearing about **that** again if they ever need an analyst."*

"My father scared me and Lucy the same way, to teach us never to touch his guns. We turned out all right."

"Lois, I don't believe you! You hate the way your father treated you!"

"Even a stopped clock is right twice a day, Richard, and my father was right about guns. If I'm going to wear it, the twins need to know what it is."

"You're going to wear it? What, to work?"

"I have a permit to carry, and I'm going to use it. I'm wearing it now."

*"**Lois!** We're in the house."*

"And if Luthor comes here, I'll be ready. Do you have a problem with that, White?"

"No, not really. What I have a problem with is the fact that I was never even consulted. But that's kind of a theme with us, isn't it?"

"What? If you've got something to say, then say it."

*"Why didn't you **tell** me you had a tubal ligation?"*

"Richard, I told you I didn't want any more kids."

"It's not the same thing, Lois."

"I don't see how it's different."

*"You don't see ... Lois, there's a big difference between '**I don't want kids**' and '**I can't have kids!**' Why do you have to keep secrets from me?"*

*"I'm not keeping secrets! I **told** you I didn't want more children, Richard, that's why I had the surgery! That's why I'm on birth control, which I **know** you knew about. **Please** tell me you haven't been wandering around hoping I'll change my mind."*

*"You never **bothered** to tell me it was beyond the realm of possibility."*

"No, I told you I didn't want kids. I would've told you if and when that changed."

"Are you sure? You don't have much of a track record of keeping me informed. I mean, Superman--"

"Don't even go there! Besides, tubal ligation is reversible - it's not like you were going to marry a barren woman, Richard!"

At that moment, the twins had started fighting over crayons, and Lois and Richard had put their own bickering aside to break up the kids'. But the angry words had hovered in their thoughts, making them both irritable. They'd sparred verbally all day Sunday, Richard even getting in a jab about not knowing her favorite cereal while they shopped for groceries. Lois had snapped that she didn't know his, either, and didn't give a damn.

By Sunday night her nerves were frayed. Hearing on the news about a couple of strange robberies - the university's science department and a warehouse owned by a medical supply company - hadn't improved Lois' mood, either. So that night, when she came into the bedroom and Richard followed her with *We need to talk* practically written on his forehead, she'd had enough. "Richard, I'm exhausted. I've had more than enough to last me for the moment. Don't even start."

"I don't want to fight," he had said quietly.

She had laughed, bitterly. "Really? Could've fooled me. The way this weekend is going, I can't imagine what else we would do at this point."

"I might have an idea," he'd replied, and caught the belt loops of her pants, pulling her close and silencing her with a kiss.

That was one thing he knew about her, knew very well indeed: exactly where her weaknesses were. Unable to help herself and too surprised to stop, she responded. Lois had only had one chance to murmur, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Not arguing," he'd replied, gathering her hair at the nape of her neck gently. "Perry's right - you are gorgeous when you're angry, you know that?"

But by then he was kissing the back of her neck, her eyes closing in reaction, and she couldn't quite answer.

Of course, now, she felt guilty about it, and mad at herself for feeling guilty. *Why the hell do I feel like I'm being unfaithful when I'm with Richard? I'm wearing his ring, for God's sake!*

Actually... the Romantic whispered.

Just the amused tone in that voice unsettled her. Almost dreading to lower her eyes, Lois glanced at her ring finger, and swore loudly enough to frighten the guy driving the Volvo alongside her. Growling in frustration, she punched the steering wheel. *Left it on the sink again. Damn! Men and their need to mark their property... If I don't go get the bloody thing, he'll see me without it for sure. Damn his insecurity!*

Doesn't he have a reason for it? That insidious whisper again, but Lois ignored it firmly. Cursing, she turned the car around and headed home.

Clark was always early to work, but that Monday he came in only moments after Perry himself, and went directly to the Chief's office.

"Good," the editor said when he glanced up and saw Clark at his door. "I need to talk to you, Kent."

"Actually, sir, I think I have something to say before you do," Clark said. His usual meek hesitancy was gone, and for once Perry didn't barrel over his words. "First, let me apologize for

what happened Friday night. It won't happen again."

Perry looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Seemed to me like it wasn't your fault," he said.

Clark looked down. *That's not what matters. I've had the weekend to think about it, and I made a decision.* "I accept full responsibility, Mr. White. My behavior was completely inappropriate. I hope you'll accept my apology ... and my resignation." Perry's jaw dropped in shock, giving Clark a few moments in which to add, "I'm sorry to do this so soon after I was hired back. My reasons for resigning are personal, and I'd prefer not to explain them."

"You're quitting because Lois tried to kiss you?" Perry said disbelievingly.

"No, it's not Lois," Clark said hurriedly. *And that's not a lie; it really isn't Lois. It's what I did to her six years ago, and how very much I regret it, that I can't stand to be reminded of every day. Better to do this gracefully.* "It's me. I just ... I don't feel comfortable working here anymore. And yes, Lois being assistant editor is part of that. She and I were such close friends for so long, I don't want to give the appearance of favoritism."

"The way she's treating you right now, nobody could call it favoritism," Perry snapped. "Hell, if you quit now, everyone's going to think she chased you off. And that includes me."

"Mr. White, please don't blame Lois. She has a right to be angry with me; I never even told her I was leaving. Best friends aren't supposed to do things like that."

"Knock off the 'best friends' line," Perry told him. "You're in love with her, aren't you? Always have been."

Clark pushed his glasses a little further up. *Sometimes I wish I didn't work for an extremely observant journalist.* "I don't see how that applies to the current situation, Mr. White. She's engaged to your nephew. Even if I did have feelings for Lois, it wouldn't be right for me to act on them."

"Kent, you're either the most excruciatingly moral person on this planet, or you studied to be a lawyer before you decided on journalism." Perry sighed, rubbing his temples. "I know you won't budge once you've made up your mind, either. Look, I hate to lose you to the competition. If you can't work for Lois, I understand that. How about we transfer you to another department?"

"I don't know..."

"I'm not talking about Lifestyle or Advertising, Kent. That'd be as much a waste of your skills as letting you resign. Give me a chance to find you a spot somewhere else. You've worked for the Planet too long to let you leave without a fight."

Clark had walked in determined to quit, but he hated to leave the Planet when he had only just returned. Perry's offer was tempting... "All right, sir, you win. I'll transfer."

Perry had to fight down a sigh of relief. Losing one of his top reporters to the competition would be more than a professional mistake; it would be a personal failure as well. It wouldn't do for any of them to think they were indispensable, but Kent was the least likely to get arrogant about it... *I would've said the least likely to kiss Lois Lane, too, but I was wrong. Speaking of which...* "About the Pulitzers, Kent."

Clark couldn't meet his eyes. "Sir."

"I haven't said anything to Richard about it, and I very much doubt Lois will, given what happened with Luthor. I'd recommend that you don't either. Nothing really happened, and as far as I'm concerned, the blame for it lies on whatever she was drinking that night. That's over, and I very much doubt you're going to try for a repeat performance, so let bygones be bygones."

"That's probably good advice, Mr. White." *Whether or not I take it is another matter entirely.*

"Of course it is, it came from me," Perry shot back. "Now, while I've got you here, let's have a look at the current openings, shall we?"

Lois breezed into the office later than normal, preoccupied and testy. *Traffic heading out of the city isn't supposed to be bad in the mornings! It took me twice as long as it should've to dash back there for the ring. Of course, now that I went through that, Richard will never glance at it. Murphy's Law. Well, I'd better go talk to Perry before I lose my nerve. Courage, Lane - you've known Perry since you were sixteen, you can convince him to keep his mouth shut about Friday night...*

She was concentrating so fiercely on what she meant to say to Perry that she walked into his office without even really registering the fact that he wasn't alone. Arms crossed and her brow furrowed, Lois had gone only three steps inside the glassed-in door before she realized her mistake.

Startled by her abrupt entrance, Clark turned, and their eyes met. Watching them, Perry thought that the only thing the moment lacked was an audible sizzle.

Clark had so much he wanted to say to her - and none of it was anything he could say in front of Perry, of all people. *I never expected you to have to carry the burden of my secret all these years. You didn't have to do it, but you did, and I'm ashamed of myself for thinking that you would've outed me for revenge the first day I came back.*

Lois' mind had gone blank at the sight of him, loss and pain and a terrible, tenacious love filling her eyes with tears. Her composed expression had faltered, her mask slipping once again. They might have been the only ones in the entire building as she grappled for control. He looked so very grave, so wounded; almost as hurt as she felt. Finally, her inner voice found words. *I do **not** need to be here right now. Overly-emotional twit exiting stage left...*

"Ah, Lane, I need to talk to you, too," Perry said gruffly.

Before she could even get her own brain in gear enough to protest, the spell had broken and Clark rose. "We're nearly finished here, Mr. White. I'll just get back to you later."

Trying to shake off her uneasiness, the dark-haired woman shot him an indignant look. *Great. Leave me with the Chief now that I'm all off-balance. Thanks.* But with that thought came the realization that they both had already seemed agitated. One dark brow furrowed then as Lois glanced from her boss to Clark and back, finally noticing their tense expressions. Clark was practically scuttling to the door. *I have this **really** bad feeling suddenly...* Suspiciously, she asked, "Perry, what's going on?"

His answer was surprisingly brusque, even for Perry. "What's going on is your harpy tongue finally drove Clark to resign, Lane."

Her jaw dropped; her chest too tight to breathe. This was not at all what she had been expecting this morning. Despite the words exchanged at The Pulitzer ceremony, Lois was utterly thrown for a loop. "What are you talking about? Resigned?"

Clark had actually opened the door when he heard Perry's reply, and he shut it again rather more firmly than usual. "Mr. White, I told you it has nothing to do with Lois," he said sternly.

"And I'm telling you that's bullshit," Perry shot back. "Sit down, Lane."

"This is not Lois' fault," Clark said, all but glaring at Perry. "Mr. White, I thought I made it clear that the responsibility was mine."

Knowing the way she had been treating him just made the protectiveness all the more excruciating. Why couldn't he just be a jerk about this? Why wasn't he yelling and screaming at her? Lois finally managed to regain her senses enough to step between them, catching Clark's gaze. "I don't need you to defend me, *Clark*; I didn't back then and I don't now," she said harshly, even more sharply than she meant to.

For just a second, he was startled and hurt, her words applying to more than the current situation. That gave Perry an opportunity to say, "Fine, fine, you've made your point, Kent. Now scram, I need to talk to my assistant."

Clark hesitated a moment longer, but Lois' stern expression made things clear. She didn't want him there. "I'll clean out my desk," he said quietly, and left.

"Lois," Perry said warningly.

Her mind was still spinning. Clark, actually quitting? Not like she hadn't asked him to leave, but... It was too much to process at the moment, and Perry's glare was more than she could deal with. Before she could stop herself, words sprang unbidden to her tongue. Words that could only be from one source. "Listen, White. You can have a senior reporter or an assistant editor, but not both. Clark and I cannot work together anymore. That's it; it's over, *finito, finale*. Make your choice."

What the hell did I just do? she thought, even as she spun on her heel and stormed out of Perry's office. *He might very well take me up on that - and fire me.* And it didn't help that Clark was still right outside the office, his wide-eyed expression making it clear that he'd heard her angry words. Lois flinched when she saw it as if shying from a physical blow, unaware that she and Clark were thinking exactly the same thing at that moment: *How did I screw this up so badly? From the day we first met, when everything looked so promising, how did we get to this?*

Part of Lois wanted to whisper an apology; part of her wanted to simply run. She obeyed the latter, heading for the elevators, completely unaware of anything except her own pain.

The doors were actually closing when Perry slipped in between them, cornering Lois in the elevator car. Before she could even open her mouth, he smacked the ROOF button and the elevator started to rise. "I'm doing this in here away from prying eyes as a favor to *you* - by rights I ought to bawl you out in front of everyone in the city room. Like it or not, we're gonna talk about this, Lois."

Uh-oh, this is bad - he called me Lois, he really means business. "I fail to see where there's anything to talk about, Perry," she said coldly, not quite meeting his eyes.

Perry looked at her incredulously for a moment, then thumbed the STOP button, freezing their car between floors. "Then open your eyes, Lois, and look at mine when you talk to me. You've been an insufferable bitch to Clark since he came back, and I want to know why."

How dare he! The General's Daughter roared like a lion in Lois' mind, hasty words leaping from her mouth before she could stop them. "Insufferable bitch, am I? Then get yourself another assistant, Peregrine. I never wanted this job in the first place!" Lois' saner half yelped, *Oh, my God, shut up! I'm gonna talk myself right out of a job if I keep this up! That'll look great - I win a Pulitzer and two days later I get fired!*

Perry wasn't fazed. "Please, Lois, you're as much a Daily Planet institution as 42-point headlines and bad coffee. I'm not firing you. But I think the gamble I took on you when you were sixteen deserves some honesty, so cough it up: what the hell is going on with you and Clark?"

"Gamble? I won you a frikkin' Pulitzer, Perry, I think that pays off any gamble you took

in hiring me!"

"It wasn't just hiring you, Lois, and you damn well know it! I let you stay at my house for six months when you first started working here. The only friends you had in this town would've killed you with secondhand pot smoke if you'd kept on staying with them. But still, you were an attractive underage girl living with her boss - if that wasn't just *begging* for the Star to publish an exposé on my hiring practices, I don't know what was! Not to mention, I co-signed for your first car, I invited you to my family's Thanksgiving and Christmas when you couldn't go home - hell, I was your father in all but blood! That arrogant bastard who spawned you might've been a four-star general, but he had no idea how to raise his firstborn. Don't you think, after all we've been through, you owe me the truth?"

Every word seemed to make Lois shrink further into herself. It was true; Perry had been there for her when her own father scorned her. He had encouraged and supported her, emotionally and financially, and all he'd ever asked in return was that she become the best damn reporter she could be. And now he was asking for this as well - a confession.

"Things have just gotten so complicated," she said at last, frustration loosening her tongue. "It's not just the four of us anymore, Perry. Everything's changed in the last six years. Clark walked back in expecting that everything was going to be just the way he left it, and it's not."

"Okay, and can you translate that into simpler terms? I'm a man, I don't do this touchy-feely emotional stuff."

Lois shot him a look of pure venom. "In man-speak, Clark always had a thing for me before he left. And he still does."

Perry sighed, rolling his eyes. *This is why I never had kids - they state the obvious like it's a revelation.* "So? What's the problem?"

"**What?!**" Lois said disbelievingly. *How much clearer can I make it?*

"You've put guys in the hospital before for harassing you," Perry elaborated. "So take care of it - I know you can. Plus the guy has *always* had a crush on you - you knew that when he started working here. Him and every other straight man in this office. Hell, I think the one girl in the mailroom's sweet on you, too. Clark liking you is *not* news. Cut the bullshit, Lane - what's really going on?"

"Perry, I just can't break his fingers or something," she snapped back. "He's Clark, not Lombard. But now he's having a hard time realizing that I'm engaged to someone else."

"Looked like he wasn't the only one Friday night at the Pulitzers." Perry cocked an eyebrow at Lois as he spoke. "Matter of fact, it looked like *you* started that."

Her jaw dropped open. *Well, Perry, it's like this. Clark is really Superman, and I'm in love with both of him. Oh yeah, that's a one-way ticket to Bellevue right there. And if that doesn't give the Chief a heart attack, I can say I've known since I was about four months pregnant with **Clark's** twins. I'm also mad at him for leaving me and for erasing my memories. I can't decide if I want to kick him in the teeth or kiss him, and I'm being torn apart by my own feelings. Oh, yeah, and by the way, Richard's helping to drive me nuts because he's getting suspicious and possessive and wants to know everything about me, starting with my kindergarten report card! Bring on the straitjacket, folks, he'll think I'm insane - and I'm almost ready to agree with him!*

All she actually said was, "Perry ... I don't ... I don't know what to do anymore, I don't know what to think..." And then, hating herself for it, she started to sniffle. *I will not cry, I've done too damn much crying over this man lately, I will **not** cry in front of Perry...*

Perry watched the conflicting emotions chase each other across Lois' expression. It was fairly obvious to him, from the way she'd been acting and the near-miss kiss Friday night, that Clark's feelings for her were at least partly reciprocated - although it would take torture to drag that admission out of her. And of course he'd known how she felt about Superman; no other man on this planet had knocked her for a loop the way the hero had. To make things even more complicated, what she felt for Richard wasn't faked. The boy had had to chase her for a long time, but Lois did honestly love him; she wouldn't settle for less. Perhaps if the other two had stayed gone...

Now that Clark and Superman had both shown back up, Lois found herself caught between three men. None of it was her fault, and she was too damned honorable to do anything but be hurt by it. And too damned proud to show the pain - Perry knew how that went, locking the ache way down inside until it turned into anger. Anger could be harnessed and made to drive a person's ambitions; it was a far more useful emotion than pain. But it could also break loose and lash out, often at the very people you loved best.

Poor Lois, Perry thought, watching her fight to hold back the tears that threatened. *What've you gotten yourself into now? And in spite of the fact that the one you're with is my nephew, all I want is for you to be happy. You're the daughter I never had.*

"Easy, Lois," he said softly. "I'll take care of it." Far more gently than the rest of the office would have believed, he drew her into the circle of his arms and let her bury her face in his shirt. Her shoulders shook as he held her, surprised again by how very delicate she was. The force of her personality could overwhelm, and it was easy to forget how petite Lois was, how much spitfire temper fit into such a small package.

After cleaning out his desk, boxing up the few things that belonged to him, Clark took the rest of the day off. He had an appointment later that afternoon to look at a one-bedroom on Shuster Avenue, and that seemed promising, but until then he had nothing to do.

In his pocket, his new cell phone chirped, startling him. The things had become ubiquitous during his absence; even Ma had one, and she'd insisted that her son carry one as well. As a matter of fact, the little display screen claimed his caller was Martha Kent. Pressing the TALK button, he held it to his ear and said, "Ma?"

"The one and only. We just got in, and I saw your messages on the answering machine. You were trying to reach me?"

"Yes, Ma. I tried the house and the cell all weekend. Where've you been?"

"Ben and I went up to Emerald Lake. There's a Scrabble tournament there, and the trout were biting. Of course, I didn't realize I'd left the cell phone on the charger in the house until we were halfway there. I'm sorry if you worried about me, son."

He sighed, shaking his head. "It's okay, Ma. I just needed someone to talk to. Actually..." Clark glanced at his watch. Four hours until his appointment. "Are you busy this evening?"

Martha hesitated. "Oh, son, the bridge club meets tonight. I'm supposed to host; I can't back out now. But I've got a little time before I have to get ready."

It felt weird discussing this on the phone while walking down the street surrounded by crowds, but at least a third of the people around him were carrying on conversations of their own. Clark had even heard someone mention their bloodwork results, casually discussing white cell counts and lipids while any passing stranger could listen in. He supposed anonymity was privacy enough. "Well, Ma, it's like this. Friday night, I found out that Lois remembers everything. She told me."

"Oh, my. And what did you say to her?"

"I didn't have a chance to say anything. She ran off, and then she left the Pulitzer award ceremony early because that snake Luthor showed up and threatened her kids."

"Good heavens! They're all right, though?"

"Yes, I checked. She has police protection, too. Some strange things have been happening lately, robberies that make no sense. We can't prove Luthor's involved, but it's him. I'm certain of it."

"Whatever he's up to, you'll catch him. You've always stopped him before." Ma sounded perfectly confident in him, and he took heart from it.

"Yes, but it's been so *close*. Of all the people who want to hurt me, only Luthor really scares me, Ma. And now he's after Lois and her children."

"Well, he won't be able to do much more than threaten with you *and* the police watching over her. But seriously, Clark, have you had a chance to talk to Lois?"

He laughed. "Not really. And I don't know what I'd say if I had the chance."

"Whatever you do, *don't* try erasing her memories again! No woman likes to have her mind messed with, and with what I know from reading her articles, *that* woman least of all."

"Oh, trust me, I won't. One mistake is enough to learn from."

"Smart boy. Now, you wanted my advice, so listen carefully. When you do finally get a chance to talk to Lois, apologize first. She's going to yell - let her. Half of what she says is going to be just because she's angry and scared, so don't take it too personally, all right? All you want to do is make amends; you have to get through that first before you try repairing the friendship. Sound good?"

"Sounds wise," Clark replied. "I love you, Ma."

"Love you, too. Be good, and don't be a stranger!"

"If dinner with your son can fit into your busy social schedule..."

"Clark! Stop being a wiseacre! You're always welcome here - you'd be welcome tonight, except you don't play bridge and you'd be bored to death."

Somewhere, a fire truck's siren wailed. *So much for an afternoon off.* "Gotta go, Ma - duty calls."

"I love you, Clark. Be careful!"

Richard was unusually quiet Monday evening. The whole office had buzzed with tension he couldn't define or explain, Lois was being distant, and Perry had been distracted. He would've liked to talk to his uncle about Lois, about the widening gulf between them, and see if Perry had any ideas on how to bridge it. But the editor seemed to be heavily preoccupied, avoiding him. Even the Monday Morning Massacre lacked its usual bite. Lois was pale and silent throughout.

Something had happened that morning while Richard was running down specifics on the newest designer drugs coming out of Eastern Europe. The twins seemed to have caught the subdued mood, making themselves scarce after dinner. Richard hadn't even heard them arguing. Like any newsman worth his salary, he hated this feeling, this intuition that something was afoot and he had no handle on it.

Lois breezed through the kitchen like a wraith, pouring herself a glass of milk. Perhaps she thought Richard didn't see the shot of Scotch she tipped into it; perhaps she didn't care if he knew that her nightcap had become more high-powered of late. He came up behind her and kissed her hair, feeling her hesitate for an instant before tipping her head back onto his

shoulder. Richard hated that, too, that new pause in all her responses, as if she had to remind herself constantly who he was...

"Time to put the kids to bed?" was all he said.

"Mm-hmm. Me, too. I got caught in traffic this morning; gotta go in early, get some actual work done soon."

What were you doing this morning, Lois? What made you so thoughtful and quiet all day? "Let's get the brats settled, then. I got them into their pajamas right after the eight o'clock news. Jason wanted to finish that picture he was working on before bed, but he should be done."

She sighed, taking a deep breath as she unconsciously ran an idle hand through her hair. "Okay. Let's round them up."

But there was only one twin to round up. Jason was in the living room, yawning while he finished coloring the last few spikes on a stegosaurus' back, but Kala was nowhere to be found.

Instantly, Lois' heart turned to ice in her chest, her pretty face sickened with suspicion that struck her to the core. *Luthor*. With that thought firmly in her mind, she raced through the house, calling for her daughter, at first angrily, then with increasing hysteria as there were no signs of her. *No, no, no! Please God, she's only a baby!* "Kala Josephine, you answer me! Where are you?" The tremble was clear in her voice, but there was no reply from any quarter.

Richard dashed out to the squad car in front of the house; the officers hadn't seen anything, no one had gone by them. He met Lois as she raced out the front door and stopped her long enough to say, "No one came out the front."

She looked at him blankly for a moment, mind working double-time, and then her expression turned to utter horror. "The river," Lois whispered, and tore away from him.

Jason had come to the open front door to watch them with only mild concern in his blue eyes, and Richard went to him, catching him up and following Lois around the house. She had gotten to the dock, but froze there, staring. Richard breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Kala sitting calmly on the end of the dock, looking up at the night sky. Jason squirmed out of his arms and padded to his mother.

Lois had never understood the phrase 'my flesh crept' until that moment. Somehow, she knew not just what Kala was looking at, but *who* she was looking *for*. *Oh my God*, was all she could think, icicles dancing up and down her spine. She didn't even realize Jason was walking past her, heading out to where his twin sat in her nightgown swinging her feet and gazing at the stars.

The little boy craned his head back to look up, following his sister's gaze, and then glanced down at her just as she looked at him. They shared a strange, almost secretive smile, and Jason commented, "Pretty."

"Very pretty," Kala replied. No further conversation was necessary. They both turned to look at the sky again, unaware that their shared curiosity was giving their mother a massive case of the heebie-jeebies.

Richard came to stand beside Lois. He didn't know why, but the scene affected him too, filled him with foreboding. There had always been something a little bit ... enigmatic about Jason and Kala, some sense that they weren't like other children. He had always written it off as a combination of their fragility, their precociousness, and the inexplicable bond between twins, but now, it felt like something more. Something else.

The twins were not allowed on the dock alone, and they both knew it. Ignoring either parent when they called was an even worse transgression, and Kala *had* to have heard Lois

yelling for her. Breaking the rules demanded consequences, but Lois was too spooked to care. When she finally found her voice, she simply called their names again.

Both twins looked around, and when Lois said, "Bedtime," they came trotting back to her as if nothing was amiss, going as far as to both hug her tightly. But that weird feeling still lingered, and when Richard caught Lois' gaze over their heads, she looked honestly frightened.

The large ballroom's acoustics amplified the sound of Kitty's high heels slamming into the hardwood floors, and Lex grinned as she stomped over to him. *Still mad about the brakes. Well, I couldn't take the chance of her acting skills not being up to par. She'll get over it.*

Kitty stalked to his side and stiffly held out his drink; Lex grinned a little more when he saw it. The martini glass was nearly filled with olives, probably only one shot of gin in there to keep the garnish company. He speared one silently, leaving Kitty holding the glass.

She would not look at him; instead she looked at his desk, at the coverage of the Pulitzer award ceremony in the Daily Star. Without naming Lex, the reporter had hinted at some unspecified threat to Lois Lane's children, and the article made a point of mentioning the police presence around her house.

"Well, I hope you enjoying scaring that Lane woman," Kitty said nastily. "Whatever you had planned for her kids, you blew it by warning her."

"My mind works in ways too subtle for the average man - or woman - to comprehend," Lex all but purred, taking another olive. "I'm not going to do *anything* to Lois or her kids. Not yet."

"But why did you do that Friday night then?"

He smiled. "To make her worry. While I get my affairs in order, my enemies will be trying to defend against an attack that won't materialize. Maximum disruption of her life with minimum effort on my part. *And* it will wear down their vigilance so that when I finally make my move, they'll be completely unprepared." Lex finally took the glass from Kitty and sipped the gin.

"You devious bastard," she finally said, staring at him.

"*Brilliant* devious bastard," Lex corrected, and ate another olive.

Kitty sat on the edge of Luthor's desk, striking a provocative pose. Lex was deep in thought, his eyes locked on the photo of Lois Lane walking up the red carpet to the awards ceremony, his expression unreadable. After a few moments of being ignored, Kitty sighed, "I suppose we'll just have to find some way to keep ourselves busy until your mysterious plan comes into effect, huh?"

He smiled that evil smile again. "Oh, I expect we'll have some entertainment shortly. I'm expecting a package from the Clerk of Records in Paris. Its contents should be ... interesting."

Interim Cycle One: The "Boys"

Interim: Perry White

Things have finally settled down around here. The last big blow-up was when Lois found out I'd transferred Kent to International. I let her yell for a while, then told her very calmly that I had no intention of letting one of my best reporters quit, and I figured sending him to work for her fiancé might remind him that she was taken. I didn't know people could actually turn green.

Somebody once said, "Love is the best way I know to jump-start a vomit." It sure applies to Lois; every time you mention Kent or Superman, she looks distinctly nauseous. I've given up meddling in it. With Kent in another department and Polly covering the Superman stories, Lois doesn't have to be around either one unless she wants to. But she can't forget about them, either. Every week or so Superman's on the front page, and of course Kent's byline is in the paper every day. Wish I knew how he learned how to type that fast.

Speaking of which, I was a little nervous about sending him to Richard's department. Kent looked a bit anxious, too, but it was the only senior reporter's job available at the time he tried to resign. It worked out pretty well, though. Better than I thought. Kent makes a hell of a globetrotting reporter; he speaks several languages and gets along well in foreign cultures. Either he's very adaptable or very centered, or both.

What's really creepy is how well he and Richard get along. Traveling the world knocked some of the nerdiness off Kent, and it's easier than ever to see how much alike the two men are. Richard practically raves over him - the guy never misses a deadline, he's got great style, and he's got connections like you wouldn't believe. And Kent seems to like working for him. They've both been in Mexico the last two weeks, covering the new illegal immigration laws. The coyotes down there - that's what they call the smugglers who bring in the illegal immigrants - are already finding ways around them, and people in Texas are starting to patrol their ranches at night, armed to the teeth. Recipe for disaster. And headlines. If I know those two boys, they'll bring me back a whole series of articles.

Near as I know, Richard doesn't suspect a thing. Kent hasn't said anything to him about his past with Lois, and I know damn well Lois won't. The others who've been here long enough to remember them before probably thought he just had a puppy crush on her, like half of them have. No one knows Lois well enough to realize she felt something for him - still feels it. No one but me, and I'm keeping my mouth shut. I love Lois, but I know her well enough to know she's got to figure this out herself. And much as I love my nephew, too, Richard will have to lose or keep her on his own.

Richard's worried about Lois, says she's been aloof and tense. Luthor really got to her, and the stress is making her snappish. Doesn't help that he's pitching a fit over every new thing he learns about her, saying she kept secrets from him. Poor kid. Lois went along to get along the last six years, following the current, making decisions mostly based on convenience. Now she's charting her own course again, and my nephew's just realizing he was never the captain of that ship.

I told him to calm down, that you can't know someone completely in three years, or thirty. If you could, they'd be damn boring, and whatever else you say about her, Lois has never been boring. I also reminded Richard that the two things about her that interested him the most when they first met were her independence and her mysteriousness. She didn't suddenly tame down and get all domestic when she started wearing his ring.

Still, it didn't make me happy to learn Lois is wearing that damn gun around the office all the time. I keep waiting for Olsen to walk up behind her at the wrong moment and get shot. She did train with the Special Crimes Unit for a while, so I guess she's got better sense than to blow away the photographer. It's just that, even though she's been on a much more even keel the last two months, I feel like Lois is subtly off balance and waiting for something to make her tip over. And I'm not exactly looking forward to a return of the sharp-tongued short-tempered hellion she was for those few weeks that Kent worked in City.

Let's see, what else is new? We had a couple of really big stories. Some firebug is working the city. The arsonist has money and time and intelligence; he hasn't been caught yet, and Sawyer told me off the record that unless the guy makes a mistake or burns himself to a crisp, he never will be. He's too good. Just last week the bastard lit up four floors of the Bank of America building downtown. The four floors in the exact middle of the building. Every fireman in the city was down there, and Superman helped rescue the trapped workers and put out the flames, but there were still seventeen casualties. Over three thousand got out alive, though, so I'll count it a win for the good guys.

There's tension in the Middle East, but when isn't there? I've got two embedded reporters with our troops, and a two-bottle-a-week Mylanta habit because of it. Still, this is the job. Nobody ever said it was easy or safe. Lois would be over there, too, except for the twins, and I can't help breathing a sigh of relief that she has them. She's one of the best, but those fanatics like to kill journalists.

And that's another thing. Polly's a good writer, but she's no Lois. I can't help but feel that our Superman coverage is below par. Lois knows him like no one else; they have history together. She ought to be writing the stories, and it feels damn weird to see anyone else's byline under a Superman headline. I won't suggest it to Lois, though. I've heard enough jokes around the office about Nuclear Warhead Lane to last me a lifetime.

The usual bedlam around the office - when I said things settled down, I meant they've settled down to a dull roar. Gossip, rivalries, feuding, the whole nine yards. The girls in Fashion have asked me again to put one of those fancy cappuccino-dispensing machines in the break room. I asked them what was wrong with my coffee, and they dropped the issue again. Newsman's coffee - thick, black, and strong enough to make your eyes water - is one of the best parts of the job. Nowhere else can you get coffee that bad. Just don't tell anyone my cardiologist is making me drink decaf these days.

Halloween was two weeks ago, and the twins finally talked Lois into dressing up when she took them trick or treating. Would've been fine if they hadn't had to run back to the office and show off as soon as she picked them up from school. Kala was a scurvy pirate, complete with sword and eyepatch, and Jason was Godzilla, of course. The killer was Lois, dressed as a gypsy. There should be a law against walking into your office wearing an off-the-shoulder peasant blouse when your coworkers are used to seeing you in suits.

Oh, and I hired Grizzly Lombard back. He just moved back from Star City, and we've got a new CEO, one without attractive daughters. Sports section loves him, though, and his column sells papers. At least if he's here, he has Lane to remind him why he shouldn't harass women. I'll have to play absent-minded boss and ask him if his hand still hurts when it rains.

We've got a new artist in the graphics department who's causing a stir. It isn't enough that Sophie Noux is pretty and French, she's also damn talented and fast. One of the old stuffed shirts over there quit when she drew up a layout in fifteen minutes that would've taken him two hours. I suppose the time she's saving me taking over his work makes up for the time lost

when all the single and single-at-heart guys find excuses to drift through her department.

Sophie's charmed the hell out of Lois, too, which no other female on this job ever did their first day. The twins were up here when she was hired, and while we were waiting on her W-4 to go through the fax, she drew Jason and Kala. Lois has that little sketch framed, and Sophie's got a fan for life.

Speaking of the twins, I'm officially the Best Uncle on Earth, In Perpetuity. I admit, it wasn't very nice to Lois and Richard to give the kids live birthday presents, but children should have pets. Kids and critters go together like politics and corruption. And even though it was funny at the time, it was kinda sad to hear Kala telling Jimmy that Mom would get her a goldfish, "an' if we can manage not to kill it, maybe we can have a puppy!"

A goldfish? Please. Lois wants to strangle me, but the kids love their gifts. At least I didn't get them puppies that she and Richard would wind up having to walk, or kittens that shred the furniture.

Although I wish I'd known how damn big iguanas get before I bought that one for Jason...

Interim: Richard White

When I was in flight school, I thought I was the absolute hottest flyboy on earth. Untouchable, immortal, the next great flying ace, a born jet jockey whose natural aptitude would completely blow away my classmates and even my instructors. I was talented, true, but also arrogant, impatient, insufferable, and reckless, probably the guy voted "Most Likely to Kill Somebody in a Stupid and Completely Preventable Way - We Can Only Hope It's Himself."

Then this one morning, I'd rushed through the preflight because it was just beautiful out, and I wanted to be up there. I liked to do things fast to show off, and as we were getting ready for takeoff, I flipped all the switches and goosed the throttle. Only, I *didn't* switch them all, or I switched something off that should've been on, or I missed something in the preflight. Maybe I somehow caused a short in the electrical system. My instructor and I never quite figured out how the hell I did it, but I got the jet into the air and then lost power completely.

There is nothing more unnerving than sitting in several million dollars' worth of Uncle Sam's property, and realizing you are now operating this finely-tuned fighter jet as a glider. With only about a hundred feet of air beneath you. In the Armed Forces, there's something called the Pucker Factor. That experience showed me how apt the term is.

I got the jet landed somehow, without wrecking it. I was too shaken to try putting it up again, so I just parked it and stared at my flight instructor. I'm not sure if any cadet has ever scared an Air Force sergeant right out of his repertoire of profanity before, but the man just sat there staring at me for a good five minutes.

It knocked all the cockiness out of me, though. And I'm grateful that it did. What bothers me is that feeling of floating along almost peacefully, the roar of engines abruptly and unnaturally silenced, knowing that unless you do something quick, there's gonna be one hell of a wreck soon. I've never forgotten that feeling, and I'm having it again with Lois. This relationship has stalled like that jet's turbines, and now we're coasting along, gradually but surely heading for a very rough landing.

We haven't really been fighting that much - we argue a little now and then, but both of us are avoiding the big one. There are so many things we don't say to each other now, so much we don't talk about.

Thing is, we aren't doing anything else, either. We hardly even see each other - Lois is

always working on a story or staying late at the office. And sex is pretty much out of the question. Lois can't sleep lately, so she says coming to bed is pointless and stays on the computer. Damned if I know how she can work on just two or three hours of sleep. When the insomnia gets bad enough, she takes one of the sleeping pills Dr. Saavikam prescribed for her, and fifteen minutes later she's out like a light. Either way, our love life is basically nonexistent.

Those are just two symptoms, though. Lois is so distant, often lost in thought and staring at nothing. She worries incessantly about the twins, in spite of the gun she carries everywhere and the off-duty cops who cruise around our neighborhood as a favor. Sometimes she gets so distracted, so wrapped up in trying to run down the Vanderworth yacht and find Luthor before he finds her, she even forgets to eat. Between that and not sleeping and working all hours, I swear she's dropped five or six pounds in the last two months. I like my women on the lean side, but not model-skinny; that just looks unhealthy. Lois was petite to start with, and the weight she's lost has made her seem almost frail.

All of that taken together makes me wonder if we shouldn't start seeing a couples' therapist. Fat chance of getting Lois to go, though. Dr. Saavikam told her that insomnia as a symptom of stress is best treated by counseling and lifestyle change, but Lois talked her into getting the pills instead.

To top everything off, my insane uncle decided to buy a ferret and an iguana for Kala and Jason. He didn't even warn us; showed up the day before the party and snuck the animals in before Lois and I knew what was happening. Of course, once the kids saw them, there went our chance to stop Perry's plan. I'm just glad the twins aren't allergic to either of their pets.

There is one good thing going on, though. Clark Kent transferred over to International. We all knew Lois had a problem with him, but nobody knew what it was. I still can't see why any department in their right mind would let him leave - he's fast, his style is distinct and very readable, and he seems to know a source for everything. He's been practically indispensable in Mexico - his Spanish is better than mine, and he blends in with people in spite of himself.

In fact, I quite like the guy on a personal basis. Lois hates that - she's quite nasty any time I say something nice about Clark. But hell, he's polite, intelligent, well-spoken, and he's got that old-fashioned integrity that so few people still have. This is a man who would drive forty miles back to a store that gave him three cents too much in his change. You have to admire anyone who can maintain those kind of values in this society.

Since it can't be professional reasons, there must be something personal between Lois and Clark (doesn't *that* sound like a daytime drama). Eventually I'd like to know what it is, but I know better than to outright ask either of them. Lois will explode if I mention his name, and Clark gets visibly ill if I mention hers. It's crossed my mind that they might've been involved somehow, but if they were, no one here knows about it. Her opinion of office romance - before I came along anyway - was very well known and often quoted to me. I guess there are a lot of frustrated suitors around here.

Speaking of which, I knew Lois was going to dress up for Halloween with the kids, but hot damn! The hair down and curly, the eyeliner, the blouse, the boots ... for a second I almost didn't recognize her, and then I was speechless with awe. The woman is a knockout.

Yeah, she may be difficult to live with, and she might be having a nervous breakdown as we speak, but I do love Lois so much. Now if only I could figure her out...

Interim: Clark Kent

I needed this two-week break, although trying to dodge drug smugglers and coyotes and

Texas militia isn't much of a break, especially when I have to hide my alter ego from Richard, too. Thankfully, this *is* Mexico, so all I had to do was 'accidentally' drink the water and I gave myself plenty of excuses to rush off without explanation. In spite of the stress, it beats the office. I don't know how much more of *that* I can take.

I see Lois every day, but she doesn't see me - if she happens to glance my way, she averts her eyes, always with that angry, wounded look. And after two months, I still haven't been able to talk to her. She avoids me like I'm a leper or something, cuts me off mid-word if I say so much as 'Good morning' to her.

Doesn't help that I'm tormented by memories. Not just the physical, although those flashbacks are haunting me. I remember when Lois was happy, when she'd flash that thousand-watt grin at everyone, particularly me. I remember hearing her laugh without that sardonic edge to it. She's always had a hint of darkness in her soul, remembered pain that turned to anger, but the sheer joy of hunting down a story used to overshadow the past. Now there's a fraught quality to her, Luthor's threat gnawing in her mind, and I'm sure knowing that I'm over here in International isn't helping. Sooner or later, something's got to give. We can't go on like this.

In the meantime, at least I can see her kids. Richard likes to bring the twins over to our department, and they really seem to like me. They are all of Lois that I can have right now, and I adore them both, even when they bring their new weird pets to school and thus to work afterward. Put this on your resume, Kent - you can make conversation with a black ferret named Captain Jack and an iguana known as Ignatius. Oh, yeah, and if they ever need an experienced mediator in the Middle East, let them send their trainees here to deal with Jason when Kala calls the lizard 'Gazeera' instead.

The twins just turned six. I thought they were younger - if I'm doing the math right, Lois didn't even wait a whole month after I left, and that's something I'd *really* like an explanation for. Turns out the kids just look younger than they are, being a little fragile. Just like their mother, they might be small, but they make up for it in willpower. That's not the only way they take after their Mom - Kala even has her occasionally smart mouth, which Richard laments, even if he's also amused by the comparison.

Richard. God, what am I going to do? I don't want to like the guy - he's engaged to Lois, whom I keep thinking of at random moments as *my* Lois, and he has the life I wish I could lead. But I can't help becoming friends with him. It just isn't in me to stay jealous and angry in the face of someone who genuinely likes me and is happy to see me every day. I've even heard him tell Lois she's crazy to have let me leave City. Why couldn't he be a jerk? Why couldn't he just be wrong for her? I feel so guilty for being friends with him and at the same time wishing his fiancée was with me. This is hell on earth.

Nevermind. Thinking on that does nothing but ruin my day. What I'd rather think about is the potential lead in the Vanderworth case. I do have to turn it over to Lois when I get back - it's her story again now that I transferred, but the message from Karla Smith-Bennett went to my voicemail. She's an attorney formerly with the firm that represents Lex Luthor and used to represent Gertrude Vanderworth. Ms. Smith-Bennett left the firm while they were working to get Luthor released from prison, for ethical reasons I believe. Perhaps she'll talk off the record about his plans, if she knows them.

I can't help thinking Luthor's somehow connected to this arsonist in Metropolis. He ruins my day, too, but I'd rather think of him than Lois. I will catch this man, whoever he is. One day he's going to make a mistake, and I'll have him. What makes a person want to do these

things? There is so much in this world to love, to rejoice in, why must some people find their happiness in destruction? I will never understand such a desire - everything I want so much seems so simple compared to these twisted people and their dark hearts.

Give me one thing with no darkness in it, one pure example of innocence and joy ... or better yet, give me two: Jason and Kala. The two of them never fail to make me smile, even when they bicker. Especially when they bicker, because I know them well enough now to know that, much as they fight, if an outsider tried to start anything with either one, they'd back each other up unhesitatingly. They're so protective of each other. I suppose they need to be.

I only wish they were mine. I suppose I wouldn't be so bitter about that if Richard was their father. Oh, yes, that was a shock. Someone finally enlightened me as the fact that Richard and Lois only got together three years ago. It was Ron, as a matter of fact. He and I have gotten quite close again - it's amazing how much I missed simply having friends. Anyway, Ron happened to mention in passing that he admires Richard for treating the twins as if they were his. That's when I found out that Lois had an affair - more of a one-weekend stand - while she was in Paris.

While she was looking for me.

Ron called it revenge sex; I can imagine the terminology Lois would use, and it makes me cringe. God, I have no words for how that makes me feel. The twins ought to be a slap in my face, a constant reminder of how angry Lois was with me, but every time I look at them I simply see her. Lois' eyes in Kala's, Lois' smile in Jason's, her laugh, her mannerisms, her stubbornness, and her character in both them.

One major difference between the twins and their mom: the kids like me. I don't know if it's the fact that I'm a misfit, just like them, or if I'm just one of about five grownups in the place who talk to them like they're adults. Every time Richard brings them to the office, they wind up at my desk. And I don't even have candy! Ron thinks that's hysterical.

At least I finally have a place to stay. The new apartment's on the corner of Siegel Street and Shuster Avenue. It has a nice view and reasonable price. Not too far from the office, either. Best of all, I can come and go pretty much undetected thanks to super-speed and a balcony. I got it through Vgerland Real Estate, so everything's aboveboard. My realtor was a wonderful lady from California, probably one of the ones whose life I saved back when Luthor and I first crossed paths.

I haven't bothered to hook up the phone service; I've got the cell phone, and it's not as if I'm going to be getting many calls that aren't Ma or business-related. Speaking of Mom, she's my main source of support these days, encouraging me to take things one day at a time. She says to think of all of those people out there, the ones wearing t-shirts with my symbol on them, and let their love and belief keep me focused.

I still can't help but worry for the future. Will I ever be able to make things right with Lois? And will I be able to stop this latest plot of Luthor's, his newest level of depravity?

Interim Cycle Two: The "Girls"

Interim: Martha Kent

I love my son. From the moment he came toddling up to me out of that scar in the fields, naked as the day he was born with a smoking spaceship behind him and a questionable future ahead, I loved Clark with all my heart. You hear people say things like, "I couldn't have loved him more if he was my own." Well, as far as I'm concerned, Clark is my own.

The first arms that held him on this planet were mine. His first meal was my famous corn chowder. His first word of English was "Ma." I was the one who wanted him, who pleaded with Jonathan to keep him, though Jonathan grew to love his son so much. And no one else will ever quite love him as much as I do, or understand that love, unless they too had the one thing they wanted most in the world literally fall from the sky and land right beside them. He is my very own miracle, my son from another star.

But as much as I love him, there are times when I could just swat him!

Like right now. Clark really can't comprehend why Lois is *still* so mad at him. He still loves her, he thinks she still loves him, she remembers everything, they should be able to come to an understanding, right? Wrong! Typical man, looking for the way to fix their relationship as if it's a leaky faucet. Some things take time, and nothing but time, to heal. And no matter what I tell him he just will not leave well enough alone. Bad enough she isn't speaking to him - if he keeps pushing her, she might turn that razor tongue on him again, and my boy's heart has always been tender.

Clark doesn't really understand women - could I expect anything else of him? He didn't get to have the same experiences as other boys, too afraid of revealing himself or accidentally harming a girl. His strength has always been a liability in itself, and he's been nervous about it since his powers began to show. And what a show that was...

When Clark was six or seven, we had one particularly vicious rooster. I kept meaning to make soup out of him, but he protected the hens so well that I forgave him. Well, Clark went out to feed the chickens, and that rooster attacked him. He was so surprised and so angry, and being pecked still hurt at that age, that he kicked that rooster.

Through the side of the henhouse.

He screamed so loud I thought he'd stepped on a nail or something. We found him in the chicken yard bawling, and the rooster was no more than a bloody pile of feathers against the opposite wall. Clark had never hurt a living thing before that - he knew where chicken soup came from, but he didn't want any part of killing. He was so horrified by what happened that he got himself all knotted up about it, worried God was going to send him to Hell for killing a mean old rooster I meant to behead anyway. It wasn't as if he meant to hurt the thing. He'd seen me shove the rooster around with my foot - not quite kick it, you know, but push it away - and there was no reason for him to think his little foot could do that.

That incident, and a few others while he was growing up, traumatized my poor son, and he was leery of girls, terrified of hurting them. If he could pick up a tractor, how easy would it be to break a girl's ribs just by hugging her? And he had a farm boy's education about death, life, and birth. If a normally well-behaved stallion could savage a mare, then what might my son - who could juggle horses if he wanted to - do to a girl if he lost control of himself?

Jor-El only reinforced that with his legacy and his mission to benefit us poor, weak, primitive Earthlings. "Yours is a higher calling" my fanny! We all have feet of clay - no one can be a perfect savior except the one who already was, and my son is not Him. Clark was

raised to be a man, but he always believed he could never have what a man wants: a wife, a family. He's not even the same species as us, there's no reason to believe he could ever father children. Though I wonder sometimes...

So Clark held himself apart from the whole world, as if his motto was "Look, but don't touch," and he made himself the gentlest man he could be. My heart bled, but I didn't know how to reassure him. What most people consider his blessing is really his curse - it really might be possible for him to hurt or even kill someone purely by accident. The one time he put aside his powers and his mission to try having an ordinary life, the world fell down around his ears. And he wound up having to resume his burdens *and* lose the girl.

I can't help but feel sorry for Clark. With all his great powers, all the amazing things he can do, the thing he wants above all else is the only one he can't have. And what makes it worse is that every day he has to work with someone who does have Lois Lane, and her children; this Richard White possesses precisely what my son yearns for. I don't know how he stands it.

And how much Clark loves those twins of hers! I hear about them every time he calls home or comes by for dinner. He adores them both, and he's very good with them. I know it makes him wish they were his. Makes me wish they were my grandchildren, too - I think I'd make a pretty good grandma. I know a dozen cookie recipes by heart, after all. But Clark is absolutely sure that the Lane kids can't be his. Not only are Kryptonians and humans probably incompatible, the dates are off by over a month.

Sometimes I wonder, though I won't mention it to him - it would only make him more determined to fix things with Lois. I wish I could meet the children, see if they remind me of Clark when he was their age. I wish above all I could meet Lois and talk to her. Maybe then I could learn the truth, one way or another, and silence that little voice whispering, "But what if they *are* his?"

Interim: Ella Lane

My God, these kids! What on earth am I going to do with them both?

Lucy is pregnant. Again. Another girl; that makes three girls and one boy, all in fairly quick succession. Someone's going to be spending a fortune on prom dresses as they all hit high school. Fortunately the Troupe siblings seem to get along, or at least they do when they're at my house. And even though I've gotten some funny looks walking to the ice cream shop with them, the kids are always welcome. If my snobby neighbors have a problem with my beautiful grandchildren, well, that's their problem. Sam would've said, "Take a long walk off a short pier."

Ron wants to name the new baby Michelle, after his cousin. Or as he says, "The one everybody calls Devil because she's always making mischief." What a precedent to establish for their youngest, but I suppose it's a Lane family tradition, too. I gave my daughters matching names and now they're giving me matching gray hairs.

Lois still hasn't told Superman the truth, and red-hot pincers couldn't make her do it. I've toyed with the thought of threatening to jump off something famous downtown until I get his attention and telling him myself, but that's just not something a man should hear from the grandmother of the kids he doesn't know he has. But I have to talk - or knock - some sense into my oldest. As near as we know, Superman is utterly alone on this earth except for those twins. And as near as *he* knows, he is alone. He doesn't even have Lois anymore.

And with Luthor knowing the twins exist, threatening them, that's reason enough in itself

to tell Superman about them. But Lois flatly refuses to do it. She's convinced he'll see the twins as a mistake, as living reminders of the one time he failed in his mission. Or worse, that he'll decide only he can properly raise them to their half-Kryptonian heritage, and take them from her. Somehow I doubt he could be that cruel, but Lois' nerves are so frayed right now she can't even listen to anything on that subject. It isn't fair to him. But it isn't fair to Lois either. And it *really* isn't fair to Richard.

I like Richard. He's a wonderful man, but I was always surprised that Lois chose him. She *hates* military guys. And Richard's just so ... nice. Lois has been fairly mellow the last few years - mellow for her anyway - and I can't help but cringe at the thought of him seeing her go nuclear. There are parts of Lois he's never seen, and some of those are her worst traits. A very few are her best. The poor boy doesn't really know her, but I've bitten my tongue and kept a smile on my face. Neither one will take advice from me, so why bother to give it? I just hope Lois hasn't taken the wrong lesson from my life and decided to stay with someone just because he loves her and she's comfortable. That wasn't how it was between me and Sam. I loved him just as much as he loved me, even if he did make me crazy sometimes. I don't think Lois can say that about Richard, but I know enough not to ask.

At least Lois now has someone to confide in, though I was horrified by some of what she told me. She didn't know if the twins would have their father's powers, or when they'd get them. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility for them to be born with his strength, which might've killed her during the birth. That was why she wanted me there in Paris. Not just because this was her first pregnancy, but also because she really thought she might die bringing the twins into the world.

My brave girl. She knew that, and she still kept the secret she'd promised. Lois had it set up to where if anything ever happened to her, I'd get a letter telling me who the twins' father was. Always prepared. I wonder if anyone else realizes just how often she forges ahead in spite of herself, in spite of being afraid or angry or nervous. Probably not. She's too damn good at hiding how she feels.

Even from herself...

Interim: Lois Lane

*No matter what I will be there
I'll be gentle, I'll be light
These are the words you
Whispered In the night*

Here I Am

Here I Am

*Now I'm standing in the cold
(Everything is said and done)
Atomic winter in my soul
(From the absence of the sun)
The only remedy I know
Is I gotta let you go so
Here I Am...*

And this is what I woke up to yesterday, playing via the radio station set up on my alarm. What a way to jumpstart your morning, never mind a guilt complex, huh? I can't even fathom

when I programmed that in. Doesn't really matter. At least I had managed to make it to my bed this time and wasn't asleep on the couch. But with the way things have been of late...

The last thing I want to do is start this out by using one of history's greatest clichés, one phrase hated by authors and journalists universally. Yet it doesn't make it any less valid. Here it is, anyway: If you had told me six years ago where I would be standing - hell, if you had told me three years ago - I would have had you committed. As it is... I'm honestly considering it in my case. Then again, you think a lot of things at 4:38 in the morning.

Three and a half months. Almost three and a half months to the day. Once again I'm snatched from the arms of Death, this time by an angel who's fallen from grace in my eyes and flung face-first into a Hell of my own making. Why is it that I could never leave well enough alone, especially where he was concerned? And why is it that my mind always tries to make this idiocy between us into something more poetic than it is?

The fact that he creeps into my thoughts even now infuriates me to no end. He has no right to even exist for me, let alone expect anything of me, not after what happened between us. Or wasn't supposed to have happened. That one simple act made his choice before he disappeared loud and patently obvious. He never even asked me! Sure, I was hurting, but who wouldn't have? I had the one thing I wanted more than anything else torn away from me by sheer guilt; there was no discussion of a way to salvage things, no compromise. It was just over, as if it were an unfortunate event best forgotten. And then, even those moments I had left to cling to were gone. As if they had never been.

Unfortunately, as 'merciful' and 'powerful' as this 'amnesia kiss' was supposed to have been, it seems it wasn't capable of magically erasing fertilized eggs in a human woman. Part of me is just vicious enough to wish he had seen the hell I went through when I went for a checkup for my 'Flu' symptoms and had Dr. Samuelle tell me with an almost paternal happiness that I was three months along. *Congratulations*. Sure. I remember even now the shock and horror that crashed down on me. It was impossible, I had thought. As much as I felt like a love-struck junior high kid, I had gone without a lover from the week after I met ... *him*. There hadn't been anyone else; despite the fact that he and I had had been flirting with the possibility of something happening, nothing had been plainly said.

I had been having somewhat vague daydreams around that time, but they had been growing more distinct as time went on. Not all of it was physical, although what I was dreaming was surpassing anything I had experienced before it. There was more, details of the battle with the Kryptonian villains that had been impossible to recall. Being at Niagara Falls, covering the Sunday supplement for Perry. But nothing had clicked. It came back, trickle by trickle, like melting snow. First, small and almost insignificant bits and pieces. Snatches of discussions. Some understanding of what had happened over those foggy three days. Then it moved faster, a stream, a river. Finding out his secret, my confession to him about my feelings, the flight north. His Fortress, all white and gleaming, the same place where the last of my childish fantasies ended. His father's vehement disapproval, his defiant decision. Watching him walk out of that crystal chamber, stripped of everything but that handsome face and his desire to be with me. And what came after...

All that came after...

Like the entire world falling down. And it being entirely my fault. If it hadn't been for me...

Can you even begin to imagine what it's like to discover that the near-destruction of your planet and race has occurred because you allowed yourself to be swept away, finally falling in

love for the first time in your life... with its defender? Especially once you're aware that that defender made things right again, only to disappear? I thought I was going to go crazy, to have the weight of that knowledge almost more than I could bear a second time. To have never asked for a child, especially a child of mixed species. To look down at your growing belly, knowing that, in his mind, it never should have been. And the last thing you want is a reminder of this 'mistake' that he made with you. To know that he would be horrified to know that this had occurred, the memory of his father's words probably still echoing in his mind? To have never wanted any of this?

And loving him too much even then to do anything to prevent it in any way. Protecting his image, hiding the pregnancy for as long as I could. Standing on the roof in the snow, looking up into the sky with tears running down my face the night they kicked for the first time. Wanting him so desperately, but ashamed to admit it. Ashamed to even have this small part of him that I had stolen away from the world.

Enough of that. God, why can't I just drop it? That's over.

Because I can't get him the hell out of my thoughts, no matter what I do. Damn him. Much to my own disgust, I'm realizing I'm missing him as much as I miss Richard. I'm such an idiot.

I wish I had an excuse for what happened the night of the Pulitzers. Not my finest hour, that much I'll flatly admit. It was an intense flickering instant of complete and total insanity on my part, to be bluntly honest. I have a wonderful relationship with Richard, a life most women can only dream of. It's comfortable, reliable, he adores the twins and loves me. Yes, loves me and I know that full well. He's never even looked at another woman since he first asked me out. He braved office gossip and my own opposition to get to this point. He wore me down and won me beyond any shadow of a doubt. He tells me every morning how beautiful I am, how lucky he is, and wants me every night before we go to bed as much as he did when we began.

But why isn't that enough?

And it's something I just don't want to think about. Kal-El is my past, over and done. A chapter that should have been firmly closed a long time ago. It doesn't help matters that Perry pulled a fast one. Resigned, huh? Well, that explains perfectly well why he turned up in Richard's department a few days later. Which is just perfect, seeing as how I wanted him out of my life and now a bullpen and two panes of glass separate us. Perfect. Some day I'm going to sneak some cyanide into that old man's coffee. Really, when he least expects it.

Besides, if that little cuteness wasn't enough, I owe him an automatic death sentence for the fact that the two latest occupants of my house are a lizard and a weasel. Neither of which is an appropriate gift for a six-year-old. I said 'maybe a goldfish'; Perry says, 'Sure, I'll get two of the most evil creatures on earth for you two, even if you are in kindergarten. Teach you some responsibility.' More like teach Mommy to get Aunt Loueen to leash her husband. All in all, the twins' sixth was an utter success. And it's a good thing that the looks of delight of their faces made my heart ache to the point that I forgot to attempt to flush that iguana when no one was looking. I have the feeling that dinosaur means trouble.

I hope he gets the flu at the first sign of a cold wave. Would serve him right, underhanded bugger.

Of course Richard's over the moon where Clark's concerned, thinks of him as the brother he never had. I can't even avoid hearing about him at home, within earshot of the twins. It does nothing for my nerves that they're both coming home in a day or two from Mexico, where they were working on a piece about the 'coyotes' there. Just the thought of the two of them talking,

especially Mr. Morality, makes me uneasy in the extreme. There are too many things both of them know, and don't know, and the last thing I need is for them to play Twenty Questions: The Lane Edition. I fought their going, with no luck. Richard and Clark both seemed baffled by it. Clark shouldn't have been.

And Perry really did put Polly Mattheson on the Superman beat. She's writing puff-pieces, to be politically correct. Could she be any less objective, asking the most random questions? She doesn't question his motives, doesn't try to pry with thought-provoking statements. The tone of the articles is so worshipful, I feel like I should edit them in the Cloisters. And damn Perry, he hired back that bloody former quarterback. I've already announced that Lombard had better keep himself busy in Sports and stay the hell out of my newsroom. He's a stress I just can't take at the moment. I also try to forget the sick feeling in my stomach that this latest rash of arsonist attacks gives me. Thank God it's died down the last little while that Kal-El's been gone. It's like this firebug knows it, too. And that's a thought I don't like at all.

With all that's going on, I'm so tired, yet it seems impossible to close my eyes for more than a moment or two without hearing a random scratching outside near a window or a high sound that might not be the wind. Goddamn that madman. Luthor's done exactly what I suspect he wanted. After all this time, I'm hair-trigger and attacking shadows. I've been on hyper-alert since our confrontation in August. The sound of winter in his voice when he spoke the twins' names scared me more than I'll ever tell a living soul. Even myself. It horrified me the same way that night on the dock haunts me still. There's an inescapable feeling of inevitability. This isn't over. Something's beginning, something's building even as I fight it. Sometimes I wonder if this will ever be over. Me, Luthor, Kal-El. It tears me apart to think that the sins of my past, of the 'mistake' that created the twins, a foolish night of selfish lust, could destroy us all. 'For want of a nail.'

But if Luthor thinks that he'll have even the possibility of taking them from me, he'll have underestimated me for the last time.

Interim Cycle Three: The Villians

Kitty Kowalski

I used to think that with Lex, I'd be going places. Well, it's true, except I'm only going one place lately: mad. I'm either wandering around this huge underground complex filled with science nerds and ex-cons, or I'm trapped on the yacht. It's amazing how fast even a boat that big can begin to feel really, really small. The only company I have most of the time is Tala. She's a sweet little dog, to everyone but Lex. I think she knows he's responsible for leaving her locked up in the Vanderworth house while he dragged me to the North Pole. Poor baby, she had to eat LJ just to survive.

If I was stranded somewhere with Lex, I wish I could say I'd do the same. But he'd probably kill me first. I think I really made a mistake with him. The man's crazy. Dangerous crazy. Thinks he's a god among us lowly mortals crazy. Nothing proves that more than his obsession with Lois Lane. His whole thing about her revolves around the fact that she hates him more than any other woman on earth. So that makes her about the most desirable woman in creation to him. Perverse, I know. But then, all his girlfriends hate him - present company included. He *kicked* Tala the other day, just booted her across the hall for no reason other than she was in his way. No wonder she tries to bite him.

So there's no one here for me to talk to. The scientists are all absorbed in the work on the crystals, and that includes Stanford. At least he used to be able to hold a decent conversation. The rest of the staff - the hired muscle Lex keeps for security - are cavemen. I wouldn't trust any of them alone in a room with me - the only reason they keep their hands to themselves is Lex. The one time Grant tried something, Lex threatened to castrate him with a bullet. At point blank range. The rest are scared enough of Lex's mood swings to avoid me. I just wish that Lex was so jealous because he actually cared about me. The truth is, he just hates for anyone else to touch what's his.

Of all the assorted thugs we have roaming around the place, the one that creeps me out the most is Brutus. Big, ugly, shaven, tattooed freak, who smiles a lot and likes cracking walnuts in his bare hands. That *does* describe half a dozen other people, but Brutus is just weird. I can't explain it, but I don't like him. It's like, if Grant ever got me alone, he'd rape me. And Riley would tape himself raping me. But Brutus - I have no idea what he'd do. Maybe sit down next to me, talk quietly to me, hold my hand ... and break each of my fingers while still smiling gently. That kind of weird.

Brrrr ... he gives me the chills! It's almost as bad as when Lex decides to stare at those birth certificates he got from Paris. The way he smiles then makes me want to go take a long shower. How the hell did I get mixed up with these people? I just wanted some excitement, someone to buy me diamonds and furs. I got that - fearing for your life is damn exciting, but what's the point of wearing a mink coat if there's no one to *see* you in it?

Lex Luthor

Things are going nicely according to plan, for once. The research progresses - Stanford is perhaps overly cautious, but since my theft has not yet been discovered, we have the luxury of taking our time. I'll have plenty of warning when that caped buffoon finally realizes he's been robbed - all of my old haunts are being very quietly surveyed by remote camera. Lane has been sneaking around the Vanderworth property, but no sign of *him* yet. The first glimpse of

him looking for me, and I'll implement my second plan of distraction.

The first is going very well. Most arsonists deserve the name firebug - they're scuttling creatures with little brains full of fire, liable to burn themselves to a crisp or to get caught videotaping a blaze of their own making. Easy to squash, and deserving of it. But with my help, Carl is making himself very useful. I choose his targets, I plan his methods, he just does what he does best, and loves it. He might even manage to keep the alien busy long enough for me to find out the optimum salinity for crystal replication.

It's not nearly as fast as I'd hoped. I had visions of my own continent, but no matter what we do, the crystals just aren't going to expand that much. There seems to be a built-in limit to how much growth we can get from a given sample. A tiny fragment will produce enough crystal to wreck a basement; a single complete crystal could have created his icy palace up north. Different crystals also seem to produce different structures, and we're not entirely sure how that works yet. Top priority is reproducing the console I stole the crystals from. Then I can access the information stored on them again.

The actual expansion is quite fast once it reaches a certain threshold, unless we happen to get a fragment that codes for something intricate, like the three-quarters spaceship that Stanford is fawning over right now. Too bad we don't have the whole thing. Still, there's a lot to be learned from this technology. I've chosen my research team very carefully; all of them are discredited for some reason or another, unable to continue in their own fields and willing to work underground for me. I mean that literally and figuratively - the lab is underground. Lining the outer walls with lead was obscenely expensive, but now that I'm free I've been able to tap into some of the assets the feds couldn't find and didn't seize.

I've had to revise my long-term plans, but I believe the payoff will be more than worth the wait. In the meantime, I have plenty to amuse me. Carl, of course - he positively capered when I told him how to do the bank. The next one will be even better. Although I must warn him about the fumes. He's using model airplane fuel - clear, odorless, and it even burns with a clear flame. But if he breathes enough of it he's liable not to make it back out of the building in time. That will be fine for when he's no longer useful, but at the moment I prefer my pet firebug alive.

Another guaranteed source of entertainment is Kitty. We're staying on the yacht or in the lab, and she's beginning to go a little stir-crazy. She talks to that damn powder puff of a dog now, wants to buy it fancy diamond collars and cute little sweaters. What is it about a fluffy little dog that makes woman want to dress it up? It's a *dog*; given the choice it would rather roll in something dead than wear a puppy parka. Besides, this yappy bitch has enough fur to keep it warm without buying it clothes. I know I've found its shed hair in my coffee more than once. The stuff *floats*.

But Kitty is so damned *funny* when she sulks. The exaggerated pout, the flouncing around, the intent stares, the melodramatic sighs - it's all I can do not to laugh out loud. She's smart enough to know that her continued health and safety depend on me, and I've been more interested in taking pages of laboratory data to bed lately than in having her there. What can I say? Even the most neurotic and treacherous woman eventually becomes boring. Kitty hasn't quite reached that point yet, luckily for her, but my plans come first. I never let myself get distracted from a goal.

If there's a secret to my success, that's it. I don't clutter my life with lovers and friends, and I'll *never* have children. Business before pleasure, avoid attachments, and always keep someone around to take the fall for you. Dear Otis, such a moron and yet so very useful, even

after I had him killed. This bunch, however ... Stanford's reasonably bright, and Riley at least has an interesting obsession, but Grant and Brutus are nothing more than hired muscle, men willing to lie, steal, maim, kill and rape for money. I worry about Brutus, though. He's the only one who hasn't started sniveling about the lack of women around here. Must keep an eye on him - I can't imagine Kitty lowering her standards that much, but it's not beyond the realm of possibility.

I'll have to consider bringing some female company down here. Restless men are rebellious men, and I'd hate to have to shoot a couple of them to keep order. It's messy and wasteful, and it would disturb the scientists. For the most part that group stays absorbed in their work and don't need women around, but the security staff needs some outlet for their collective testosterone. I can easily procure a few women whose affections can be purchased. Of course, then I have to worry about rivalry and possessiveness, not to mention that Grant isn't the only man I employ who was imprisoned for rape and murder. It could get expensive if the boys keep breaking their toys.

I must keep my mind active while I'm down in the lab. Fantasizing about what I'll do if my plans come to fruition in exactly the right way isn't enough, though it *is* quite entertaining. Fortunately, I have at least one mystery to ponder. On days when the scientists don't have anything interesting for me, I can always open the lockbox in my desk and look at my latest prize. It wasn't easy to get these two simple sheets of paper, but they provide me with no end of joy and speculation. It's amazing how the absence of one little thing can mean so much - particularly when it's a name, any name at all, on the line marked 'Father' of a child's birth certificate. I suppose she didn't know his real name - not that anyone does.

I wonder if Lois even knows who the father is? She did have partial amnesia. I'm not completely certain myself. The timing is about right - they behaved like lovers when I saw them last, and the children were born ten months later. They could've been conceived just before he vanished, or the gestation period for half-alien spawn could be longer than a normal human pregnancy. I doubt anyone else would guess at the latter possibility. People forget what he is - simply because he *looks* human doesn't mean he is human. If the twins really are ... *his*, Lois is lucky the brats didn't have his powers in the womb. Though that would've made for wonderful welcome home - "Hello, Superman, one of your kids kicked a little too hard and your woman hemorrhaged to death. And you didn't even know she was pregnant."

That's almost as bad as what I have planned for him...

The Russians say revenge is a dish best served cold, and though it may be very cold indeed by the time it reaches my plate, I'll be completely content. I may never have so delicious a meal again, but if everything falls into place just right, I'll never need to, either.

Sweet satisfaction, thy name is vengeance. *Complete* vengeance.

What Would Happen If

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At speed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

first sketch to last stitch was so much more fun.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. Four times."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hints and Allegations

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What was that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Any ideas on how the arsonist got in?"

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

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

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

damaged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How many bombs were inside the building?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And twenty cameras caught his poleaxed expression.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lane residence," Ella answered in formal tones.

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

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

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

Jason immediately hollered back, "Is not!"

"Is too!"

"Is not!"

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

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

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

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

It's All Coming Back To Me

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

steal Superman's girlfriend.

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

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

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

"Bitchy?" Richard finished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Huh? But Chief, why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, God," she groaned.

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

Lois winced. "Perry..."

"Have you even told him yet?"

"Told him what?"

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

"What about..."

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

Lois sighed disgustedly. "I think he suspects."

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

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

Glass Houses

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

Next message...

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

Next message...

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

Next message...

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

Next message...

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

Next message...

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

Next message...

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

Next message...

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

Next message...

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

Next message...

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

Next message...

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

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

play her messages, which became more and more shrill.

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

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

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

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

I need Ma.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

a man over the age of nineteen!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where are you, Lois?" Maggie said.

"Leaving the office."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Smartass reporter."

"Jaded cop."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fine! So talk."

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

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

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

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

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

"I know."

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

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

"What are you talking about?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Fine ... Joanne."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lois, I'm disappointed in you."

"Momma..."

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

was going to hear it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank your husband for that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Momma..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

make himself at home."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Throwing Stones

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

Almost as much as she needed the people inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Didja kick their butts?" Jason asked hopefully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Amen," the Troupes echoed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

you two. Time for bed."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

pronounce the girl's name?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure?"

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

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

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

"**No!**"

"See why I never said anything?!"

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

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

"Did you ever sleep with him?"

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

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

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

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

"It's none of your business!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Closing of the Day

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure?" Jason whispered back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Kala? You 'wake?"

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

"You started it!" Jason hissed.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

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

"Fine! Just tell me why Mommy left."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Pregnant?" Clark gasped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lois..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was nothing to watch on television except infomercials, so Richard turned it off and looked at the clock. Hmm, four in the morning, which meant it was about ten in Paris. Plenty late enough in the day for what he'd decided to do.

He took the notepad beside him and looked at the list of numbers he'd gotten from directory assistance yesterday while waiting for Lois to get home. Four men who had worked for *La Tribune Quotidienne* six years ago, and seven others who shared Jason's middle name. Garen wasn't all that common a name in France, it seemed, and if Lois had really named the boy for his father, then one of these would know her.

If I have to argue with her again - and I just might - I'd better do my research first. If what I suspect is true, I have to eliminate all the other possibilities first.

Picking up his cell phone, he dialed Garen Lamoureux first.

Stutter Steps

Perry walked in early, secretly pleased at the prospect of lambasting Lane, Kent, *and* his nephew. Lane and Kent had both snuck out yesterday, and even though Lois had asked to leave and Richard had called after the fact to let him know, Perry could blame them for Kent's absenteeism and each other's. *Nothing more delightful than the prospect of winding up three of my best reporters and turning them loose on an unprepared world.*

But when he actually walked into the office, he saw a pitiful sight. Lois was slumped over her desk, asleep in the clothes she'd worn yesterday, just one hand and a mass of wavy black hair visible. *It's worse than I thought*, Perry mused, scowling. *Usually it's the man that gets thrown out of the house during a fight. Well, Lois never could do anything expected.* At least he had an hour before anyone else came in. That ought to be enough time to put things right...

Lois woke up very slowly, feeling as if her head was stuffed with cotton wool. Her neck and back and legs ached, too, and the arm she had laid her head on was numb. *Oh, God. Now I remember why I don't do this anymore. Eww, I fell asleep without brushing my teeth. Yuck. I'm getting old.*

She lifted her head, hair tumbling into her eyes, and focused blearily on the insulated coffee cup in front of her. Fragrant steam rose from it, smelling nothing like the over-boiled mud she usually got at work. Eyes practically crossing, she pulled it closer and took a sip.

"Well, at least we know she's alive," Perry's gruff voice said behind her as she put the cup back down. She whirled as he continued, "Your devotion's admirable, Lane, but you really didn't have to sleep here to be on time for the conference."

"Perry..."

"And don't try to weasel out of it, either. Your name plate says *Assistant Editor*, you have to go to the meetings. Most of them, anyway. I *ought* to make you go like that, only I'm too nice."

Perry looked more amused than anything else, so Lois just drank her coffee and looked at him with an eyebrow raised.

He grinned. "Olsen was kind enough to come in early and pick up your dry cleaning, so that suit Kala spewed on is here and ready for you to wear. He also got you some coffee from that froufy little shop on the corner. Now I've got him running down to the convenience store for a toothbrush and toothpaste. Loueen's on her way in, and I asked her to pick up whatever else you'd need. I don't meddle in feminine mysteries, and neither should Olsen. Besides, Loueen's more likely to accurately guess your bra size. She said you'd have makeup?"

"Yeah, I have a makeup bag in my desk," Lois muttered. "Perry, what about the twins? Who's taking them to school?"

"Richard," the editor replied. "I called him and told him you'd slept here and he needed to take the monsters in."

Lois winced. "Lovely. So how much has your nephew told you?"

"Not a damn thing, and I didn't ask," he retorted. "But I think he was glad to know you were here and nowhere else."

Ouch. "Point made, White, now leave it." Lois took another swig of the coffee, glad that Starbucks knew her usual, and raked her fingers through her dark hair. *What I really want right now is a nice long bath - I missed my morning shower. Speaking of which...* "Perry, if it's going to be a few minutes, I'm going to go down to the gym and have a shower. I feel grungy."

"Knew that free membership for the executive staff would come in handy," he muttered.

"Go on, I'll send Loueen down there when she gets here."

Lois got up, wincing when she stretched, and kissed Perry on the cheek as she went by. "Thanks, Dad," she said, and though her tone was light, her eyes were sincere.

"Yeah, like I'd admit to a daughter like you," Perry groused, but he was smiling. "Don't pull this nonsense again or you're grounded."

Clark woke up late, having been afraid to return to sleep after that dream. His walk to work was further delayed by a car wreck on the way; he didn't have to change out of uniform to unobtrusively pop open a stuck car door and help the fortunately-uninjured driver out. The young man's alcohol-laced breath made the wreck just another statistic for the officers who were arriving as Clark ducked out of the scene.

Lois would have been amused at the number of 'unofficial' rescues he did, and the thought of her made him smile bittersweetly. That dream had been so very real, and even now he wished he could exchange this life for the one he'd led in it. *Too late*, Clark thought. *I have no idea what would happen if I turned back time that far, and it would be unforgivably selfish of me to do so just so I could have a second chance with Lois. Saving her life was one thing, and I only turned back time a little while. But more than six years... No. Never.*

At least they had promised to be civil to each other ... and he *still* had to get the info from Karla Smith-Bennett over to Lois. Last Clark had heard, no one had officially picked up the Luthor/Vanderworth investigation after he left City, so that meant Lois was most likely doing it unofficially. She never would leave a story while there was the faintest hope of getting some answers.

Mulling over the Luthor problem, Clark continued on his way to work, not particularly worried about being late. Perry had always forgiven his occasional disappearances and tardiness as long as he finished stories on time ... speaking of which, he had to wrap up the second article on the trip to Mexico...

Lois let the hot water blast straight into her face, hoping it would wake her up enough for this damn conference. She'd have to remember to refill the shampoo and conditioner bottles she carried in her makeup case...

"Hello, Lois? It's me, I'm here to rescue your silly butt. Did you really spend the night here?"

The reporter grinned. Marriage hadn't tamed Loueen, apparently. "In here. Yeah, I had a few things I wanted to look up and I fell asleep at my desk."

"Type-A overachiever," Loueen said affectionately, tucking a strand of thick chestnut hair behind her ear. She was right outside the shower stall now, and added, "I hope I guessed your size right ... I brought panties, bra, stockings, slip, and camisole. Everything matches - I figured it was the pinstripe."

"Mm-hmm. Thank you so much, Loueen. You didn't have to."

"Yes I did. That's why you shouldn't marry your boss; you get used to actually doing what he wants."

"No such worries here," Lois replied, turning off the spray and grabbing the towel of the shower door. "You're the one who wanted to get hitched, not me."

"It does have its benefits," Loueen said lazily. "Such as not having to fight over the 'official office hot chick' title anymore. A much better wardrobe. More money in the house. And it has drawbacks, too, I'll admit. He didn't tell me you didn't know about the pets until we

were at your house and he wanted to sneak them inside."

"You know," Lois muttered as she finished drying off, "one day, you're going to be a widow because of that little trick, right? The lizard is evil."

"Tell me about it. It got loose in our house and I had to chase it off the curtains with a broom." Lois heard Loueen chuckle, and then the younger woman said, "Everything's right outside the door here. I'm going to go see if Jimmy's back with your toothbrush. Somehow I don't think he'd dare come in the women's locker room even if they let him."

The black-haired reporter grinned to herself, pulling the shopping bag into the shower stall. No, he probably wouldn't have, especially since he knew she was here. Several years ago, Lois had been in the habit of quickly changing clothes in the janitorial closet, which was closer than the restrooms. Jimmy had once walked in on her in mid-change, wearing just a bra and panties, and the young photographer had been so traumatized that he couldn't meet her eyes for days. That, and the life-sized picture of Perry now plastered on the closet wall, had cemented Lois' decision to walk the extra distance to the restrooms to change from then on... "No, Loueen, he wouldn't. Jimmy's too much of a gentleman."

"Like someone else we know," Perry's wife and former secretary replied. "The two that love you the most are the two least likely to subscribe if I set up a pay-per-view webcam over that shower door."

"Loueen! You're terrible!" Lois was glad the other woman couldn't see her blushing at the mention of Clark.

"It's true. Heck, the last time I saw you and Kent together was at that Christmas party, and he saw you over by the mistletoe and didn't even *try* to trip you so you'd be under it or anything. Jimmy I understand - he'd faint dead away if you kissed him, but Kent's just too noble. Lombard, on the other hand..." Her brown eyes fairly gleamed with amusement.

"You mean the hand I broke three fingers of?" Lois said sweetly, glad of someone else to discuss. "By the way, when did you start drugging your husband with illegal substances? He *rehired* Grizzly Lombard!"

"Don't blame that on me, he's always been like that. Something you know perfectly well," Loueen shot back, laughing. "Probably did it just for the fun of watching a big burly ex-quarterback hide from someone as petite as you. All right, I'm gonna go get that toothbrush before you blame me for anything else."

"C'mon, Loueen, everyone knows that anything that goes wrong is blamed on the last person who quit. Namely, you."

"Hey, Norm quit after me!" Loueen called from the doorway.

"He didn't quit, he died! There's a difference!"

"Fancy *you* knowing that!"

Any hope Clark had of arriving unobtrusively was blown when he walked in. Jimmy and Perry had both beaten him into work, and the editor rounded on him immediately. "Kent! What the hell did you think you were doing yesterday, leaving early?"

Caught off guard, he could only stammer in reply. "Didn't ... didn't Lois tell you? I was sick..."

"Sick of working, more like! First Lois tells me she's leaving early, then Richard skips out, then you just sort of drift out without a word. Got any explanation that *won't* make me laugh?"

"I had a, um, stomach virus," Clark said, feeling much the same way he had when he and Richard were in Mexico being unexpectedly shot at. "I did ask Lois to say something..."

"Well, I was probably too busy tearing her a new one for her spat with Superman on national TV to hear her if she did tell me," Perry replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, not noticing the way Jimmy hustled to his desk out of Perry's line of sight. "Besides, *Lois* isn't your boss. You should've called me or Richard. Of course, you couldn't have reached Richard because he took the afternoon off, too! I'm not going to put up with my best reporters playing hooky just because they don't feel like working. Is that understood?"

Bewildered, Clark said, "Yes, Mr. White, sir. I, um, I'd be happy to stay late and make up the hours..."

"No, don't start that. Lois tried the same thing last night and fell asleep here. She hasn't done *that* since Superman left. Dedication's fine, but when you people start moving in, I start to worry."

"Lois stayed here last night?" Clark's gaze darted to Jimmy for confirmation. At the younger man's silent, wide-eyed nod, he continued, "But the twins..."

"Richard took them to school," Perry said, then did a double-take. "Wait a minute. You told *Lois* you were sick? Thought you two weren't speaking. Didn't she drive you out of City?" He folded his arms and gave Clark a challenging glare. Behind him, Jimmy's eyebrows rose speculatively.

"Mr. White, I left City for my own reasons," Clark said, beginning to get a little testy. *I'm beginning to remember why I thought this could never work. Everyone's always poking their nose in.* "And Lois and I are both professionals. I happened to see her yesterday as I was leaving and asked her to pass on the message."

"Well, that explains why I never got it," Perry muttered. "Kent, in the future, call me. Lois didn't get any less vindictive while you were gone."

"Mr. White, I don't think you're being fair to Lois..."

"Fine, fine. She didn't get any less absentminded, either." Perry turned away, making Jimmy quickly start rustling through the papers on his desk in an attempt to look busy, and then the rest of the employees started to arrive. Grateful for the reprieve, Clark hurried to his desk and found the notepad on which he'd written Ms. Smith-Bennett's contact info, and all the background information he'd been able to gather on her in such short notice. As soon as Lois got back, it would make a nice peace offering...

Other reporters trickled in, and Clark's keen hearing was more liability than asset as he heard them *still* discussing Lois' behavior yesterday. *My God, the gossip mill never stops. Don't they have anything better to discuss? They're supposed to be journalists, why are they so excited by hearsay and supposition when the actual facts come down to so little?*

Lois swept into the office with Abigail Montgomery, Caroline Biste, and several other reporters. Clark watched her carefully, but he saw no signs of her overnight stay at the office. Only her hair was still slightly damp, curling into a mass of raven waves in the absence of a hair dryer. It relieved him to see that Lois didn't seem as harried as she had been just before he left for Mexico.

Now is as good a time as ever to face her. I just hope Perry hasn't riled her up too much...

Lois glanced up from her desk, ready to snap at Perry for bothering her about the damn conference again, and saw Clark sidling into her office instead. He was watching the editor as if concerned that Perry might catch him out of his department, and then turned to Lois with a nervous smile. "Um, hi," he said.

She had a brief moment of *déjà vu*, his coming into the office like that, most especially due to the way that her eyes seemed to no longer acknowledge the disguise. Only that goofy smile stopped Lois' suddenly train-wrecked feeling, the reminder that both the men she had always cared for were behind those glasses. Her heart ached suddenly then, too strongly to ignore, to just forget the consequences and go to him now. Forget Richard, forget the audience they'd have. Just tell him everything, right here and now...

And then she felt like an idiot.

They had promised to leave all that mess behind; she had given her word yesterday that they would get past all of it, not to mention last night's decisions on the matter. For a moment, she couldn't look away now that they were in the same room, but shook it off. Glancing away, she murmured to her former partner in almost her normal tone, "Good morning, Clark. Thank you for coming by. Close the door, would you?" There was a pause as he did so, then Lois dropped of management pretenses to ask cautiously, her gaze averted, "Hi. Feeling any better? No worlds to save on the way home?"

"No, not this time," Clark replied, still a little unsure of where he stood with her. "I... While I was in Mexico, this attorney, Karla Smith-Bennett, called me about the Vanderworth case. I guess she got my number when I worked in City and then took two months to call." He shrugged and laid the notes on Lois' desk. "Did a quick background check, she seems legit. Here's everything I could find on her in a hurry, and her callback numbers. I think she could help."

A fresh lead on Luthor's trail could be invaluable at this point, most of her own having gone dead a while back. And his resources were usually better, whether she had ever wanted to admit it or not. At least these days she knew why. Nonetheless... Lois arched an eyebrow. "Thanks ... but I'm not exactly a beat reporter anymore, you know."

Clark smiled at her knowingly. Sarcasm he could handle. "Uh-huh. That's why no one else is investigating the Vanderworth case, right? And that's why I saw your car parked up the street from the mansion a few days before I left."

Lois tried to look outraged, but it was too true. What did you say to someone who could check up on you with remote vision? At last she simply muttered, "Shut up."

He grinned and chuckled. "You're running it down on your own time, aren't you? Lois, you've never quit on a case. Never. If you think Perry wouldn't let you take it, you just won't tell him. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, isn't that your motto?"

His reaction to the entire thing was a million miles from what Richard's would have been. His light, taunting tone startled a laugh out of her, and for a moment it was like old times. It had been a rare moment when he'd scolded her very hard, she remembered, even when he caught her in a dangerous situation. Even as Clark, her most skeptical critic at such moment, he had always been just a bit exasperated. As Superman, he would only chide her gently, usually touching her cheek. He had always understood her so well, better than anyone else ever had. That was what she had missed the most, if she was honest.

At that laughter, so free and for once without the bitter edge he'd grown used to hearing, Clark's heart broke a little more. Once upon a time, he could've coaxed a laugh from her two or three times a day, been blessed by her fond smile as often. Lately, though, he had missed her happiness...

"All right, smart guy," Lois said in a mock-warning tone, a little half-smile lurking around her lips. As much a soft touch as she felt for letting something so simple affect her, she couldn't dismiss the relief it afforded her. Which she *tried* to dismiss. Although, there was one thing she

need to know...

Reaching for the manila folder, she opened it and glanced at the contents before drawing, "I take it then that you don't plan to rat me out Perry or Richard then? Or make any dire pronouncements about putting myself in danger? Something like that? I mean, it *is* part of your job." Her hazel eyes came up to look into his, waiting somewhat anxiously for his reply in spite of herself.

"Well, if you already know what I ought to be telling you not to do, and I already know you won't listen, what's the point of actually saying the words?" he asked almost rhetorically. Lois shrugged, lowering her gaze to the folder again. Clark felt almost as though he was pushing his luck to continue their good-natured banter, especially considering what he wanted to ask her later on, when he had figured out how to frame the question. *So, Lois, are they mine?* just seemed too bald a query. Instead he kept on with the repartee for which the pair of them had once been infamous. "The same goes for telling Perry. You wouldn't listen to *him*, either; you've had selective hearing as long as I've known you."

Those hazel eyes rocketed back up to his with a hint of affront in them. "I beg your pardon, Emperor of Eavesdroppers, you said something about *my* hearing?"

Clark wasn't sure if the remark was just mock-vicious or truly venomous, and he hastily backtracked. "I'm sorry, Lois, I had no right to presume..."

"Clark, stop," and her voice was gentler. "I did call truce, didn't I?"

His blue eyes widened at that, the memory of her voice in the night haunting him even after he had woken. "You ... you really said that? I thought I was still dreaming..." Remembering the subject of that dream, of her delicate hand on his arm, her voice so warm and knowing, Clark suddenly blushed and looked away.

What on earth...? Lois thought, her own eyes widening. *No, it couldn't be.* "Uh-huh. Yeah, well ... I really said 'truce.' Not that it'll be easy, but..."

He suddenly glanced over his shoulder at the door and frowned. "Richard's on his way in. Lois ... I'll talk to you later?"

"Sure," she said, glancing out the door as well. "That's *all* I need right now. Thanks for the info, Clark."

He was already at the door as Richard walked in on the opposite end of the bullpen. "You're welcome, Lois," Clark replied as he stepped out of her office, pitching his voice to carry. "I know you'll see it gets to the right person."

Lowering her voice so that only he could hear, Lois caught his gaze and whispered, "No, really ... *thank you.*"

The only reply he could make was a smile as he left, followed quickly by a little wave to Jimmy and an innocent, friendly, "Hi," to Richard. Lois, watching him head back over to International, saw the speculative look on her fiancé's face, saw also how exhausted he looked. *Jerk*, her mind growled with a momentary lack of sympathy for Richard, and she turned resolutely back to her morning's work.

Richard's eyes felt gritty, and his temper frayed, but he showed up for work anyway. At least the twins had been reasonably good that morning, only squabbling once and briefly; Lois' absence seemed to have turned them somber.

His mood was not improved by the sight of Kent leaving Lois' office as he walked in. But Richard replied to his greeting with what he hoped was a natural smile, and headed for Lois' office.

Perry waylaid him, though, and practically dragged him into the center office. "Just what the hell did you think you were doing yesterday, skipping out like that?" the editor barked.

Richard's eyes narrowed, and the calm façade began to crumble. "Uncle Perry, I do not need this right now."

"Yes, you do, and knock off that 'Uncle Perry' crap when I'm giving you a lecture," Perry snapped back. "Don't think you can get away with giving yourself a half-holiday just because you're my nephew."

"I don't think that, *Mr. White*," Richard growled. "I think I can take half a day off because I'm the managing editor who rescued your whole International department, *and* because I haven't called in sick in three years, *and also* because if I'd seen Lois yesterday we probably would have had our extremely ugly fight *here* in front of the rumor mill!"

"*That* wouldn't have been a problem because Lane wasn't here, either!"

"Oh, and I don't suppose you yelled at *her* like this, did you?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I didn't," Perry replied hotly. "One, she *asked* to leave - to get the kids. Two, she came in early today to make it up. Actually she came *back* last night, but regardless, she was here before me this morning, and you're not. And three, I never yell at Lois like this. For her I yell a hell of a lot louder and I use more profanity, too!"

Richard felt all of the anger and frustration and sorrow rise up in his throat like bile, but he bit his tongue and held it back. This was his uncle *and* his boss, after all. Perry didn't deserve the emotional equivalent of being puked on, no matter how much of a jerk he was at the moment. "Fine. Fine. I shouldn't have skipped out and I won't do it again. Happy?"

Perry crossed his arms and furrowed his brow. "No. I wish I knew what the hell was going on with you and Lois. Better yet, I wish I knew how to fix it." Then the paternal concern vanished beneath the editor's scowl. "I'm getting sick of my best reporters being off their form."

Exhausted, everything he had learned and suspected warring inside him, Richard gave up. *You're not the only one who's sick of it*, he thought, and offered Perry a crisp Air Force salute. "Sir, yes sir. I will no longer pursue a personal life if it affects my career, sir. Permission to go apologize to my fiancée, sir?"

Perry sighed heavily. The boy had been through the ringer, from the looks of him, and he was now apparently beyond everything but tired humor. "Fine, go on. But don't ever try this b.s. again."

Richard left without another word, glancing over at the international department as he did so. Clark was there at his desk, starting work as usual, looking as if everything was perfectly normal. Richard didn't know whether to envy or pity him, or some mixture of both. Sighing, he went to Lois's office and closed the door behind him gently.

She looked up, hazel eyes stormy, mouth tight with anger, and her whole body gone defensive. "What do you want? Here to take another couple potshots at me?" Lois said in low, even tones that still conveyed her tension.

Holding up both hands, Richard counted to five before he answered. "I'm here to negotiate a ceasefire." *Mainly because it's the only way I'll ever get you to tell me who the twins' real father is. And because I discovered I don't sleep well without you in the house at least.*

His only answer was a fine dark brow, arching up questioningly.

"Look, Lois, I was a jackass, okay? Sometimes I wonder if you really do care about me or not, especially when you don't tell me things, but that was not the way to start talking about it.

I apologize. Can we just sweep last night under the rug and try again?"

Lois groaned, letting her head fall into her hands. "Richard, I wouldn't have moved in with you in the first place if I didn't care about you. I wouldn't have let my *twins* anywhere near you if I didn't care about you."

He bit his lip again at *my twins* but let it pass, coming closer to lightly touch her shoulder. "I had a bad day yesterday, and you had an enormously awful one. Let's just let it be for now, okay? For the twins' sake? They were mostly quiet and well-behaved this morning, and they didn't ask where you were. I think they heard us fighting; neither of us wants them exposed to that."

She closed her eyes tightly, knowing Kala had to have heard it. Had to. Nothing else on earth could make her want to curl up in a shivering ball of tears and self-pity quite like the thought that she was being a bad - or even a mediocre - mother. "Fine. I was a little sharp with you, too. Let's just forget about it and move on." She looked up at him, a sheen of moisture in those eyes, but he saw the deep steel in her underneath that. "Richard, no woman *ever* tells a man *all* her secrets. If you care about me, stop digging."

"Okay. I love you." For the moment, he would stop. But Richard's mind was filled with the image of his father trying to patch up the spreading crack in his wall, plaster drying on his forearms, cussing the thing under his breath. They'd known all along that patching it was just a temporary solution; the wall would never be sound again with the growth of the tree and the weight of the house both pulling it in opposite directions. "I just worry about us, Lois..."

Lois sighed heavily. "Here, you still want an answer? Yes. Yes, it was romantic. No, we never actually dated, I wouldn't have called him my boyfriend, but yeah, we were more than just friends. Then he left me without even a goodbye, and it was over. There." Even as she looked up at him, she kept her thoughts from showing on her face. *In the middle of that, I found out my crush and my best pal were the same person, and we were both so giddy with the end of secrets that we did something a bit stupid, and being together almost cost us the world, literally, so we broke up and he stole my memories. Two months later he was gone, and eight months after that I had his twins. Kal-El's twins.*

Some of it showed; Richard knew she was still hiding something, even had an idea what it was. *And then you went to Paris to find him, and you found someone else there. Someone who comforted you when you were lonely. And his name wasn't Garen; I proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt this morning.* He had lost his taste for confrontation, though, and let it pass. Not that he wasn't still heartsore, still feeling that vague dread like freefall way too close to the ground. Richard just didn't want to fight anymore. He kissed the top of her head and said, "Thank you for telling me."

Lois had reached a similar state of mind, and remembered with an ironic twist the way she had whispered *truce* to the wind. "You're welcome."

Just then, Perry stuck his head in the door. "Time's up, nephew, if you haven't made up by now you won't succeed at it today anyway. Lane - where's that article on the fire yesterday?"

Lois opened her mouth, froze, and then slowly closed it with an expression of dawning horror. "Oh, *shit*." She smacked her palm against her forehead, feeling a terrible kind of betrayal - *I never miss a deadline, I never let anyone else get to the scene first, and I never sleep with anyone I work with. Now I've screwed up two out of three - nice going, Lane.* "Goddamn *idiot*. Perry, how much time do we have before the afternoon edition deadline?"

"You haven't even *started* yet?" the editor asked incredulously. "When you were here *all night*?"

"How much time, Perry?"

He glanced at his watch. "About two hours 'til we have to leave for the conference. You better type *fast*, Lane. And God help you if I hold a space on the front page for you and you don't get it finished."

In her precarious mood, she didn't dare to answer. Lois only swung away from both of them, booted up her computer, and got out her notes in silence. After a moment, Perry nodded, and took Richard's elbow. "C'mon, son, time to let Lois earn her keep. Something you might want to think about doing today, too."

Two hours later, Lois' eyewitness account of the fire was finished *and* proofread, and the reporter herself was on her way out of the city room with Perry. The editor was oozing with smug satisfaction; not only had he goaded his three best reporters into seriously putting their noses to the grindstone, he'd scared the Olsen kid into getting some work done as well. Best of all, Lois was going to an executive conference and for once not complaining about how she was a *reporter*, not a pencil-pushing middle manager.

He didn't see Kent glance up as they passed International, didn't see Lois meet his look for a heartbeat and then turn away almost shyly, without the frigid glare she would've given him before. Nor did he see Kent's eyes follow them both out of the room and to the elevator, unhindered by doors and walls, though Lois felt his gaze still on her.

None of them saw Richard in his office, watching Kent watching them. He was not entirely happy with the way things had gone this morning; he needed more data before he would let his suspicion become a theory. And then Richard saw the perfect source of info walk past the doors. *Olsen. I bet there's not much he doesn't notice about Lois. All three of them were thick as thieves back in the day.*

Clark, still looking after Lois and worried by her somber mood, heard Perry ask as they entered the elevator, "Just what *were* you working on all night if not the fire?" And as the doors closed, Clark saw the wide-eyed look she turned on him, all but saw the words *uh-oh* flashing neon over her head as she demurred. But he didn't have long to contemplate that incident, because he heard his own name from the city room.

He didn't need his particular vision to see trouble brewing this time. Richard was over at Jimmy's desk looking down at the hanging files full of photos, trying to seem casual but failing. "Looks like you have a bunch of office pictures from way back. Is that Perry before his cardiologist made him stop smoking cigars? Mind if I look?"

Storm Warning

Jimmy Olsen was in the throes of one of his rare fits of organizing. In theory, a better filing system would make finding photos simpler and faster, which in turn would leave him more time for actually taking the shots that would advance his career. In practice, the more organized he got, the harder it was to find things that weren't in their long-accustomed places. That didn't stop the young photographer from occasionally succumbing to the siren call of brand-new file folders with color-coded tabs, however, and at the moment Jimmy had several years' worth of pictures sprawled across his desk as he tried to update his filing system.

At first he didn't even see Richard walk up to his desk, and the international editor's voice startled him. "Looks like you have a bunch of office pictures from way back. Is that Perry before his cardiologist made him stop smoking cigars? Mind if I look?"

Jimmy looked up quickly, almost dropping the handful of folders he was trying to fit into his filing cabinet, and then smiled. "Sure. Some of these go back to before Clark started working here." *Go on and look, but don't be surprised at what you see.*

Richard started leafing through the photos on the desk, ostensibly looking at his uncle (Perry had never been without a cigar in the old days, even if he didn't always light it, he always had one), but really looking at Lois. Jimmy knew he probably had more shots of her than anyone without a crush ever needed, and Richard noticed that, too.

"You've got a lot of Lois here," her fiancé said offhandedly.

"She's a good subject," Jimmy replied just as casually, twitching an office candid out of the stack. "See here? Terrible lighting, but with her coloring she still shows up well. Good contrast. Besides, Ms. Lane never runs from the camera like some people." He showed Richard a picture of Lois smiling broadly, while Perry tried to skulk out of the frame with a scowl. "She's such a ham sometimes," he added, pulling out a few more.

As if by accident, Jimmy chose another that showed Lois grinning at his lens, having hopped up on a desk and crossed her legs to better show off her white skirt. It happened to be Clark's desk, and the edge of the shot captured his face. His expression was a complicated mixture of surprise and a touch of embarrassment, but his appreciation of the view was also quite clear.

Richard's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned, but all he said was, "It's amazing how much leg she has for someone so petite."

Jimmy didn't smile. He liked Richard well enough; he was a good guy, great with twins, and he adored Lois. But he wasn't Clark. Since realizing Lois thought of him as a cute little brother, James B. Olsen had always secretly hoped that his best friend would finally win her. *Have a good look, Mr. White. See what you interrupted. Well, actually, Clark interrupted it himself when he left for six years, but if you hadn't come along and pestered her into going out with you, I bet they'd already be back together. Clark's a lot less shy since he traveled the world, and I've seen some pretty intense looks going back and forth between the two of them. Besides, he loves her so much it practically surrounds him like a halo. If anyone here deserves Lois, it's him.*

Jimmy filed several shots of just Lois into their own folder, which was unlabelled. He had to remember to show some of those to Clark, just in case he needed to replace either of the snapshots Jimmy had given him years ago. Even with the best and most attentive care, pictures that old tended to yellow. The newer photo papers lasted much longer.

Richard was now investigating the group candid, what Jimmy thought of as the family photos. There were a lot of shots of Clark, Lois, and Perry in that stack, along with people

from all the Daily Planet departments. A majority of them had been taken at various company Christmas parties and other functions. The infamous 'premonition' snapshot was in there, Loueen kissing Perry under the mistletoe, the editor trying to look annoyed but not succeeding in the slightest.

And Richard saw it, smiling as he picked it up, but the smile melted off his face as he caught a glimpse of the shot immediately below it. This was the same Christmas party, from the year just before Clark left, and the same bunch of mistletoe hanging by the door. Lois was caught in the act of dodging away from it, her hazel eyes glaring up at the parasitic plant. At the edge of the frame, Grizzly Lombard scowling in disappointment at having missed her.

Much closer, Clark watched Lois, beginning to laugh at her adept evasion. He wasn't trying to maneuver her under the mistletoe like Lombard had been, just watching. Jimmy sat back and said nothing as Richard perused the pictures, seeing how many of them had Lois either grinning devilishly at Clark or Clark smiling wistfully at Lois. The two years they'd worked here together were chronicled in those snapshots, and they painted a picture of another relationship Richard knew nothing about.

"Wow. I never realized how close Lois and Clark were," Richard said to Jimmy.

"Well, they were best friends," Jimmy explained. "Didn't people tell you about the stories they ran down together?"

"The stories, yeah," Richard muttered. Then he looked seriously at the photographer and said, "You know them both better than anybody, Jimmy. Did you ever think ... something else was going on?"

Jimmy just raised his eyebrows and looked completely innocent. "Something else? Like what?"

"Like maybe they were more than friends." Richard was looking at the pictures now, avoiding Jimmy's questioning gaze.

"Oh." *Now how do I handle this? Tell him I don't think there was ever more between them, but I always thought there should've been? Back in those days, Clark was the only one here besides me and the Chief who really cared about her, and Perry and I were disqualified by age. The rest of the guys here just wanted to get in her pants. Clark cared - he still cares. He's the only one who deserved to be with her. But it's not like I don't know that Richard loves her, even if I don't think they're perfect for each other.* Jimmy took a deep breath.

"They were *best* friends, Mr. White. They had to be, to work together the way they did. And they cared a lot about each other." He paused, then shrugged. "Clark probably liked her, you know, more-than-friends liked her, but he's always been a gentleman."

"What about Lois? Do you think she liked him, and maybe nothing ever happened just because they had to work together every day?"

No way am I going there. "Hey, if I could read Lois' mind, Mr. White, I wouldn't get yelled at so much. Maybe she did. Maybe she just thought he was a nice guy, and the only one around here she could trust."

"Hmm."

Clark was bent over his desk, pretending to work, while listening to Jimmy's conversation with Richard. He was also looking at the same photos, thinking that Jimmy's pictures of Lois were clearly framed by Love's eye, and all but reliving the memories those snapshots carried. Jimmy even still had the full picture from which the one on his desk - hidden behind the photo of Ma - had been cropped. That one was from the last Christmas party, Lois lounging in a chair

after a couple of drinks, a sweet unguarded smile on her face, that incredible red dress...

She'd walked into the party, fashionably late, wearing that long black coat that covered her from neck to ankles. Someone laughed, someone else kidded her, "A trench coat? Some party dress, Lane!" And then Lois had smiled wickedly and shrugged the coat off her shoulders, letting it land on someone's chair. The exclamations and wolf whistles had startled everyone who wasn't looking her way, and Lois stalked to the punch bowl like a queen moving through a crowd of her adoring subjects. Hair down and wavy, lying night-black over her pale, bare shoulders, the vivid crimson of the dress in high contrast. It wasn't really all that racy; it was just that she wore it so very well... Clark had almost forgotten to breathe while he watched her, love and longing wrapped so taut around his heart he thought it would burst... And as everyone was leaving, she had hugged him tightly enough to leave the scent of her perfume on his clothes, and kissed his cheek...

The phrase "more than friends" yanked Clark's attention back to the present. It made him uneasy to hear them talking about him, especially with the direction Richard's questions seemed to be leading. Jimmy seemed to be avoiding a straight answer, for which Clark was grateful.

While he was wondering what would be the best way to distract Richard from his current line of thought, his phone rang. Momentarily startled, he answered it. "Daily Planet International Department, Kent speaking, can I help you?"

"Kent? C'est Henri Archambault. Parlez-vous français?" The reply had a heavy Quebecois accent, and this was the source he'd been trying to reach for his newest article. The man was notoriously difficult to get hold of ... no way he could pass up this call.

"Oui, je parle français. Merci pour retourner mon appel, Monsieur Archambault. Je voudrais vous demander..."

Clark soon found himself so absorbed in the call that he had to tune out Richard and Jimmy. Hopefully, the photographer wouldn't say anything incriminating...

Several minutes later, he hung up the phone with a sigh of relief. In addition to the immigration story, he now had an extremely knowledgeable source to quote for Quebec's continued desire to secede from Canada.

"I didn't realize you spoke French so fluently," Richard said from the other side of the desk, and Clark jumped.

"Gosh, I didn't even hear you walk up," he replied, keeping his face open and innocent while his stomach churned. "I took French in high school. And college. I like it a lot."

"Your accent's flawless," Richard told him, and there was that intensity about him, that slight narrowing of his eyes. "You'd sound right at home in Paris. Ever been there?"

"Oh, a couple times."

"I used to visit all the time when I lived in London," Richard said. "Hey, what years did you go to Paris? We might've just barely missed meeting each other."

Clark panicked a little then. He'd been to France many times, actually, but not as Clark Kent. The only time he could remember actually using his passport was the time he'd gone to the French observatory outside Paris to see what everyone had thought was Krypton. So he stammered a little as he named the year. "That was my first stop, you know, on my big trip around the world."

Richard's eyes lit up with an almost savage expression of triumph, but he damped it down quickly. For a moment, he'd looked almost like Lois when she'd shot him... Chills ran down Clark's spine. *He knows. He knows something. The last public save I did as Superman was*

that woman who fell into the Seine - how could I be so stupid? How could he not make the connection when I practically drew him a map? Oh, dear God, what am I going to do now?

But Richard's voice was very calm as he replied, "Yeah, I was in London then. Couldn't get away 'til summer, though. Oh well, I guess it's better we met working here, right? I hear enough crap about being Perry's nephew, it'd be worse if I'd been friends with the star reporter years ago, too."

Clark tried to chuckle, but it sounded a little rusty to his own ears. "Oh, no, I'm not the star reporter. Lois is."

"Lois isn't a beat reporter anymore," Richard replied, a glint in his eyes. "A lot has changed about Lois while you were gone."

Clark met his gaze with a faintly puzzled expression, trying not to remember Lois' mouth on his only yesterday, nor the things both hurtful and truthful she'd said to him later.

Perhaps they would've said something else, perhaps something they would both regret, but Clark's eyes went unfocused as he picked up a sound he was beginning to dread. *Fire engines? Not again!*

A moment later, someone monitoring the police bands yelled, "Holy crap! The French consulate's on fire!"

Perry and Lois were both gone. Richard gave Clark a twisted grin. "You're the one who speaks French, Kent. Get down there."

Clark just nodded, grabbing a tape recorder for the look of it. He was running for the air shaft before the reporters in City had even figured out who should go. Richard stuck his head in the bullpen and called out, "Jimmy! Head down to the consulate - I bet Superman will show up there pretty soon. One of you guys from city go, too - I've got Kent covering the international angle."

"Kent?" someone grouched. "Great, there goes the whole story. I'm not wasting my time. He's too damned good."

"The international angle?" someone else complained. "What international angle? This's Metropolis' arsonist!"

"Yes, the international angle," Richard said sweetly. "Because the French consulate is technically foreign soil. Your precious pet Metropolis firebug just targeted another nation for the first time. I'd say that's news, wouldn't you?" Into the utter silence that followed his chiding, he continued, "No volunteers? Gil, go for it. Get moving!"

He turned back to his own department just a second too late to see the look Ron had been giving him.

Lana left Agi's office smiling. One minor detail in the write-up of her fashion show had needed to be changed, something the event organizer had gotten wrong, not the *Daily Planet* staff. Ms. Vega had been very professional about it, promising to take care of the correction immediately, and getting that done so quickly left Lana with a large blank space on her schedule for the day. On a whim, she decided to go see Clark.

She arrived, unfortunately, only a few minutes after he'd left to catch the consulate story. "Sorry you missed him," Richard told her. He had just happened to be by Kent's desk, not nosing around at all, when she walked up. "I don't expect him back for an hour or two, but I can give him a message for you if you'd like."

"Oh, no, that's all right," Lana demurred. "I was just hoping he was free for lunch. I've only got an hour or so to kill."

"Hey, my lunch offer still stands," Richard said impulsively. It would be nice, for once, to spend an hour with someone who wasn't connected to the *Planet*, its rivalries, its demands, its gossip... "We can call it a business lunch and put it on the expense account; you're going to have shows in Paris and Milan, right?"

Lana laughed. "I don't think that quite qualifies as international news, Mr. White..."

"Please," he replied. The more Richard thought about it, the better the idea seemed. Lana was pleasant company, and he needed to talk to someone with whom he wasn't involved. "My uncle is Mr. White. I'm Richard. Although around here I mostly answer to Hey, You."

She smiled, and asked a trifle shyly, "Are you sure your fiancée will understand?"

A brief flash of something in his eyes, anger or annoyance, and then Richard chuckled. "At the rate things are going, I doubt she'd notice. Besides, this is business - you're a news source, Ms. Lang."

Against her better judgment, Lana let that handsome grin sway her.

Superman had never made any distinctions between nations; when the need of him existed, he answered it. The fact that the French consulate was technically foreign soil didn't slow him in the least.

This time, he was on guard, listening carefully for anything that might be a timer. *Same nitromethane, but no bombs so far. No delayed ignitions either. Why is his M.O. so different each time?*

He had little time to ponder it, though. This fire involved fewer people, but they were less amenable to the idea of fleeing the building and leaving their precious documents behind. All in all, he was kept too busy to wonder about much more than how many people were left inside, and whether the fire had smoldered into life again.

After it was all over, while dodging the press, his worries returned. *This arsonist is unlike any other in Metropolis' history. Some of his targets are much more elaborate than others; some seem political, others just seem calculated to create the greatest havoc possible. I'm beginning to wonder if this is the work of one man...*

Of course, there's always the possibility that Luthor's mixed up in it somewhere. Though I would expect Luthor's plans to have more rhyme and reason to them.

Boredom lay on Lois' skin like a swarm of ants, making her irritable and frustrated. The investments representative had been going on for more than ten minutes about the side of the business that interested her the least, and she found herself wondering if there was any way to escape the meeting. *If I see one more bar graph, I'm going to find out how far up that guy's nose I can stick this pen. Maybe if I pretend to have a migraine ... or the flu ... or Ebola...*

Her cell phone suddenly vibrated in her pocket, and Lois glanced at it under the table. "New text message," the screen read. Intrigued - even a wrong number would capture her attention at that point - she read it.

MS LANE. FIRE, FRENCH CONSULATE. SUSPECT: YSTDY'S ARSONIST. And it was sent from Jimmy's phone.

Lois leaned a little closer to Perry and hissed, "The French consulate is on fire! Jimmy just texted me. Looks like our firebug is at it again!"

"Damn," he muttered. "And I'm stuck *here*. Well, they'll send somebody."

"What if they send someone like Polly?" Lois whispered. "Neither one of us are there to make sure it's done right!"

"I could've been there if I'd trusted you to come to this thing without me," Perry replied out of the side of his mouth. "Ask Jimmy who went."

WHO COVERING? Lois tapped the little keys rapidly, and got a reply in seconds.

CLARK, GIL, ME.

"Clark? Clark?! He's bloody International!" she muttered. Not quietly enough, apparently, for several of the large men in suits sitting around the table glared at her, and Perry's elbow caught her ribs.

"Continue on, gentlemen, I've got Lane monitoring the pressroom for me," he said aloud, then grumbled, "It's an *embassy*, Lois, its International's baby."

"It's *in* Metropolis though."

"Technically, it's on foreign soil..."

"Bullshit," Lois growled. "It's surrounded on all sides by Metropolis, so it's City."

Perry was looking over her shoulder at the tiny screen. "Hell, one reporter from each department and a photographer. What more do you want, Lane?"

Lois glared at him and thought of another question. WHO SENT?

It took Jimmy a minute to work out what she was asking, then he responded, RICHARD SENT US.

Hazel eyes narrowed, and Lois glared at Perry. "I could've been on this one if only..."

"Hell, no, you couldn't," the editor growled. "Last time you went after a story you forgot your car!"

"That was different!"

Just as Perry opened his mouth to reply, he noticed how the rest of the board was watching them instead of the Powerpoint presentation. "Well? Is this a meeting or a spectator sport?"

Richard found Lana very easy to talk to. Perhaps *too* easy to talk to. "I just think, if you really love someone, you shouldn't keep secrets from them," he said, and speared a piece of grilled chicken.

Lana leaned on her palm and looked at him wryly. "So you want a dating resume? A list of everyone she's ever seen, all the way back to her first kiss? What would you do if she asked that of you? You went to college after the Air Force - don't tell me your list wouldn't be longer than hers, *if* you could remember all the names."

Richard paused, thinking, and then said, "Okay, you got me there. I was a stupid kid in college. But I don't want to know everyone she's ever been with, just the important ones."

"Oh. Just the *famous* ones." Lana chuckled and had a bite of her salad. "Has it ever occurred to you that she might not be trying to keep secrets? She might just be trying to respect his privacy."

"His *privacy*? He's *Superman*, he shows up on *radar*, Lana!"

"I know, that's precisely my point," the redhead replied, gesturing at him with her fork. "*Everyone* knows Superman. They know everything about him, they think. Don't you hate reading about celebrities in the tabloid papers? Don't you pity the people who have to live like that, everyone taking pictures of them at six AM when they're just trying to run to the corner store for some milk? And if they look awful doing it, the pictures get even more coverage. He has *no* private life, except with her. Can't you see why Lois would *never* talk about anything that happened between them?"

Richard opened his mouth to reply, then slowly closed it. Lana soldiered on.

"Furthermore, how could they ever have a real relationship? It's not as if he can take her to a movie or a restaurant. He's a six-four hunk in a bright primary suit. Not exactly unobtrusive, Mr. White. It had to be a very strange relationship, one that probably doesn't fit into any easily-labeled pigeonhole. If she really cares about him, she'll never talk about what happened. Not even to you - not that it's your business, either."

"It's none of my business?" Richard's voice rose slightly.

"None. That was years before you met her. She's not trying to leave you for him, is she? Seems like she's pretty upset with him still, from TV yesterday." Lana leaned forward to make her point more firmly. "*He's no threat to you, Richard.* You're smart, you've got a good sense of humor, you're handsome, you have a good job and lots of other great stuff going for you. Just let it be! Stop being a reporter for five minutes and ask yourself how you'd feel if she started grilling you about all those awestruck college girls."

Totally nonplussed by the question, Richard could only sit back in his chair and stare at Lana. The litany of his good points was very helpful to his ego, even if it was unexpected. "I ... I guess you're right..."

Lana rolled her eyes heavenward. "The man sees sense! Just don't harass the poor woman into doing anything stupid, and you'll be all right."

His eyes narrowed. "There *is* one more thing, though."

"Oh, dear God, what now?"

"The twins' father."

Lana peered at him over her glass of iced tea. "What about him? You *knew* they weren't yours. And he's clearly out of the picture, too. Unless... You don't think..."

"Nah, they're not *his*," Richard said. "She told me she'd never ... you know. And I kind of believe her. Anyway, he's an alien. I mean, come on. Nobody ever thinks about that because he looks just like us, but who knows if he could successfully hybridize with a human? Even if he could, I doubt the kids would be so normal. Other than being precocious and having some health problems, they're just regular kids. No picking up cars, no laser vision, none of that."

Lana just looked at him interestedly. "Okay, so if *he's* not the father, why are you so determined to figure out who is?"

Richard sighed. "Because I have a pretty good idea already who it is, and I think he deserves to know. It's no one from the *Quotidienne*, I know that. She said the father was a guest columnist, and she hinted that Jason's middle name is for him, but that paper has never had a Garen in its byline. The only Garen in Paris that even heard of her worked in the office across the street and happened to meet her for coffee a few times."

"Just *how* do you know all this?"

"Because I called them all. That last one, his boyfriend of the past twelve years answered the phone, so I know it's not him."

Lana dropped her fork and put her head in her hands. "My God, Richard, if she ever finds out about that, she'll kill you. You do know that, right? I only met her yesterday, and *I* know that."

"I know Lois," Richard said. "Like I said, I'm pretty sure I know who it is. But before I confront her, I have to prove to her that I know all her explanations are lies. Lois will never back down as long as there's a shred of chance she can brazen something out. I have to have evidence."

"Okay, fine, Sherlock. Who is it?"

Richard sipped his coffee, a beverage he believed complimented every meal including

dessert. "Nope. I'm not telling anyone until I know for sure, and then I'm telling *her*."

The redhead glared at him. "You mean after all that, you're not even going to share your suspicions? It's not like we know any of the same people!"

"I thought you said you hated gossips," he replied.

Lana's green eyes narrowed still further. "Oh, that's low. That's really low. Fine, Mr. Holmes. I *was* going to split the check, but since you made me eat my own words for dessert, *you* get to pay."

"I already planned to," Richard chuckled, "I'm putting it on the expense account."

Richard made it back to the office first, dropping Lana off on the way. Gil and Jimmy were next, claiming not to have seen Clark at the fire at all, but about fifteen minutes after they left to work on the article and develop photos, Clark turned up at Richard's desk with a typed rough draft of his own take on the events. He seemed puzzled that Gil and Jimmy hadn't seen him; he'd certainly seen them, and told Richard that Jimmy's photos would probably be front-page stuff.

Things had barely settled down in the office again when Lois and Perry got back from the meeting. Richard heard their raised voices before they ever got into the bullpen, and steeled himself for a confrontation with one or both of them. *The world would be a better place if I spiked the coffeemaker in here with Xanax*, he thought.

"Oh, bite me," Lois snapped as she shoved open the door.

"I can't, my cardiologist told me I had to give up cheesecake," Perry retorted.

Lois came to a sudden halt, and whirled to look at him incredulously. Half the reporters in the room instinctively buried themselves in their work, hoping not to attract notice. Perry just walked on by Lois, adding, "I knew there was a reason I don't take you out in public."

After a few minutes, she laughed, surprising everyone who expected to hear another extensive recital of profanity. "Nice one, White," Lois chuckled, a hand on her hip as she leaned against Jimmy's desk. "You're still a jerk, though."

At his office door, Perry shot a glowering look over his shoulder at her. "*You're* the one who brought the whole meeting to a screeching halt because you couldn't go chase a firebug, Lane. After scaring everyone half to death and then leaving early yesterday, don't be surprised if I start locking you in your own office!"

"Try it and die," she muttered, but she still had half a smile on her face. Once the old man had entered his lair, Lois stood up with every intention of going straight to her own office and getting some work done with what was left of the day, when something caught her eye. On her way out earlier, she had heard Jimmy comment that he was going to try to get some of his older exposures in some semblance of order. Seems he'd been in the middle of that when the story broke. Unable to help her curiosity, she leaned closer for a better look.

Once she did, it was clear that it was old pictures of the *Planet* employees, from before the twins were even a thought. In a couple of the photos on the top of the pile she spotted a familiar dark-haired girl and smiled. *Well, since there are pictures of me in here, not to mention him and Perry, I doubt he'd mind if I looked.*

What she saw made a small thoughtful smile come to her lips. As she shuffled the photos around, recalling the events of the pictures, memories of the past rose around her. One snapshot half-buried under the others fell out, Clark's face captured in a moment of absolute shock tinged with moral horror, and it provoked a particularly vivid flashback...

Right after Perry's infamous "most important interview since God talked to Moses"

meeting, Lois had been thinking about various ways to snag an interview with the mysterious flying man who had saved her life. Perhaps if she lay down on some train tracks...

Clark's voice, hesitant: "Ah, Lois ... about tonight..."

"Mm? What about tonight, Clark?"

She'd only been giving him half her attention, and he smiled shyly. "Our date. Well, our dinner. Don't you remember?"

Damn. She needed to get that interview before anyone else did. "Sorry, Clark. I must've forgot."

His face fell, and she felt like a heel. The poor guy, it had probably taken every ounce of nerve he possessed to ask her in the first place. "Gee, I planned on it all week..." he said resignedly.

She'd sighed, not having much resistance to the sad, hopeful puppy-eyes, and said, "All right, Clark. I'll go out with you. Might as well get it over with."

Clark had brightened immediately. "You're wonderful, Lois. Where would you like to go?"

Teasing a little, she'd grinned and said, "How about the Gold Room at the Park Towers?"

He'd gulped. "The Gold Room? But that's the most expensive place in town."

Seeing his expression, she'd been ready to say she was joking, to suggest someplace else, but Jimmy Olsen had just walked by, and heard enough to turn a very impressed look on Clark.

"Wow, Mr. Kent, are you really going to take Ms. Lane out to the Gold Room?" His voice had been full of admiration, with just a touch of envy.

Lois had watched with amusement as Clark realized he was trapped. Then he shrugged, and trying to sound suave (not precisely succeeding), he replied, "Oh, I don't know, Jimmy. Maybe ... if she's a good girl..." He dropped a wink to emphasize the last two words, but the poor man had no idea who he was dealing with yet.

When playing poker, Lois always upped the ante, no matter what her hand. Mimicking his self-satisfied wink precisely, she shot back, "And if I'm not a good girl... Let's let Jimmy take the pictures, okay?"

*As she walked off, smirking with delight at Clark's sudden blush, she heard Jimmy ask, "Boy. What do you suppose she meant by **that**, Mr. Kent?"*

Ah, old times. Good times. Still chuckling to herself over the memories, Lois continued on her way to her desk, only glancing into International once.

Richard was bent over his desk, reading something intently, and didn't even see her. But he was watching, and though mind-reading wasn't one of his talents, thank God, he seemed to smile at the same thought.

Spinning Wheels Turn

An excited yip, the clatter of claws on tile, and Talia caught up her new toy, bringing it back with her chest fur fluffed out proudly. Kitty whispered, "Good girl," as she threw it again, and the tiny Pomeranian raced to fetch it back.

Is it possible to go completely out of your mind with boredom? Kitty smiled bitterly as Talia pattered after what now looked like a disheveled mop, getting both drool and shed fur on it along with the dust from being thrown to the floor. But the woman and her dog were both amused by their sport, which was more than anyone else here was doing for them.

Lex had spent most of the last three days in the testing chamber with the new crystal console. The few times Kitty had wandered by, she'd heard Jor-El's voice droning on and on about something technical. It was creepy, listening to a dead guy - a dead *alien* guy - all day. That left Kitty with absolutely nothing to do.

Even if Lex would've let her leave the compound, she knew all too well what was above them. Miles and miles of desert, baking sand relieved only by a few puny bushes. Somewhere nearby were canyons with their own sources of water; the occasional hermit lived in them. Of course, none of them had running water or electricity, and they never noticed the partially-shielded EMP's created by Lex's experiments. But they were no more interesting to Kitty than the recording of Jor-El and his endless lectures.

She was bored, lonely, and beginning to be a little frightened, since Lex refused to tell her anything about his ultimate plans. Using his favorite toupee to play fetch with the dog seemed fitting payback to Kitty.

The phones over in International were still ringing off the hook as Lois got ready to leave; it looked as though Richard would be the one staying late today, while she got the twins. The dark-haired reporter stopped by her fiancé's department just long enough to let him know that, smiling briefly at Clark on the way out. He also had his hands full with the day's story.

Lois drove through the city, content with life - for the moment. Her working schedule meant that she normally left about an hour after the kids' school day ended, but luckily she'd found someone who would pick up the children and watch them until she or Richard could get off work. *What would I do without Barbara?* Lois mused as she headed uptown to the Thomas' house. *All she originally signed up for was giving piano lessons, and she's become the only person outside my immediate family I trust with those two. Thank God for Barbara's generous heart.*

The Audi seemed to skip through traffic, expertly driven as it was, and Lois was soon at Barbara's door. The woman who answered her knock was a pretty brunette of about Lois' own age, with an easy smile and the endless patience common only to saints and teachers. "Well, hello, Lois," Mrs. Thomas said. "I wasn't really expecting you this early, with what was on the news."

"It was the consulate this time, Barbara. We think it's the firebug again. Damage was bad, but thankfully not as bad as the last one. But Richard's department's handling this one, so..." Lois replied with a shrug as she walked in. Kala immediately ran toward the sound of her mother's voice, trailed by Barbara's daughter Ashlyn. The dark-haired little girl did her best to tackle her mom, while Ashlyn hung back a bit, smiling shyly. Lois laughed, picking Kala up, "Hello, munchkin. Mommy missed you."

Kala hugged her neck fiercely, whispering, "Missed you, too."

Lois took a moment to just hold her daughter close, sighing with relief. There were no

words for just how much the twins' mere presence calmed her. Then she turned back to Barbara and the little girl half-hiding behind her. Tilting her head to the side, Lois grinned and waved at the child, "Hi, Ashlyn darling."

The blonde smiled adorably, but quickly ducked her head, making Barbara chuckle. "Still shy. Jason's practicing; he probably hasn't heard you yet." The two women and their girls headed for the music room, but Lois froze in the hallway when she heard what Jason was practicing. Her eyes widened as her skin paled, making Barbara ask, "Lois? What's wrong?" But the reporter couldn't answer, swept up in a flashback.

"Heart and soul, I begged to be adored; lost control, and tumbled overboard." Ella Fitzgerald's voice, Kal-El's arms around her, that fateful night ... the notes Jason was picking out on the piano with increasing confidence brought it all back. The memories overwhelming her, and almost kissing Clark in front of a thousand journalists. That terrifying, longing moment when she knew their feelings hadn't died, not completely. That song...

"Lois, are you all right?" The concern in Barbara's tone brought Lois back to the present.

She tried unsuccessfully to laugh it off, ignoring the way the hair at the nape of her neck prickled to still hear him playing it. Shaking her head comfortingly, Lois shrugged. "It's nothing, it's just ... I don't have the best associations with that song. It's silly that I reacted that way, honestly. I didn't even realize Jason knew it."

At that, her friend looked upset. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. He heard Ashlyn learning it and he wanted to play it with her. If I'd realized..."

"It's okay, really," Lois reassured her. "It's nothing terrible, just ... a reminder I hadn't quite expected right now. Don't worry. Knowing Jason, once he has it down pat he'll play it until all I can associate with it is him." *And boy, am I looking forward to **that**.*

As soon as the thought entered her head, Jason finally noticed her and looked up into hers with *his* cerulean eyes as he grinned proudly.

Lois could only smile back, even as her heart ached while recognizing it.

That little kiss you stole, held all my heart and soul.

When the story of the day seemed to be over at last, Clark headed up to the roof and took out his cell phone, hitting the first speed dial number. The way Martha's social life went, he doubted she'd even be home...

"Son! There you are. How are things in Metropolis?"

Clark had to close his eyes for a second. Just her voice, so warm and always welcoming, soothed his heart tremendously. "Hi, Ma," he replied, smiling. "Busy, that's how things are. What about you?"

"Oh, the usual," she replied. "Nancy got loose this morning and ate a pair of Ben's boots that he left on the porch. We had lunch with the new family staying at the pioneer center; they've got three children. The oldest is a very sweet, shy girl, and the two little boys, well, they're a handful."

"Ah, yeah. Speaking of children..." Clark fell silent for a long moment. How on earth did you tell your mother something like this?

"Clark? Are you there?"

"Yes, Ma," he replied, and sighed heavily. "Listen, I found something out last night, and I ... I don't know what to think now. I need to talk to you."

"Do you want to come over, son?"

This was hard enough on the phone; he doubted he could find the words face to face.

"No. Not right now, anyway. Things could get busy again soon. It's just, well ... kinda hard to talk about."

"So, start at the beginning and tell me what's happened. You know I love you, son, and nothing could ever change that."

He took a deep breath, and slowly told her about dinner with Lucy and Ron, and the revelation of Kala's name. "All of a sudden, Ma, I'm not sure. I mean, I confronted Lois about it - she was so angry with me for leaving, and then she has this fling in Paris less than a month after I'm gone? She didn't argue with me saying that; she's the one who told everyone that story. But now I realize that she probably named Kala after me, and it makes me wonder. I never thought ... I'm not even..."

"You think they might be yours?" Martha asked, so gently.

"Well..."

"You did say 'speaking of children.' And if Kala is named for you - for your other name - that's a pretty strong hint."

"But Ma ... it shouldn't be possible. It just ... I'm not *human*," his voice dropping to a whisper on the last word. "And the twins were born ten months after, you know. Shorter than nine months is common, longer is very rare. Most doctors would've induced labor well before the ten-month mark."

"Clark," Martha said, and he could almost see her rubbing her temples. "You have no idea how long a normal Kryptonian pregnancy is."

"Yes, but why would she let me say that about her affair in Paris? If it wasn't true, Lois would've corrected me. We had talked about everything else, practically."

"Son, is there a reason she would want to hide it from you, if they really are yours?"

"I don't know," Clark groaned. "I can't imagine why she would. It just doesn't make any sense to me."

Martha's voice was clearly reluctant as she brought up the other possibility. "Do think she might've had an affair - since she didn't correct you on it - and maybe she's not entirely sure whether they're yours or not?"

Silence. "It could be," Clark admitted at last. "She's ... Lois has a quick temper. It's something she might've done in revenge. I just ... I don't want to think she'd do that."

"Does it change how you feel about her if she did?"

Another long pause. "No. No, it doesn't. Ma, I love her, but I *know* her too. Lois is fully capable of being that vindictive - just like I was fully capable of being that blind. I should've known stealing the memories would infuriate her."

"Well, I just hope she realizes how lucky she is. Most men *would* be angry with her for that, whether they were the ones to leave or not," Martha opined. "But we're left without a clear answer. The twins might be yours, they might not."

"How am I going to find out?" he asked in frustration. "I can't just walk up to Lois and say, 'By the way, are those my kids?' Especially not at work."

"Clark ... have you thought about what you're going to do after you get an answer?"

He frowned. "What do you mean, Ma?"

"Well, what if the twins *are* yours? Have you thought about what that means?"

"It means I'm not alone," Clark replied, and his voice held a depth of longing that Martha had long suspected but never heard expressed. "It means Kala and Jason are probably going to need me. If they take after me at all, their lives are going to be very confusing, very difficult. They'll need my help to come to terms with whatever ... powers ... they may have."

"But what about their mother?" Martha asked gently. "Even if they are yours, she may still decide to stay with Richard. She's been with him for three years, she's wearing his ring. And it's her choice to make, Clark."

"I know, Ma," he replied wearily. "As long as she's happy... I want to be with her whether the twins are mine or not, but I know that may not happen. But if they are mine, I have a duty to them. It's ... it could get very hard, especially now that I know ... she still cares... I have to do what's right for Jason and Kala. And that might mean standing by and pretending to smile while Lois marries Richard. I'd do it for them." He ignored the way his throat seemed to swell at those words, the picture of that future all too clear: Richard kissing Lois before an altar, while Clark forced a faked smile and offered to watch the kids during the honeymoon. *That would be the hardest thing I could ever do ... but it may be what's best for everyone, especially the twins.*

Martha was quiet for a long while, knowing the sound of grief in his voice, and then she said decisively, "That's it, I'm coming up there."

That startled Clark out of his contemplation. "What? No, Ma, you don't know Lois..."

"Relax, son, I'm not going to walk up to the woman and demand to see my grandkids. But it sounds like everything is getting to you. Clark, you need someone sane around to keep you company."

At that, he smiled. "Ma, I love you dearly. But you'd hate it here in the city. Besides," and the words burned his throat slightly, "Ben would miss you."

"My son, always thinking of everyone else before himself," Martha sighed. "Well, if you're absolutely certain..."

"I'll be okay. I've just got to find my way through this on my own. But talking to you helps a lot."

"I love you, son," Martha said, "and I wish I could help you more."

"I love you, too, Ma," Clark replied. "I need to go somewhere and think. I'll call you back later on, though, if I get a chance to talk to Lois."

"You do that, Clark. Until then, take care of yourself."

"Yes, Ma," he replied, laughing slightly, and hung up the phone.

As he did so, he noticed the little icon on the screen that meant he had a voicemail message. "Now if I can just figure out how to listen to my messages," Clark muttered as he started scrolling through the phone's menus.

As she drove the twins home, Lois was lost in thought. Barbara had looked at her oddly when she had thanked her for looking after the kids so often, and it got Lois' keen journalistic mind running.

Normally, Lois would pick up the twins on Wednesdays when school let out early, and then bring them back to the office. The rest of the week, Richard got them when he left work, or Barbara got them and Richard or Lois picked them up as they left for the day. Since Clark's return, however, Lois hadn't wanted them around him, in case he figured out that they were his. Maybe Barbara had simply gotten used to having the twins over every Wednesday afternoon, and didn't think of it as a burden.

"Mommy, I'm hungry," Kala groaned pathetically in the back seat, trying to act as if she hadn't had a snack at Barbara's house. Jason chimed in, too, and the pair of them managed to distract Lois fairly efficiently.

Up ahead, she saw a sign that read "Mr. Dragon," a popular chain of Chinese food

take-out restaurants. "How about Chinese?" Lois asked Jason and Kala.

The response was unanimous and vociferous. Next to Mexican, Chinese was the twins' favorite food. Jason suddenly decided to change his mind, however, declaring, "I want Japanese, Mommy."

Kala glared at him. "Eatin' Japanese won't turn you into a big dumb ol' ugly radioactive lizard!"

"Kala! Stop pickin' on me!"

"Stop bein' such a dweeb, then!"

"Mommy!"

"Enough!" Lois said loudly. "Stop that, right now, or we'll go straight home and you can have chicken soup with no noodles."

The silence was, for the moment, golden, though punctuated by Kala's icy glare and Jason's furious scowl. Lois managed to park the Audi before the twins started mouthing names at each other, and as she got them out of their seatbelts she carefully kept one twin on each side of her. *This is why the Middle East peace talks never amount to anything*, she thought, holding Kala's right hand and Jason's left. *If they ever want to make some progress, they need to send a mother of twins up to Camp David. I spend every day trying to negotiate an end to hostilities between two rival powers; I've got to be better at it than a president.*

With the way the twins were glaring at each other hatefully, and the short line at the counter, Lois paused just inside the door to catch their attention. "You will both behave while we're waiting, is that understood? One whine, one name called, and we're leaving. I don't care who started it, it stops *now*."

Kala and Jason both nodded, trying to look as cute and innocent as possible. They knew from experience that Mommy meant it. She'd only once had to walk them out of a restaurant and make the unruly pair wait while Richard finished his meal and boxed hers up. Made to sit in their car seats for fifteen minutes (or forever, to three-year-olds) and then sent directly to bed with no supper, the twins had learned their lesson forever.

Lois sighed. "You're both good kids when you wanna be, you know it? Mommy loves you." After a pause, she added under her breath, "Even if you make her crazy."

"We love you, too, Mommy," they chorused. Jason tried his best to give her a winning smile, but it looked more like a shark on Prozac.

Kala suddenly cocked her head and turned around, her hand slipping from Lois' loosened grasp easily as in a nightmare. As her daughter ran to the front of the line, the dark-haired reporter had only a moment in which to gasp before Kala called out, "Mr. Clark!"

The man at the front of the line turned just in time to catch the little girl who leaped at him, trusting him to catch her. Clark's surprised but very friendly chuckle sent ice down Lois' spine, and she barely registered Jason pulling away to run to him as well.

Oh, my dear God, Lois thought with disbelief. *This has got to be a nightmare. He's only met them twice! When the hell did he get so familiar with my kids?!*

Clark could tune out the full range of his hearing; he'd have gone mad long ago if he couldn't. Especially when talking to the soft-spoken young woman behind the counter, unsure of her English, he needed to concentrate on that conversation only and ignore the thousand other things he could hear. Only sirens or a sharply raised voice would've gotten his attention.

But Kala's delighted call did reach him, and Clark whirled, shocked to see her. *I was just talking to Ma about the twins... What on earth are they doing here?* Surprise turned to

happiness as Kala jumped at him and he caught her, laughing at her boldness. A moment later Jason was at his side too, demanding attention as Kala hugged his neck. Only then did Clark realize that he'd been hearing Lois' heartbeat - even her voice - for a few minutes.

The woman herself was walking toward them now, looking at him in wide-eyed disbelief, and the sight of her pierced him. Around the office these days, Lois always had something of an edge about her, a steely aura of competence and drive that kept all but a chosen few from getting too close to her. But now, with her hair down, earrings off, and that predatory news-hawk look replaced by surprise, Lois looked much softer, much more approachable...

"Ah," the young woman behind the counter said, smiling at Clark holding the grinning black-haired child. "Daddy's girl?"

Clark's eyes widened and he stiffened slightly, while Kala turned to glance at the woman with a puzzled frown. Lois all but skidded to a halt, her face going slightly paler, though she didn't say anything. Her reaction wouldn't have been noticeable to anyone other than Clark, who saw her so very clearly.

Well, if that isn't suspicious... Clark thought, but he smiled at the cashier and said gently, "No, I'm just a good friend of the family." And watched as Lois unfroze with a tiny sigh of relief. *Hmm...*

"Are you gettin' Chinese for dinner too, Mr. Clark?" Jason asked curiously.

Kala rolled her eyes at him from her perch. "Of course," she said disdainfully. "Don' ask him if he likes Japanese; he doesn' wanna be a lizard."

Jason scowled, but hearing Lois' heels deliberately tapping toward them, he refrained from calling his sister any names. Instead he looked at Clark with a long-suffering sigh.

"Yes, I'm having Chinese," Clark said, casting an apologetic look at the people in line behind him. "What do you two want?"

"Cashew chicken," Kala said promptly.

"No, Kala, you can't have nuts," Clark replied, not seeing the look of shock that crossed Lois' face at that casual remark. "What about Moo Goo Gai Pan? It's really good, I've had it from here before. And nothing in it to make you sick." To Jason, he added, "What about Beef Broccoli for you? It's got your favorite vegetable."

The twins chorused approval, and the cashier added their dinners to Clark's bill. Lois had reached the three of them, and controlled her increasing confusion. "I'm surprised you know their tastes so well," she said smoothly.

Clark knew that tone and what it portended, but chose to ignore it for now. A slightly crowded restaurant wasn't the place to confront her. "Hi, Lois," he said awkwardly. "General Tsao's for you?"

He saw her start to reply, saw her expression soften slightly, and thought for a moment that perhaps they could discuss things. And then he heard a voice he'd almost forgotten about.

"Sorry about that, Clark, did you already order?" Lana asked as she came out of the ladies' room. Seeing Kala, and Jason, and Lois, she halted, and said quietly, "Oh."

For a moment, Lois stared at Lana, then turned to Clark with shock and a hint of betrayal written largely on her face. In the next instant, she glanced down, and a veil seemed to fall across her emotions. "Well, hello, Ms. Lang," Lois said politely. "Fancy meeting you here."

"I'm surprised to see you, too," Lana replied just as sweetly. "Clark and I were just going to have dinner and catch up."

That seemed to remind Lois of something, and she turned to Clark with the same overly courteous tone. "By the way, Clark, why are you buying my kids dinner?"

Because I forgot for a minute who I walked in with? Oh, my God. "It's all right, Lois," he said, trying to be casual. "I'll just add it to your tab from all the times I bought you lunch at work. You only owe me about twenty pizzas. And I lost count of hamburgers, hot dogs, salads..."

"All right, all right," Lois said, dropping it. For now. "Hmm, they have a lot of things I haven't seen in a while. Make mine a Bang Bang Ji, then, and a Mu Shu Pork, too. Those two and the Beef and Broccoli and the Moo Goo Gai Pan are dinners - white rice, no eggrolls."

"What about you, Lana?" Clark asked, feeling terribly uncomfortable and trying not to show it. He wasn't even thinking about the fact that Lois had ordered four dinners.

"Sweet and sour chicken for me," she said, glancing at Lois from the corner of her eye.

"Here or to go?" the young woman behind the counter asked.

"Here," Lana and Clark said, while Lois answered firmly, "To go." After a moment, the cashier got the two orders rung up separately, and Clark paid for both.

While the adults did boring adult stuff, Jason looked up at both women with wide eyes, his head swiveling like a spectator at a tennis match. Kala just slithered down out of Clark's arms so he could pay, peering up at Lana curiously. "Who're you?" she asked.

The redhead was momentarily nonplussed, looking into those eyes so like Lois'. "I'm an old friend of Clark's," she replied. "We went to school together. You must be Jason and Kala. I've heard a lot about you."

Clark saw Lois' head whip around fast as a cobra. But it was Jason who asked, puzzled, "From who?"

"Well, actually," Lana stalled, glancing up at Clark, her eyes wide.

He read her look accurately, and covered for her. "Oh, Richard talked about you guys while we were waiting for our luggage at the airport," he said smoothly. It was technically true, though Richard had mentioned them only in passing. Lana must have seen him since the other day in International to have that guilty expression.

"Oh, okay," the twins said in unison, turning their minds to other matters. Their mother, however, was not mollified.

"Really?" Lois said, too pleasantly.

Embroidering only slightly, Clark continued, "Well, I've probably mentioned the twins a time or two myself on the way here. Little rascals do make an impression." He ruffled Jason's hair casually as he spoke.

Lois raised a dark eyebrow as Jason grinned up at Clark. The unpleasant tension continued while they waited for the food, mostly unnoticed by the twins. Kala and Jason were preoccupied with the forbidden lure of fortune cookies, which were made with wheat flour and thus their mysteries were forever unattainable.

Clark felt distinctly uncomfortable, with Lana on one side of him and Lois on the other, trading looks that ranged from guilty to icy. The twins, oblivious to it all, tried to find out if Clark or Lana happened to be carrying any candy or other assorted snacks. "But Mommy an' Nana an' Aunt Lucy an' Aunt Loueen *always* have sugar-free candy in their purses," Jason told Lana sadly, as if he'd discovered a major character fault.

"You'll be eating in a few minutes, Jason, I promise you won't starve," Lois muttered, facing away from Clark and Lana deliberately.

"But Mommy," Kala started to say, and then the food arrived, blessedly quick.

Taking her bag, Lois smiled thinly at Clark. "Thanks for buying all of us dinner, Kent. See you tomorrow." The twins chorused their goodbyes, demanding a hug each, and only then

would they follow Lois out.

Even as Clark carried his and Lana's plates to the table, he glanced over his shoulder at Lois' departing figure. At the door, she turned, and for a moment their eyes met, his troubled, hers stormy and unreadable.

Lana saw Clark meet Lois' gaze as she left, and the redhead couldn't help an ironic little smile. *This is one of those moments in life that needs a soundtrack. A little snippet of the romantic theme, abruptly fading away as the Unattainable Woman exits stage right. I guess that casts me as the Sympathetic Friend slash Girl Next Door.*

I don't think so. As Clark sat down with their meals, she looked up at him, assessing the changes. Of course, she realized when they ran into each other at the airport that the lanky, shy teenager she'd known had filled out, but now Lana looked more closely.

Clark was actually quite a big man, over six feet and broad through the shoulders, and under the slightly out of fashion suit was a muscular frame. No wonder he always carried himself with that somehow apologetic air; he'd be intimidating otherwise. Rather than capitalize on that as some men would, he'd chosen to make himself seem harmless, just a geek in glasses. It seemed that his essentially gentle nature hadn't changed, and Lana couldn't help smiling wistfully.

Seeing that look on her face as he got ready to take the first bite of his Ginger Beef combo, Clark hesitated. "So, what's on your mind, Lana?"

"You're in love with her," she said plainly, and dipped a piece of chicken into her sweet and sour sauce.

The shocked expression on his face was priceless. "What? How - Lana, why on earth would you think something like that?"

Because I'm a lot smarter and more perceptive than most people think pretty girls should be, she thought, but out loud she only said, "Clark, you forgot I was here when she walked in."

The poor man actually blushed. "Um, Lana, it wasn't that..."

"And you adore her kids," Lana pointed out. "They like you a lot, too. But then, so does their mother." She chuckled, remembering Lois' quickly concealed look of pure venom, and added, "If looks could kill, she'd have shredded me when I walked up to you two."

Clark was totally at a loss for words, staring as Lana nibbled at her eggroll. At last he said, "Lana, nothing like that is going on. I mean, really, it's preposterous..."

She couldn't help snickering. "Please, Clark. We may not have kept in touch, but we've known each other for years. We both grew up. I'm not the fool who kept going out with Brad just because it's some kind of natural law that the head cheerleader has to date the quarterback. I'm not that blind anymore." Green eyes catching his intently, she continued, "If I'd had a little more self-confidence, maybe I would've admitted what I saw in you back then. Maybe things would be different. But that's long ago and far away. *She* doesn't have my hang-ups; I get the impression Lois Lane has spent her life avoiding doing all the expected things."

"Yeah, pretty much," Clark murmured, toying with the beef.

Lana pointed at him with her fork. "She's awfully possessive of you, she obviously cares a lot about you, and you love her. So why is she engaged to another man? What happened there, Clark? With the looks you two were giving each other at the takeout counter, it has to be one heck of a story."

"I'd really prefer not to talk about it," Clark finally admitted. "We ... I made some mistakes, in the past, and... Besides, I'm just not comfortable talking about this. Lois *is* engaged to another man. One I happen to admire, not to mention I work for him."

"I know: Richard," Lana said. "But even he realizes how much she cares about you, Clark."

That brought blue eyes up to meet hers sharply. "I don't recall him saying anything like that at the airport."

Now it was Lana's turn to blush. "Well ... I was trying to find you today to see if you wanted to catch up, and, um, Richard wound up taking me to lunch."

Clark continued to give her his best reporter stare.

Lana sighed heavily and leaned back. "Clark, I can't help it. I like the guy. I'm not trying to steal him from Lois any more than you're trying to steal her from him. We were both raised better; thank God for Smallville."

"I know," he replied. "And it doesn't help that they seem to be having problems. But I still don't think it's right for us to talk about it."

The redhead poked at her chicken for a moment. "I guess I just feel better knowing there's someone else in the same predicament, you know?"

"Yes, but even so, what can we do about it?" Clark replied sadly. "Nothing, really. Just ... hope for the best, I guess."

"You're probably right," Lana said. "The best for who, though?"

"All of us," he told her, and turned the conversation to safer topics.

Lois found the traffic leaving the city slower than usual, and her mind churned as she waited for other cars to move. *God, I'm such an idiot. What the hell was I doing, letting my guard down like that? And of course, the minute I turn my back, he's out with the damn cheerleader. Just another in a long series of Incredibly Stupid things I've done over **that man.***

However, with four boxed dinners sitting in a bag beside her and slowly perfuming the Audi with the smell of delicious Chinese food, Lois knew she had to distract the twins or they would start pleading to break the no-eating-in-Mommy's-car rule. Just this once. Wrenching her train of thought away from Clark and Lana, she glanced in the rearview mirror and asked, "When we get home, let's learn how to use chopsticks while we eat dinner. How would that be?"

The twins glanced at each other and broke into identical grins. "Swell!" they chorused, and broke into giggles.

Swell. Swell? Swell?! Lois gripped the steering wheel and gritted her teeth. Only one person she knew used that word... "Hey, did you guys learn that from Mr. Clark?" she asked lightly.

"Uh-huh," Jason said cheerfully. "He's really nice, Mommy. He even brought us special no-wheat cookies!"

"Wow," Lois said, still keeping her tone deliberately light. "How did you guys get to know him so well?" In the backseat, Kala had cocked her head and furrowed her brow.

"Daddy brings us up to work on Wednes... Ow! Kala, stop that!"

"Shut up!" the little girl snarled, hitting him in the shoulder again, hazel eyes blazing.

"Shut up, Jason, you dummy! *That was supposed to be a **secret!***"

The leather steering wheel cover creaked under Lois' hands. *Richard, you sonofabitch.*

You've got my kids keeping secrets from me! From me, you bastard! How dare you! Not to mention, I've been scared to death of Clark seeing these kids and getting ideas, and he's seen them every week! No wonder Barbara looked at me like I was crazy. I thought she had to watch them while I went to those stupid editorial meetings.

And that's another thing! I started going to the weekly meetings to have a reason for not bringing the kids up to work anymore, and Richard's been doing it behind my back anyway. That's two hours of each week spent bored to tears for no damn reason! Oh, I'm gonna kill him...

"Ow! Mommy! Make her stop! Kala, quit it!"

"Dummy! Boogerhead! Igg-nor-ay-mouse!" Kala punctuated each word with another punch to the shoulder.

It didn't hurt Jason's shoulder as much as his pride. "Mommy asked!"

"Daddy said not to tell, stupid-face!"

Lois took a deep breath and got ready to verbally break up the fight in the backseat. Thank God they generally listened...

Just as she glanced into the rearview mirror again, her lips forming the word *enough*, a red blur flashed in front of her car. Lois whipped her head forward and felt every hair on her body stand straight up as the low-riding sportscar from the next lane cut in with only feet to spare. Smashing the brake to the floor, she just barely managed to avoid clipping the idiot's bumper. A credit card might've been able to slip between the two vehicles, but nothing larger.

That was too much stress for the reporter after the last half-hour. Her window was already down; Lois leaned out and soundly cursed the driver and his entire family tree, unto the seventh generation. The young man unfortunately had his convertible top down and heard every word, turning to look with amazement at the pretty, delicate-featured source of that profane fury. His girlfriend in the passenger side was equally shocked, but seemed to be in support of Lois' assessment.

"Get that fancy-ass wanna-be racecar piece of shit off my road, or else *learn to fuckin' drive!*" Lois roared, and sat back down in her seat, still incensed. Traffic opened up in the lane beside them, and she gave the jerk an example of how it should be done, neatly shifting over into the available space without causing anyone to jam on their brakes.

In the long, fuming silence after that encounter, Jason finally whispered, "Oooh, Mommy said a bad word. Mommy said the *really* bad word."

"Mommy said a lot of bad words," Kala replied in hushed tones, slumped down in her seat and peering over the back of the chair with wide eyes.

Shit. If she hadn't been driving, Lois would've smacked her own forehead. *Nice going, Lane. So much for not cussing in front of the kids. Get your mind together before that man and everything connected to him drives you totally insane.*

Aloud, she told the twins, "It's okay, you two. Mommy just got freaked out. That guy almost made me hit his car, and somebody could've gotten hurt." *Like him. Jackass. Well, at least it made the twins stop fighting.* "It's all right, I'm not mad at you."

"You're sure?" Kala asked, and Lois' heart broke at her tone.

"Of course I'm not, sweetheart," she replied. "Jason, Kala, Mommy never talks to you like that. Mostly because you're a lot smarter than that guy in the convertible." They seemed to perk up, and Lois added, "Of course, Captain Jack would probably be a better driver than *him.*"

"He'd need Gazeera to reach the pedals though," Kala said instantly.

"Nuh-uh. Ignatius can drive, your weasel can push the pedals," Jason shot back.

Lois wished she could close her eyes and rub her temples to forestall the huge headache she felt building. *Is it too late to take back wishing to be rescued from that helicopter? God. My life, ladies and gentlemen.* "No more fighting, you two. I mean it."

The pair hushed up, still in awe of their mother's vocabulary.

Later that evening, Lois and Richard sat on opposite sides of the couch with the television on and the sleepy twins between them. They had barely spoken ten words to each other; Lois was striving valiantly to keep the tentative truce, not wanting a repeat of last night. The kids didn't need to hear another argument.

Both of their minds were elsewhere. Richard was wondering about everything he'd learned and suspected, but given how tense and unhappy Lois had seemed since she got home, now was not the time to discuss it. He was also thinking about Lana, and thinking that he really shouldn't be thinking of her. Lois was still worried over how much Clark knew, and she kept trying to tell herself not to be so upset that he had taken Lana out to dinner.

When Jason and Kala started yawning, Lois and Richard carried them upstairs and started to tuck them in bed. Almost immediately, the kids whined that they wanted Mommy. "You're not gonna leave again, are you?" Kala whimpered.

Richard touched Lois' shoulder gently, feeling the tension rise sharply as he did. "Go on, hon. Take them to our bed. I'll bed down on the couch."

She looked at him briefly, her eyes unreadable, and then nodded as if she didn't trust herself to speak.

Half an hour later, Lois and the twins were sleeping, exhausted. Richard was lying awake on the couch. Staring across the room.

Staring at Lois' laptop in her office.

Playing With Fire

The next few days were a whirlwind for everyone involved. Richard found himself both relieved and disappointed that he couldn't figure out Lois' password, but then a fresh spate of violence in the Middle East happened to coincide with possible nuclear testing in Asia, and the two stories consumed the entire International department's time.

That included Clark, of course, who found himself working too hard at both jobs to spare even a moment to question Lois further. At least there were no more fires, for the moment. He missed seeing the twins, though - Richard had come in fuming one day after going to get the twins and finding out that Lois' mother had picked them up. Apparently their long afternoons wandering the International department were over.

Lois wasn't idle, either. Things with Richard were tense and prickly, but after working so hard all day, both reporters were more than glad to leave each other be. Perry was watching her more closely than ever, as if forgetting one's car once was a sign of imminent senility, and Lois could barely steal time to run down leads on Luthor. At least she managed to learn the specifications of the Vanderworths' security system.

Lana had her fashion show to organize, and as the actual opening drew nearer, all of the talented, creative people she worked with began to behave in the stereotypical manner of artists confronted by absolute deadlines: they panicked. She spent more time than she would have believed possible soothing egos and damping down tempers, and more time than she would have liked to admit wishing Richard was around.

Of course, none of the hectic events stopped anyone's mental wheels from spinning.

The long, frustrating days were getting to Lois. Her temper was starting to fray, and she knew that before long, she'd say something she would regret. Luckily, she had a cure for that.

Letting Richard know that she was going out for lunch and he'd have to fend for himself, she headed to the garage. For once he hadn't questioned her, and Lois was profoundly grateful. Her sarcasm wasn't needed at the moment, not at all. Things with Richard were barely hanging on as it was...

But do you really want them to hang on? Lois bit her lip as that voice whispered in her ear as she got into the Audi; her conflicting thoughts had been mercifully quiet of late. It was just the one whisper, though, so perhaps she'd be spared the endless rounds of arguing with herself.

Driving through the city was hardly stress relief, and when she reached her destination the raven-haired reporter was wound as tightly as she'd ever been. But she still managed to show her ID and speak politely to the desk sergeant. Lois was a frequent enough visitor that he let her through with no difficulties.

She left the bustling precinct above and headed downstairs, into cool dim corridors. Her heels echoed off the cement walls; the firing range was a place most civilians never saw, and no effort at decoration had been wasted on it. Functional space, nothing more.

There were forms to sign, ear plugs and protective glasses to borrow, but at last Lois was standing in a narrow booth looking down a long aisle. Overhead, a cable with a clip on it ran between two pulleys. Lois fastened the paper outline to the clip, and ran the cable out to fifty feet. *Pretty close, but I need the warm up*, she thought, removing the Ladysmith from her purse and unloading the deadly hollowpoint bullets.

As she replaced them with softnose lead ones, another set of footsteps came up the corridor behind her. Flats, hard-soled, a distinctive sharply-striking stride... "All you cops walk

like you're British Royal Guards," Lois muttered, clicking the loaded cylinder back into place.

"Better than mincing around like reporters in stiletto heels," Maggie Sawyer replied. A series of metallic clicks came from the booth next to Lois as the lieutenant loaded her service revolver with target ammunition. "So, you wanna see how it's done?"

Lois grinned to hear that competitive edge in her friend's voice. "Please, Sawyer. My Dad had me plinking cans with a .22 while you were still playing cops 'n' robbers with toy guns."

Her answer was two shots from Sawyer's .45, to which she replied with a pair of shots to her own target. *Ah, rest and relaxation the General Lane way*, Lois sighed.

At least, it was while their guns did the talking. As both women stopped to hang up fresh target outlines, Lois noted that her shooting was a trifle better than Maggie's. However, they were both on the mark every time. It was then, while Lois finally felt the tension melting out of her shoulders, that Sawyer asked casually, "You've been wound pretty tight since he came back, haven't you?"

No use asking which *he* she meant. They both ran the new targets out to a hundred feet while Lois answered, "Maggie, you're misconstruing things. If I'm wound tight, it's because *Luthor's* running around."

"That's part of it," the lieutenant replied, placing two bullet holes close together and smiling at her work. "But most of it predates that. You're surly and you throw away a lot of ammo down here lately. Now, terrorists and reluctant sources you can handle, but relationships are apparently something of a challenge. You wanna talk about it?"

Lois answered by drilling two shots through nearly the exact same space in the paper outline's chest. "Sawyer, your cop instincts are wrong. I'm not tense over anything dealing with *him*."

Maggie sighed, and stepped back out of the booth. While Lois was still looking straight ahead at the target, she reached around and hit the runback button on Lois' side. That made her target suddenly race toward them with a loud whirring of cables.

It startled Lois, and her finger tightened on the trigger, sending a wild shot somewhere up at the roof. That brought an immediate blush to her cheeks, thinking, *Idiot! It's just a freakin' piece of paper!*

Still, her body had been tensed for an attack for the last two months, and she reacted the way she'd long planned to. No input from her conscious mind was necessary to aim for the middle of the onrushing target and fire twice, pause, and follow up with a shot toward the head area of the outline.

As the paper target came to rest in front of them, both women looked appraisingly at it. Two holes in the center of the chest, and one through the forehead.

"Yeah, Lois, you're not tense at all," Maggie said coolly, and the reporter grumbled under her breath, vowing to show *her*.

Neither of them noticed the young officer at the other end of the range who had been watching them. His name was Smith, and he knew Lois only by reputation as a hotheaded, nosy journalist. He'd heard the rumors; her idea of self-defense was more like pre-emptive offense; she did unto others before they could do unto her. The wild shot had surprised him, and he looked to see where it had gone.

Clark dropped his latest copy on Richard's desk and paused. The International editor had an envelope from Sears Portrait Studio on his desk, and Clark couldn't resist a quick glimpse inside.

Of course, he immediately wished he hadn't. A happy family portrait, with Lois, Richard, and the twins. Though it looked like an older shot - a reprint, maybe - it still wounded him. *Even if they might be, even if they are, what gives me the right to hope?*

He walked back to his desk in a mournful mood. The role of home wrecker didn't suit him; even though Lois and Richard were having problems, even though he knew now that she still loved him, he couldn't silence the low voice in the back of his mind that said, *Breaking up an established relationship is just plain wrong. No matter how much you love Lois, no matter how much better you think you are for her, if you actually succeed in breaking them up, you'll feel the taint of having done it for the rest of your life with her.*

I have got to start thinking about something else. That was just too difficult a topic, even if he was obscurely pleased by the way Lois had reacted to seeing Lana the other evening. Clark sighed as he opened his desk drawer to get out his notes on the next story.

And there was a good distraction. Jason's drawing of Clark, which he had shyly presented to him a few weeks ago. The reporter grinned; the boy really liked him. *And I like him, too,* he thought, looking at the picture. *Reminds me a little of myself as a kid, even if I never wanted to be a giant lizard. Some of his quirks are Lois', but his seriousness ... his kindness ... his fondness for math and science... I wonder if he gets that from ... me.*

What if he really is my son? Is that why we get along so well?

But what if he isn't, and all of this is just wishful thinking? What if I'm just trying to convince myself that my fondness for him is some kind of sign, when really it just means that I desperately want his mother to come back to me?

And where does all of this leave the man he calls Daddy?

Feeling a headache start, Clark realized that no matter how delightful Jason was, he probably wasn't the best distraction from his current situation.

The heck with this, it's past lunchtime. Ma always says I get moody when I don't eat enough. I'm running out for a sandwich.

Lois was positively light-hearted as she headed back to the office. Wiping the floor with Sawyer helped a lot - Lois' aim had improved dramatically when she began envisioning Luthor's face on the silhouette target, though she wouldn't share *that* little fact with the lieutenant. And both women's natural competitiveness had forestalled any further discussion of Lois' ex. She was practically whistling as she headed back to the office, taking the elevator up from the basement garage.

A sizeable crowd squeezed into the elevator cab with her on the first floor, and Lois flattened herself against the back wall, momentarily disappearing behind several tall men. The majority of people got off on the twenty-second and twenty-third floors, though; as she expected, they were all one group. No one else would be coming back from lunch this late...

As the last of the crowd left, though, Lois' train of thought came to a screeching halt. The one person she'd least expected was now the only one left in the cab with her.

Clark.

He turned, and surprise lit both their eyes as the doors clicked shut.

A moment, in which that last little secret rose up in Lois' throat and she nearly choked herself with the effort of keeping it down. *Not like this ... not yet. Wait, see if you can figure out how he'll react - he broke your trust once before, and broke it badly. And it was nearly as important to you then as this is now. You can't give in to your feelings for him again, not when you're still not sure. Not when the twins are at stake.*

"Um, hi, Lois," he said quietly, glancing at her. Something was on his mind, she knew that much, but she couldn't tell what.

"Hello, Kal-El," she replied as if her mind wasn't a whirl, keeping her tone unruffled, and saw him flinch slightly.

"Wow. I keep forgetting how much it surprises me when you do that," he told her, his voice slightly reproachful. His mind was full of questions with no good way to ask them, and it didn't help that she caught him off guard like that.

Lois couldn't resist a smile at him. He really was thrown off by it, almost the same way his mere presence continued to throw her for a loop. She supposed it was only fair. Then, trying to keep him off-balance, she asked almost too lightly, "So did you take any stunning models out to lunch today? That never seemed a habit of yours before. Going for a different image, now, *Clark?*"

He did a double-take, and laughed at her a little, his nervous Clark chuckle. But two could play at this game, and he was better at it than she suspected. After all, he'd had a master to learn from - Lois herself. "You really *are* jealous, aren't you? Jeez, Lois." Clark didn't even try to keep the genuine astonishment out of his voice.

"Me, jealous? Of the cheerleader?" It was his turn to surprise her and that he did. It was so very straight to the heart of the problem, yet so incredibly unlike him to call her on it. It was all she had not to blush at being caught. Unsure what else to do, Lois looked up at the ceiling grillwork and tried to laugh. "What on earth are you talking about, Kent?"

"You, Lois," Clark replied. Suddenly it was clear why he was such a good reporter; once she'd shown weakness by looking away, he bored in and refused to drop the topic, but kept his tone factual, not accusatory. "The other night at the Chinese restaurant. And that day we got back from the airport, too. You really shouldn't be so threatened by Lana, you know."

Lois sniffed, crossing her arms as she made herself look at him. *I have every reason in the world to be jealous. You loved her once and she's free to have you now. Even if it means that she can only date **half** a person. Even if it means living a lie. Which I don't have the luxury of doing.* "What makes you think I'm threatened by *her*?"

"For one thing, the way you won't use her name," Clark said. They were rising past the fortieth floor now, and no one else seemed to be getting on the elevator with them. "And the way you look at her - Lois, the look you gave her when she walked up to us at the restaurant almost peeled paint off the wall. I never thought I'd see you so possessive over me."

Speaking of deadly looks, she glared a killer of one at him then, crossing her arms and jerking her eyes from his. "Don't flatter yourself, hero," Lois said, trying to be cold and kicking herself for having been so obvious. It just wasn't in her nature to give her feelings away like that, regardless of the thousand other reasons not to let this man know how much she still loved him. When had she started to get so lousy at this? She just kept breaking cover and showing her face for the stupidest reasons...

Clark raised an eyebrow at her skeptically. *I know I'm right, and I won't let go,* that look said. After a moment, he continued, "Lois, come on. You're really a lousy liar."

Again she had to remind herself that he couldn't read thoughts. Mentally, she just resumed kicking herself. *You idiot.* "What's *that* supposed to mean?" she asked frostily.

"You were really jealous of Lana, and you have no right to be. I mean, she's a nice girl and all, but it was just two old friends going out to dinner. It's not like I'd cheat on you..."

Hazel eyes flew wide as they met his, and Lois's expression went from sarcasm to shock to panic. And then to something else. Clark, realizing he'd said that *out loud*, tried to stammer

his way out of it. "I didn't mean ... Lois, I..."

"Kal-El," she began, but couldn't finish the sentence. *He left me, but he never cheated on me. Oh, dear God.*

Into that moment, where they might have spoken, might have resolved some of their tensions and questions, the *ding* of the elevator doors intruded.

Both reporters turned wide-eyed, and saw Jimmy Olsen. Coming from the darkroom on the fifty-eighth floor, he seemed just as surprised to see them.

"Wow, hi, guys," the photographer said brightly. "Hey, you've got to see these latest photos. Here's *my* Pulitzer, right here..." Still talking excitedly, he boarded the elevator and started rifling through the stack of pictures he carried, riding up to the *Planet's* floors with them.

Lois and Clark could only look at each other briefly, sharing a moment of mingled relief and dismay. True, they were avoiding a confrontation ... but also prolonging the tension. And as usual, the agent of chaos that kept them apart was James B. Olsen. *Some things never change.*

Ella had both twins when the phone rang, and she sighed at seeing Richard's number. Lois had warned her that he was nosing around the Secret Which Must Not Be Revealed, and it infuriated her daughter that he'd been taking the twins to work without telling her. *I'm not exactly pleased about it either*, she thought, heading into the living room to answer the ringing phone. "Lane residence," was all she said, however.

"Hi, Ella," Richard said. Was that a note of contrition in his voice? Ella's arched eyebrow showed exactly where her daughter had gotten the expression from. "Listen, I wanted to ask you a favor."

Ella leaned her shoulder against the wall, keeping her eyes on the other room where the twins were busy coloring. There was a hint of used-car-salesman wheedle in Richard's voice now; these children constantly forgot that she knew all their tricks, had tried to play them herself years ago. And had had about as much success fooling her own mother. "Mm-hmm. And what favor would that be?"

"Could you watch Jason and Kala overnight? Or at least, until pretty late."

The eyebrow climbed a little higher. "On a school night, Richard?"

"Well..." His voice trailed off, and Ella smiled knowingly. *Here comes the semi-truthful plea, dripping with sincerity. My own parents must be looking down and laughing themselves hysterical.* "You know Lois and I haven't been, well, getting along," Richard said, and the embarrassment was real. "I was hoping, maybe if we took a night off ... went out somewhere for dinner ... we could maybe patch things up a little."

My daughter is very close to slapping you senseless, and you want to take her on a date? You're either very sure of your charm or not half as smart as I thought you were. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Richard? She is not very pleased with you at the moment."

"I know," he replied. "But I have to try. I love her ... Mom."

Unfortunately, he also knew the one thing that could soften Ella's heart against all reason. "Fine, I'll keep them ... *son*. Go ahead and play with fire, but if she gets upset with you, don't come crying to me."

Richard actually chuckled at that. "Don't worry. I'm taking her to the Kasbah. No way can she be temperamental in the face of a pomegranate martini."

"Don't be so certain," Ella warned. "Richard, I'm not joking. You're treading awfully close

to the edge with her right now."

"I'll watch myself," he promised. "Remember, I've met Lombard. I know what happens to guys who cross Lois Lane, and I don't fancy any broken bones."

"All right," Ella replied, stamping down on the last of her misgivings. She hung up after a few more pleasantries exchanged, and headed into the living room to give the twins the news.

But by the scowl on Kala's face, she'd already heard the news, and thoroughly disapproved.

Richard hung up the phone and sighed. *She's right. I really ought to just drop this while I still can. No matter how carefully I plan this evening, Lois has proven time and again that I don't know her well enough to one hundred percent predict how she'll act.*

He leaned his forehead into his palms, trying to rub away the incipient headache. Work had been an absolute beast lately, and living with Lois was no picnic at the moment either. It would've been nice just to let go, relax, stop worrying... But he'd bitten off a huge hunk of this mystery, and to stop chewing was to choke.

*I'm a reporter, I can't let something like this go... I know she's lying. Furthermore, I know that the father of the twins is one of two men I admire, and whichever of them it really is - and I think I know - he **deserves** to know that he even **is** a father.*

*Hell, I've been a Superman fan for years. I've even got the tie with the S-symbols on it, but I don't dare wear it around Lois. There are times - usually when we're fighting - that I wonder if half the reason I'm attracted to her is that she's the ultimate Superman collectible. 'Yeah, I have his autograph, the starter jacket, the tie, the 'I circle back for Superman' sticker on my plane, and I've even got his girlfriend, too!' Although I was in denial for years about the fact that she really **was** his girlfriend. It didn't help that she kept saying it was nothing like that, the media gossips just made a mountain out of a molehill...*

Maybe Lana's right. Maybe she had a right to keep that secret from me. I mean, things between us would've been a lot different if she had said stuff like, 'My last boyfriend flew me to Venice for dinner. At about the speed of sound.'

*But this - the twins' father - can't be kept a secret. I know if one of my college flings had secretly had my child, I'd be mad as hell to find out I was a father and never knew my own kid. If it's **him**, well, I can see why we can't exactly announce it to the world, but maybe that's a secret Lois and I can share, one that will bring us closer. It's not as if Superman can really be a father or a husband, not with his life.*

Of course, if what I suspect is true, then it isn't the caped wonder I have to worry about. My problems are a lot closer to home, and I have this feeling like something's going on behind my back.

Richard sighed again, and picked up the phone to make dinner reservations. *No, I can't drop this. Maybe I'll get to the bottom of all of it tonight.*

Jason ignored Kala's grumbling. Privately, he sometimes thought that some of the things she claimed to hear were imagined. At least the conversations of kids in other schoolrooms had to be made up; nobody could hear *that*, nobody except Superman.

That was who he'd drawn and was now coloring. Finding the exact right shade of blue for his uniform had been hard, but the rest of the drawing had gone pretty well, and Jason was happy with it. Maybe Nana would put this one up on the fridge; he didn't want to bring it home. Daddy had been pretty unhappy every time anyone mentioned Superman lately. That

made everybody else unhappy, and Jason wished the grownups could act more, well, grown-up. They were supposed to be in control of things, not arguing like two kids with one toy.

The little boy deliberately thought of something else, though, because those ideas made him sad. As he added the finishing touches to Superman's hair - careful to draw the special little curl - he hesitated, black crayon hovering over Superman's face. Someone else might've thought he was contemplating drawing a mustache on the hero's face, as a naughty kid might.

Jason was thinking of something far different, though. Just two little circles. Well, and a change of clothes. Put a pair of glasses and a gray suit on, and you magically had Clark Kent instead of Superman. He'd first realized it one day at Mommy and Daddy's job, seeing Clark standing under a big TV screen that was showing Superman. The face was the same, the absolute same. The shock of realizing that Superman was *right there* in the room with him - and not even the *grownups* knew it - had caused an asthma attack.

His shortness of breath had kept him from blurting out the obvious to everyone around him, and Jason figured that was a good thing. Superman had to have a reason why he wanted people to think he was Clark Kent. After a while, he realized that he'd never heard of Superman doing normal things, like going out to dinner or watching a movie. So Clark Kent was who Superman was when Superman wanted to be just like everybody else. Jason could see the attraction in that - special could be a burden. Sitting by the sidelines watching the other kids play dodgeball, he'd often wanted to be just like everyone else.

Glancing at Kala, he grinned. Jason was often mistaken for the good twin, but he could be just as devious as his sister. He just wasn't as brazen about it. And he was sure she didn't know that Clark Kent and Superman were the same person. Hah, she thought she knew something special... Girls. She probably just knew something dumb like what his cape was really made out of. Jason felt like the only person in the world who shared Superman's secret...

Except Mommy. Mommy had to know. She knew practically everything anyway, except how to play piano. Besides, she'd told them why she was mad at Superman, but never told anybody why she was mad at Mr. Clark. It had to be because she knew they were really the same person.

Yup, he and Mommy were the only people in the whole world to know Superman's secret... Jason glanced at Kala again, and starting humming smugly as he finished his picture, leaving off the glasses. No way did he want to give his stuck-up sister a *hint*.

Lois hadn't seen Richard leave work, and that was fine with her. Tired, having lost the benefit of her target-shooting session, all she really wanted to do was go home and unwind.

So when she got to her car and found Richard leaning against it with a bouquet of hyacinths and a hopeful smile, Lois at first simply halted in shock. He smiled at her, that old charming smile that had worn away her defenses years ago, and proffered the flowers. "Any way I can talk you into going on a date with me, Ms. Lane?"

The sudden wash of memories was almost painful. *Have I really been thinking about just giving up on this man and the life we've built? Richard loves me. Sure, we have problems, but he's been there, every day and every night. He's been there for me, and he's been there for the twins. He's the only father they know...*

Her expression softened, and she came toward him, taking the flowers. "That's sweet of you to offer, but we do have children to take care of," she replied, tilting her face up for a peck on the cheek.

Richard wasn't content with that; he caught her lips for a quick kiss that still spoke of the attraction between them, and then lightly placed another kiss at the corner of her eye. It was his trademark move, his secret way of saying *I love you and no other*, and it nearly broke Lois' heart again. "Nah, beautiful, your mom is watching them. She said it's okay for them to stay late. I want to take you out somewhere, Lois. We haven't been spending enough time together lately, and I miss you."

She had to close her eyes. *If you're going to try to make this work ... if there's any chance left for you and the twins to have a normal life ... you'd better take the peace offering.* "Sometimes you're too nice, Richard," Lois whispered, but her sharper side couldn't resist adding, "when you're not being a nosy jerk."

Instead of yelling, he hugged her. "I'm a *reporter*," he breathed against her hair. "It's what we do."

Luckily he couldn't see her blush. She had been just as persistent, just as exasperating, in trying to prove that Clark was really Superman. At least Richard hadn't gone to those extreme lengths in his little investigation. "All right, all right," Lois sighed. "So where are we going?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," Richard teased, and she couldn't help smiling at him as they got into the car. She was driving, of course; the Audi had rarely known anyone else's hands on the wheel since she'd bought it. With the recent exception of a certain lieutenant with car stealing skills...

The drive was made pleasant by the odor of the flowers, and as Richard called out turns, Lois admired them. She wondered if Richard knew that they symbolized apology ... probably the florist had told him so.

At last, they arrived at a pleasant little restaurant set back from the street behind a courtyard. Lois liked the look and scent of it; mouth-watering aromas of spices and something else, something sweet, reached the street.

As Richard followed her in the door, into the warm embrace of flavored smoke and Mediterranean cooking, his expression momentarily hardened. *A glass of wine, a martini or two, and we'll even share one of those hookahs - the smoke's a lot safer on your lungs than her cigarettes. I know she's been smoking, but I won't call her on it. Then maybe once she's relaxed, I can get an honest answer or two...*

And if we just have a wonderful dinner that reminds us why we're together, that's fine, too. I have almost all the evidence I need to make my point.

Everything Burns

Is that a shadow, or a flaw in the paint? Lois stared up at the patterns of the ceiling and wondered, as she had the last half hour. She was wide awake and sober too soon, the last of the alcohol having burned out of her system. Unfortunately, the soothing effect of the nicotine was gone as well.

I should've known something was wrong the minute Richard offered to let me smoke, she thought. Her gaze shifted to Richard's slumbering form, but she found it difficult to be angry with him. Not after the last several hours, anyway. Herself, was a different matter.

Dinner had been wonderful. The restaurant was fantastic, candles in low red glasses on every table, all the wood stained dark with time and use, everywhere the mellow gleam of candlelight and brass and glasses full of delicious wines.

They'd sampled a variety of Middle Eastern fare: hummus with olive oil drizzled atop it, spicy falafel, swordfish kabobs, and delicious meat pies in flaky pastry. Lois had eaten far too many olives, and downed several glasses of delightful wine. The highlight of the evening for her, of course, had been the hookah. Filled with rose-flavored shisha tobacco and filtered through rosewater, it had lifted the simple act of smoking to a sublime ritual of relaxation.

Combining the joys of the thick, cool hookah smoke with an assortment of sweet baklava and a bottle of chilled ice wine had elevated the evening to exceptional heights. Lois looked back on her behavior and winced; now the pattern of Richard's conversation was easy to define, but then he had seemed innocuously curious. He always circled back to Clark, and like a fool, she'd spoken too freely, her tongue loosened by liquor and nicotine. Lois had reminisced fondly - she cringed at the memory - over the many stories she and Clark had hunted down together, all of the good times they'd had. Even the memory of their first awkward meeting, admitting with a sly smile that she had been testing him with the soda bottle trick.

Was I really that blind? Did I really say all that? Dear God. What kind of moron was I to fall for this, hook line, and sinker?

At least she'd managed to keep the secret of his alter ego. And at least she had made it very clear that, though Clark certainly had feelings for her, she'd kept him at arm's length, kept him guessing. Only when Richard asked about the last time she'd seen Clark did Lois actually stop. The haunted look on her face she hadn't been able to conceal and her muttered comment about not knowing he was taking extended leave had convinced Richard to end that line of questioning for the night. *Thank God for small favors.*

More wine, sweet and golden, thick with flavor. More shisha, this time flavored with mint. Thick cups of sweetened coffee, and then it was finally time to leave. Lois felt pleasantly off-kilter, though she wasn't precisely inebriated. Just the combination of vices had relaxed her to the point of lightheadedness, and Richard helped her to the car. She'd laughed easily, leaning on his arm, and that laughter had been precious to them both.

The restaurant was set back from the street behind a courtyard full of potted plants and trickling fountains. They'd had to cross in front of traffic to get to the parking lot, which was dimly lit. As Richard tried to unlock the passenger side door, Lois had leaned heavily on him, feeling as though the lovely evening had somehow melted her bones. It was also quite a funny feeling, and she couldn't stop chuckling as she pressed closer to him to hold herself up. Which threw her off-balance and she had slipped just as she was afraid she'd do. But Richard caught her easily.

Now, lying in bed and remembering that moment, Lois still couldn't be sure that she

hadn't kissed him first. It was like in dreams, where the scene changes abruptly with no transition, and she found herself pressed against the car, kissing him hungrily as if the last taste of the coffee in his mouth was ambrosia. And Richard clearly felt the same about her, his hands running possessively up and down her sides, pinning her against the car door and kissing her hard enough for her lips to feel bruised.

As his passion became tangible, Lois' mind started to disconnect. *Do you really want to do this?* the Romantic whispered. *With him? With the way you're feeling about someone else right now? It's not right, Lois. Didn't we do this once already, and who felt guilty afterwards?*

Shut up, Lois growled back, determined to block the voice out. Shut up, I'm not gonna ruin this... Who cares if it's right? It's no more wrong than those damn dreams I've been having about him. I don't care ... it feels so nice after so long...

And it *was* nice to just forget about everything else, Richard nuzzling her neck, feeling warmth suffuse her body. Lois murmured incoherently, tilting her head back and letting him kiss her throat with a low moan. So very nice, drifting in a haze of warm pleasure...

Which suddenly shattered. Richard ran his hands down to her thighs and lifted her, pinning her at a more convenient height. An icy shiver of déjà vu ran through Lois as her eyes opened wide; that was a car door handle poking her in the back instead of the drawer handle of a filing cabinet, but the comparison to the other morning couldn't be clearer. And recognizing the similarities, admitting to her feelings for both men, she couldn't go on. *Damn you, Kal-El.*

"No," Lois whispered, almost moaning with frustration and resignation. "No, no, no, we can't. Not like this, not now, no..." She pressed both hands against Richard's chest as she dropped her head, tormented by memories and promises. "Richard, no, stop."

Richard sighed heavily against her neck, and Lois shuddered at his breath on the sensitive skin. "Why?" he asked. "Why not?"

"We can't," Lois whispered back, not daring to look him in the eyes. Her body ached with craving, but her mind was frozen. "Not here."

Richard let her down gently. "Well, no, not here," he said with a breathless chuckle, desire making his voice rough. "But later..." He kissed her earlobe, letting his warm breath tickle her.

Shivers ran up and down Lois' spine and she leaned toward him, then suddenly pulled back. "No," she said more sternly, clamping down hard on the lightning-quick desire in her veins. In that way at least, he knew her so very well. "Richard ... it's the wrong time." Lois blushed as she offered that last-ditch excuse. *Oh, for God's sake, Lois! You couldn't come up with anything better than that?*

For a moment, Richard looked confused, then understanding dawned. "Oh," he said, crestfallen. But he didn't question her; no man ever would question that particular reason. However, Lois was acutely aware that even six months ago he would've known she was lying - only their recent estrangement made the excuse plausible.

He kissed her brow, sliding his arms around her gently. "Another time, then," he murmured, and Lois was still enough under the sway of caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol to cuddle against his chest and let the rest of the world spin as it would.

Lying awake in bed beside him now, the reporter didn't know exactly what to damn herself for. Part of her wished she'd accepted the affection she craved, having missed it for quite some time. Another part felt that doing so would be a betrayal of Kal-El, who had woken feelings in her heart she could no longer deny regardless of her fears. And still another part felt

that making love to Richard now would be a betrayal of Richard as well, since she could no longer make herself believe she loved him the same way.

To make things even *worse*, Richard chose that moment to roll over in his sleep and slip his arm around her waist with a blissful murmur.

What am I going to do now? Just what the hell am I going to do? How do I get myself into these things? And just how am I going to get myself out of it this time, without destroying everything? Staring up at the ceiling, still unable to decide whether it was a shadow or stain, whether semblance or substance.

As Richard drove the twins to school the next morning, Kala leaned against the window, staring out and upward. She couldn't see much sky now that they were downtown, only glimpses between Metropolis' concrete canyons, but those few stretches of blue captivated her interest. Had Lois, still in bed miles behind them, known what Kala was thinking, she would have been wide awake and terrified.

Wonder if I'm gonna ever be up there? Kala mused. *Maybe I can fly, like Daddy. That'd be really cool.*

Several days after overhearing her Nana's urgently whispered conversation with Mommy - *Have you told Superman about his twins?* - Kala had been up at her parents' job, and talked Uncle Jimmy into walking her down to the break room for some flavored water. They had passed the rows of front-page stories, framed and mounted, which Kala had seen dozens of times before. At six years old, she couldn't read much past the headlines, and had always dismissed them as sort of boring posters. But that day, with Nana's electrifying words still floating in her mind, Kala had skidded to a halt in front of one the stories.

I Spent the Night with Superman, she needed no help with that. The biggest word was one every child in Metropolis knew well. But what Kala had never quite noticed before was the byline beneath it. *By Lois Lane*, she read, and her hazel eyes grew wide. "Uncle Jimmy, my Mommy went to a sleepover at Superman's house?" she had asked, impressed.

The photographer had chuckled, and explained that the two had spent the evening flying around, which Kala found incredibly exciting. She'd managed not to tell Uncle Jimmy everything she knew, though.

Superman's my daddy, Kala thought, remembering the incident warmly as she gazed up at the brief flashes of sky. *My Mommy was in love with **Superman**. That's the most special-est ever.* Then another realization hit, and she sat bolt upright in the back seat. *That means Mommy kissed Superman! Maybe more than once! **Wow!*** New respect for her mother shone in the little girl's eyes.

Jason was looking at her like she'd lost her mind, and Kala just glared at him. ***He** doesn't have a clue. Boys. They're all so dumb ... except Daddy. Both daddies, Richard and Superman. They're pretty smart. Hey, Superman was **in love** with my Mommy! That's **so neat**.*

Such pleasant and intriguing thoughts kept her occupied all the way to her classroom.

It had not been a pleasant morning for Lois. She'd woken in the wee hours from a dream that left her clammy with sweat. In it, the life she'd worked so hard to build had continued on just as planned. She'd married Richard, they'd lived in this house, and they had come to know each other very well after all and to enjoy each other more with each passing year. Their lovemaking had become more tender than passionate as time went by, and they spent more time together in silence because everything was known between them. But it was a good life,

one happier than many women could ever dream of.

So why had she woken up shivering with fear? Lois asked herself that as she crept to the bathroom and rinsed her face, trying to shake herself back into reality - and out of the sudden urge to call Clark.

Staring at the dark shadows under her eyes in the pitiless fluorescent light, Lois had to admit that she wanted more. More than happiness, more than comfort, more than stability. She wanted that level of intimacy that was almost painful in its intensity; she wanted awe and wonder and the occasional feeling that her life was out of her control. For a moment the reporter tried to scold herself, thinking, *Life is not a fairy tale, you don't always get magic and princes.*

But another voice replied softly, *Once upon a time you did - and it's not too late, if you're brave enough to try again. Brave enough to call the whirlwind into your own life and let it blow away everything that isn't bolted down tight. Make the choice, dare to say the things you've been thinking, and when it all dies down you'll see what's left is what's strongest. And you already know what that is - the love you can't deny, can't excise from your heart.*

Still she hesitated. Even if her own heart - and finally her mind - were clear on what she wanted, Lois wasn't making a decision just for herself. *The twins. Which is best for them: the security of the life they've always known, or the constant uncertainty of life with their real father?*

It hadn't been the kind of question she could answer that early, so Lois had crawled back into bed and eventually slept. Later that morning, after Richard left with the twins, she decided to make time to investigate the Vanderworth estate a second time, now armed with both the information Clark had passed on and additional tidbits passed on from Karla Smith-Bennett during their phone conversation. She'd stop briefly by the office, of course, but only briefly. She had to at least show up in the morning, but it would be best if she didn't run into either of the men today...

One of those mornings, again. Maybe the arsonist planned to plead not guilty by reason of insanity if he was ever caught, or maybe he was inspiring copycats. Clark privately thought it could be either one as he hurried in to work. Certainly this morning's fire was nonsensical, in some respects closely following the firebug's usual M.O., in others widely different.

The same model airplane fuels, but this time the target had been an abandoned warehouse. Virtually no risk to human life, but the same timed ignitions. Of course, the other arson targets didn't fit an easy pattern, unless maximum mayhem was a pattern...

He changed in the ventilation shaft and headed into the newsroom the back way, as if he'd just come down the secondary stairs from the corrections department above. As Clark walked in, something made him look up and across the busy city room to the front doors.

Lois was on her way out, though she couldn't have been in long at this hour. Even across the crowded room, their eyes met, and for a moment Clark couldn't move. He had once stood next to the great bells of Big Ben as the clock struck noon, just to see if the chimes would dampen the thousands of other sounds he could hear. It hadn't worked, but the vibration shocked him into immobility. Standing that close, every cell in his body seemed to resonate in answer, even his pulse and breath keeping the bells' time.

That feeling returned to him as he met Lois' gaze, seeing a kind of stricken look on her face. The sight of his beloved drove everything else out of his heart and mind for a moment,

and from the unthinking way she took a step toward him, Lois felt as much for him. *What are you thinking, Lois?* he couldn't help but wonder.

Then the moment was gone, Lois shaking her head slightly as she turned to leave. *What are **you** thinking?* Clark scolded himself as he headed to his desk. *Stop it. Just stop it. How much you miss her doesn't matter; what she wants, and what's best for her, does. How the heck can you manage to put the **entire planet** above your own needs, **except** when it comes to her?*

But he knew the answer to that. *Love has its reasons, that reason never knows.*

Clark didn't have long to contemplate, however. He'd been at his desk barely ten minutes when he heard a fire alarm. *Not again...* It might just be a school testing the system; it might just be a homeowner who'd let the bacon sizzle a little too long. He listened a moment longer.

And heard the alarms in one of the main fire stations go off, shortly followed by sirens. *I have got to catch this guy,* he thought, hurrying out again. *Or else he's going to make me lose my job.*

Lois's heart had stopped beating for a moment, catching Clark's glance. There was so much she needed to say to him, her stubborn defiance gradually being won over by the desire to end this secret-keeping. In spite of her resolutions, every time she saw him she wanted to simply confide in him, to take him back into her trust. *What are you thinking? Are you really as torn over all of this as I am? Do you really want me back or do you want me just because you don't have me?*

Do you dream about me at night, the same as I do about you, and then lie to yourself in the morning?

*Is it even **possible** for us to have another chance? Even now?*

They would talk soon, set the record straight on everything, but now wasn't the time. Not with all that was going on at the moment. *Soon,* she promised herself. *For better or worse.* Closure or new beginning, it had to be done. But for now, she forced herself to leave, remembering that she probably wouldn't get out of the office at all if she didn't do it before Richard got there.

Thankfully, the Vanderworth alarm systems had a few vulnerable points - vulnerable to someone who didn't mind climbing the property fence and getting in the basement via a cellar window, anyway.

The basement was dark and dusty, forcing Lois to suppress a sneeze. She kept close to the wall, listening intently. Somewhere in the mansion, she could hear the dull roar of a furnace, but there was no other sound. For the moment, she could risk a light. Lois always carried a small electromagnetic flashlight in her purse, the kind that needs no batteries. All she had to do was shake it briskly, and it gave her a strong bluish LED beam.

Dusty was an understatement. Every surface was cloaked in pale powder, giving the room an unsettling shrouded appearance. And it wasn't all the normal dust of neglect - quite a lot of it appeared to be from cracking and shifting concrete, since the floor and walls were buckled. The extent of the damage was incredible - apparently there had once been some kind of train set down here, but now it was in ruins. The powerful light showed toppled buildings, derailed trains, flattened mountains, and everywhere the figures of miniature plastic people lay knocked over and broken.

Lois felt a premonitory chill run down her spine. *Whatever caused this destruction, I **really** hope Luthor hasn't figured out how to scale it up.* She couldn't, however, immediately

divine the source of the EMP. A great many wires lay tangled in a heap under and around the jumbled remains of the train set, but they could have all been part of the set itself.

Suddenly, a glint from under one of the piles of debris caught Lois' eye. She had to pick her way across to it carefully, stepping over miniature bridges and roads and trees, but finally the reporter knelt in the dust and examined her find.

A tiny chip of glass... no, crystal, no bigger than a grain of rice. Lois sighed disgustedly; it could be part of some kind of timing device for explosives, or a piece chipped out of someone's watch face. *Why can't life be more like a novel? Why can't I find a nice big clue, like a book entitled "How to Cause a Massive EMP with Easily-Traceable Materials"? Yeah, open to the page that would tell me how he did it, with his fingerprints on the cover.*

Oh well. This might mean something, it might not. Either way, I'm taking no chances. Lois took an envelope out of her purse and sealed the fragment inside. Then she set off to continue her exploration, carefully avoiding the windows so she wouldn't be caught on the exterior security cameras. She wasn't worried about the interior; the specs of the alarm system hadn't mentioned indoor monitoring.

After dropping the twins off, Richard stopped for coffee. He hated that stuff Perry brewed at the office, it looked and smelled like tar - and tasted worse. He preferred to get his cup of steaming black wakefulness from a corner doughnut shop, at which newsmen from several papers liked to congregate.

As Richard was paying for his coffee, he overheard a wisp of conversation from somewhere in the back of the dingy, dough-scented room. He could only make out a couple of words, but they electrified him: "Lane ... drunk ... Pulitzers..."

The International Editor drifted toward the voice, pretending to be preoccupied with the selection of doughnuts in the large glass case. The speaker was a heavysset reporter Richard had seen here often, but whose name he didn't know. He gestured with a powdered, jelly-filled doughnut, then took a bite, spraying powdered sugar all over the table. "I'm tellin' ya, she was drunk off her ass."

The man across from him at the small table leaned back in distaste. "You obviously don't know Lois Lane. There wasn't enough liquor there to get *her* drunk. She's made of iron..."

"Nah, she ain't," the large man replied. "Dunno who she thinks she is anyway..."

"She's the next editor-in-chief of the *Daily Planet*, Harry," his companion replied sharply. "And she knows it perfectly well. Lois Lane won the Pulitzer; she got the first Superman interview back in the day, too. I'd be careful what you say about her."

The other man harrumphed, and sipped his coffee noisily. Richard acted as though he was fascinated by the crullers. "Yeah, right," Harry said. "I'm not scared of her. What's she gonna do, break my arm?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," the other replied. "Don't underestimate her. She looks pretty and sweet and vapid right up until she scoops your story and steals your sources. And don't forget her boyfriend."

Richard kept his face turned away, but he soon realized they weren't talking about him. Harry sprayed more crumbs as he laughed. "Yeah? That guy in International, the pilot? So what, Dan?"

"No, the *other* flyboy," Dan replied, dusting off his sleeve and glaring at his companion. "The caped one. He wouldn't take kindly to you disparaging his lady love."

Another shower of crumbs. "Hah! Superman? Please. It's been six years and she wrote a

bitchy article about him. That's the first time PMS has won anybody a Pulitzer."

"Tone it down, Harry. I'm serious."

The heavyset man seemed not to hear, and Richard began to suspect there was more than creamer in his coffee by his slightly slurred words. "Besides, he's got a lot more to worry 'bout than me. How thrilled you think he's gonna be when he finds out she almost kissed *Kent* at the Pulitzers?"

"*Kent*?" Dan's disbelief was clear, and Richard felt frozen in shock. "Clark Kent? Mr. Milquetoast? Her old partner?"

"Yup," Harry replied, relishing his moment of glory. "Kent. Told you she was drunk."

That effectively ruined Richard's day. *Kent. She kissed Clark at the Pulitzers? Why am I the last one to find out these things? What the hell else have they all been hiding from me?*

Oh, Uncle Perry's in for it now... He stormed out, seething, and headed right back to the office to confront Lois, Perry, and Clark ... whichever of them were around.

Perry White never quite minded his own business. Everyone else's was so much more obviously in need of experienced minding. At the moment, he was peacefully monitoring what his employees thought were private emails ... in spite of the notice in the handbook that said all emails sent to and from the company server were subject to managerial review.

Grinning at some of the less than savory descriptions of himself - wouldn't they be surprised when he casually remarked on the inaccuracies - he was completely unprepared for Richard to burst into the office. Perry raised a grizzled eyebrow and looked skeptically at his brother's son.

At least Richard let the door shut completely behind him. "What the hell happened at the Pulitzers, Perry?" he demanded immediately.

The editor sat back in his chair, for once in his life stunned. *Ah, shit. I knew this was coming. I just hoped it wouldn't be so soon.* "What're you talking about, Richard? And don't take that tone with me."

"I'm talking about my fiancée and Kent." Richard leaned across the desk, and completely ignored the warning about tone. "Don't play stupid with me, Perry. You were there, and nosy as you are, you had to know about it."

"What about your fiancée and Kent? What kind of rumor-mill bullshit have you been listening to? And watch your goddamn tone, Richard - you're not too old to feel my belt."

"Oh, come off it," Richard scoffed. "Stop screwing around and tell me what the hell you know about Kent and Lois making out at the Pulitzers."

"Making out? Are you smoking something?" Perry was relieved to be on safe ground here. "I don't know who you were talking to, but they don't have their facts straight."

"So what *really* happened?"

The editor hesitated, then plunged on. "Dammit, *you* told her there'd be an open bar. You practically told her to drink."

"So she got plastered?"

"She didn't get *drunk*; she got a little bit tipsy. I chased them out onto the dance floor so she could finally talk to Kent - which is what we all wanted, so they'd quit fighting all the damn time - and it worked. They were bickering like they used to. Problem is, she almost kissed him at the end of a slow dance."

"She *kissed* him?" Richard hissed.

"*Almost*," Perry growled. "Stop calling yourself a reporter if you can't quote a source

accurately! She quit and pulled back well before she actually kissed him, though."

"And you weren't gonna tell me?!"

"Of course not!" Perry barked. "You'd just make an ass of yourself, like you're doing right now!"

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really! She'd had a few and she was dancing with the guy. So she almost kissed him. There's a shrink in Chelsea who did a whole lot more than kiss her a couple years before you showed up, if you want to be a jerk to someone who deserves it."

"Well, I have good reason to believe she did a whole lot more than kiss Clark," Richard replied hotly. Before he really knew what he was saying, he spilled everything. "I'm pretty sure I caught them making out in the damn supply closet the day we got back - they sure looked guilty as hell. But it shouldn't surprise me, considering that he's the father of the twins."

"*What?*" Perry stared at him incredulously. "Richard, son, you have completely and utterly lost your mind. Clark Kent no more slept with Lois than I did."

"I'm serious," Richard said, regaining a little of his composure. "Look, Uncle Perry. You sent them to Niagara, posing as newlyweds. Those Kryptonians try taking over the world, Lois is a hostage, Superman shows up in the nick of time to save the day. Next thing we know, Clark's acting all kinds of pained, and Lois is being a little flaky about remembering things. Boom, Superman vanishes. Clark goes on leave the same time - *to France*. To Paris, actually. Lois heads out looking for Superman, and she winds up in Paris."

"So you're saying they met in Paris? Richard, there was nothing romantic between them before they left. I would've known. Besides, she was nuts about Superman."

"Yes, and thanks so very much for telling me that when I first met her," Richard replied sharply. "Anyway, she was in Paris, just realizing that Superman was gone indefinitely. And then suppose she met Kent, just by coincidence. Kent, who's always had a thing for her. Who's always been there for her. The one man she trusts more than anyone, except you and Superman. You know Lois - can't you see it? When she needed someone who was comfortable and reliable more than anything else, he was there."

"Okay, okay, it's plausible. But what about Garen what's-his-name?"

"No such person," Richard retorted. "I checked. The name Garen never appeared in a *Quotidienne* byline, as first, middle, or last. The only Garen who ever worked in the area had a stationery shop across the street, and his boyfriend didn't appreciate me calling."

"You *called*..."

"*Furthermore*, of the four guys who worked there at the same time as Lois and who claim to have slept with her - none named Garen - none of them actually *have*. At least, none of them have ever seen her naked."

"*What?* How the hell do you know that?"

"Because they can all describe, in detail, a birthmark she doesn't have," Richard told him.

Perry stared. Slowly, he said, "If she ever finds out you've been investigating her, Richard, she'll kick your ass. I mean she will literally beat the daylights out of you."

"Yes, well, this is what happens when you lie and evade to the point where someone doesn't trust you to answer a direct question," Richard replied hotly.

"Still..."

"Perry, look me in the eyes and tell me you think I'm wrong," the younger man demanded. "It's the only explanation that makes sense. *He* was gone, Clark was there. You know Lois better than I do - *everybody* knows her better than I do, apparently - tell me I'm

completely wide of the mark. Go on, do it."

Perry sighed, dropping his face into his hands. For a moment, just a moment, he looked his age, careworn and tired. His voice was low and resigned as he said, "Richard, listen to me for once in your life. Which do you want, the truth - or Lois? Because you're gonna lose her if you keep this up."

His nephew leaned forward, eyes intense. "What if she was never mine to begin with, Perry? Just answer me."

"Fine, shoot yourself in the foot if you want to," Perry barked, some of the old fire coming back. "I didn't want you to get hurt, but I can't stop you if you're this determined. Yeah, I think it makes sense. I don't one hundred percent believe you've hit on the truth, but it's plausible. If you're happy now, do me a favor."

"What?"

"*Don't* talk to Kent. If what you think is the truth, that's *her* job. Don't you *dare* spring this on Kent."

"Why ... not that I'm gonna, but why not, Perry?"

The editor glared. "Because if you're wrong and he never slept with her, you'll probably kill him by suggesting he did."

Richard rolled his eyes, got up, and left the office without a further word. A few moments later, Perry saw the switchboard monitoring program on his computer pick up a call from Richard's cell phone to Troupe in International. *At least the boy's figured out he better let someone know when he leaves this office*, the older man thought, sitting back in his chair with a troubled glance into Lois' office. She and Kent had both just barely missed meeting Richard, and Perry was damned glad they had. That was not a scene he cared to witness.

Lois arrived back at the office after Richard had shown up and left again. Perry was giving her a strange look, but he didn't call her into his office, so she ignored him for the moment.

Richard stayed gone, and Clark eventually made it back. *Seems like this is the morning for wandering in and out. Typical Friday*, she thought, but it was probably better this way. Lois had a chance to work on her editorial due tomorrow, and the Vanderworth story as well. A few minutes of searching on the internet quickly told her that she'd have to find an actual expert to ask about the crystals; half the people online were more concerned with whether a given stone could open your chakras or help you remember a past life. The way testimonials were worded, she couldn't weed out those kinds of search results even by adding *explosive, detonate, destruction* and similar search terms.

By lunch time, she'd given up in disgust. *I'm going to have to talk to an actual geologist. Lovely. Forget this, I'm going to go get something to eat. And no break room vending machine for me today, please.* She waved to Jimmy on her way out, and he smiled at her, instantly lightening her mood.

Ten minutes later she was back, her heels striking the carpet sharply, and Jimmy looked up questioningly but knew better than to ask what was wrong. Lois headed to her office without a word and called her car insurance company. "Hi, this is Lois Lane," she said pleasantly, but there was that edge to her voice, the one that those who knew her well learned to hear exquisitely - and fear. The operator replied politely, and Lois continued, "I've got an Audi A3 covered by you guys... Yeah. It won't start."

The man started going through what was clearly a checklist, and Lois replied impatiently.

"Right, I tried that... Uh-huh. Nope, it has fuel, I checked the distributor cap, spark plugs are tight. Battery's only a year old..." That seemed to be the end of it; Lois rolled her eyes and suppressed a sigh as the operator finally agreed to tow the car. "Yes, please, take it to the dealership for me. It's in the *Daily Planet* parking garage, space B12. First floor. Have them call me and I'll meet the tow truck driver at the car... Thanks... You too."

She hung up the phone, sighing in disgust, and then called in an order of pizza. After that she dialed Barbara, "You'll definitely be picking them up today, hon."

"Really? What happened?" Someone was practicing the piano in the background, probably one of her adult students.

"My stupid car died. I have a \$450 a month lease and the bloody thing just won't start. I love that car, but right now I could just kick the hell out of it."

"It's no problem, really. I'll get them. You just be glad the car didn't break down while you were driving it, Lo."

"Very true," Lois chuckled. "Thanks, hon. No, really. Thank you. I guess I'd better get back to work..."

The student hit a blatantly sour note, and Lois envisioned Barbara flinching as the woman sighed. "Yeah, me too. See you later."

"See you. Bye." Lois hung up and dropped back into her chair, glaring out the windows. *Just another lovely day in the life of Lois Lane. And to think people envy me...*

Things in the office had seemed unusually tense that morning, and Jimmy wisely chose to spend it in the darkroom, away from everyone's line of fire. He came up in the afternoon with justification for his pay, plus a couple more pictures from the recent fires to run with an article on the arsonist.

Jimmy was at his desk, keeping a weather eye out for Perry and Richard. One of the other photographers had muttered something to him about a very intense discussion between those two. Sarah Olsen hadn't raised any fools; the way things had been lately, the discussion could only be about Lois, and Jimmy didn't want to be interrogated again.

The coast looked clear, though Perry and Lois were in their offices. Richard had been gone for a while, though Clark was finally back. Maybe nothing was up ... this place was a giant rumor mill, and what the gossips couldn't dig up they *made* up, the juicier the better.

Still, Jimmy kept an eye on Lois. Anything that went wrong around here would either center on her or drag her into it, always had. Lois was a magnet for controversy.

Her office door was partly open; it wouldn't close all the way unless you tugged it, which Lois blamed on damp weather and Perry blamed on her slamming it. So Jimmy heard her phone ring, and having finished setting up the photos for tomorrow's article, he glanced her way with mild interest.

The raven-haired reporter smiled at first, but then that pleasant expression fell from her face and shattered, like fine china falling from the shelf with a splintering smash. Jimmy sat up, worried, and watched as Lois' expression went from shock, to fear, to absolute terror. And then rage swarmed up to join the horror, and Lois dropped the phone. It swung beneath her desk from its cord, smacking the wood, while she snatched up her purse and bolted for the door.

Uh-oh, Jimmy thought, panicking. He'd never seen her look like this; even when the Kryptonians threatened them and hurt Perry, she'd been furious, but not this frightened. And again, he'd seen her scared, but not simultaneously so wrathful.

As Lois stormed past his desk, her eyes glazed and fixed on the door, Jimmy yelled for help. "*Chief! Clark! Somebody stop her! Clark!*"

Perry was already out of his office, calling her name, but Lois didn't turn around. No one else seemed willing to get in her way, and Jimmy started to follow her as well. *Someone's got to stop her; there's no telling what she'll do when she's like this*, Jimmy thought. *Where the heck is Clark when...? Oh, thank God.*

As he and Perry reached the still-swinging doors, they saw Clark outside, standing between Lois and the elevators. His shoulders were set, but his entire posture spoke of reluctant resignation. "Lois, wait," he said in a low, firm voice neither of them had ever heard him use before.

"Get out of my way *now*, Kent," Lois growled, and Perry and Jimmy were both shocked by the panic in her tone. The panic, and the fury.

She tried to shove him aside, but he caught her arm. "Lois, you can't do this. You can't run headlong..."

Even if the newsroom doors hadn't still been swinging back and forth after she slammed them open, they would've heard her voice suddenly rise almost to a shriek. "*Don't tell me what I can't do! Luthor has my twins! And I'll do whatever I have to do! Now get the hell out of my way!*"

*She sits in her corner
Singing herself to sleep
Wrapped in all of the promises
That no one seems to keep
She no longer cries to herself
No tears left to wash away
Just diaries of empty pages
Feelings gone a stray
But she will sing*

*Til everything burns
While everyone screams
Burning their lies
Burning my dreams
All of this hate
And all of this pain
I'll burn it all down
As my anger reigns
Til everything burns
Watching it all fade away...*
-Ben Moody and Anastacia, "Everything Burns"

Cinders on the Wind

Lois had smiled when she picked up the phone, hearing Barbara's voice. But before she could say more than, "Hello," her expression began to slip.

"Lois, listen," Barbara said, and the tension in her voice was enough to send a chill down Lois' spine. In the background, she could hear Ashlyn crying, and Todd's voice trying to soothe her. "Ashlyn's class got held late, so she came out five minutes after everyone else. When she got to the bench where Mrs. Mosley normally waits with the twins, nobody was there."

"What?" Lois' voice was a tiny, strengthless whisper.

"Todd and I got there right after; we found Mrs. Mosley. Someone hit her in the head and dragged her into the bushes; Todd called an ambulance and the police. She's gonna be okay, I hope... She doesn't remember what happened."

Ashlyn's voice rose in the background, petulant with trauma. "I want Jason an' Kala!"

Barbara sighed, and her tone made it clear how much she hated giving this news, how deeply she understood the horror she was about to voice. "Lois ... the twins are missing. They can't be gone long; we already called the police..."

But the reporter heard no more. At those four words, *the twins are missing*, her vision went abruptly white, her ears deafened by the sudden roar of her own blood beating faster, faster. "Luthor," she whispered, and came back from the brink of fainting, burning with fury. *Luthor. You sonofabitch, I'll kill you. Touch one hair on their heads, and I swear, if it takes my last breath to do it, I will kill you.*

She wasn't aware of dropping the phone, letting it thud against her desk as it twisted on its cord. Lois just grabbed her purse with the reassuring weight of the Ladysmith inside, and headed for the doors. She tried to keep her emotions locked down inside, but it was little use. Part of her was wailing in sheer terror, howling for this to be merely a nightmare. Another part screamed for Luthor's blood, enraged and knowing instinctively he had to be behind the kidnapping.

Dimly, Lois heard Jimmy yell, sensed him and Perry following her. She had one goal in mind: hunt Luthor down before he could harm her children. *God alone knows what he's figured out*, she thought, storming toward the doors. *I'm not going to let the twins get hurt because of me, because of what I had with their father. I'll strangle that bastard Luthor with my bare hands if he hurts them... Jason, Kala, Mommy's coming...*

She was barely aware of her surroundings until she nearly reached the elevators, and then *he* was there, barring her way. "Get out of my way *now*, Kent," she growled, his voice unheard. Not even Superman could stop her when her children were at stake...

Clark had been minding his own business, working on a story and worrying about the arsonist, when he became aware of the absence of a sound that he knew and loved. Lois' heartbeat.

His head snapped up, his expression intense enough to give away his secret if the right people had seen his face. But then her heart began to beat again, and for an instant he relaxed.

The beat was too fast, though, too hard, and it only accelerated. Clark hadn't tuned into the phone conversation yet - he spent most of his time trying *not* to hear private discussions - but he did so then, catching only a woman's voice as she called out, "Lois? Are you there? The cops are coming ... the twins could be anywhere..."

And his own heart stilled in its great steady rhythm. *The twins. Oh, my God. No...* Lois went steamrolling across the office, Jimmy yelling for the Chief, yelling for *him*. Clark forced

himself to move past the shock and the horror, and as soon as he was up he found his own pulse hammering. He sped out of the side door that lead to a long-disused hallway to some conference rooms, and beat Lois to the elevators in a blur of super-speed. "Lois, wait," he said, and she was nearly incoherent with terror and rage as she snarled a reply and tried to push past him.

Clark caught her arm, held her fast. "Lois, you can't do this," he said as gently as he could, his heart breaking for her. "You can't run headlong..."

She whirled on him, punching his elbow in a vain attempt to make him let go that probably numbed her hand. Her voice rose as she shouted, "*Don't tell me what I can't do! Luthor has my twins! And I'll do whatever I have to! Now get the **hell** out of my way!*"

Lois was hysterical. Clark had never thought he'd see her this far gone into that particular madness, but he couldn't let her go. She'd likely run blindly into some trap of Luthor's, and how would that help Jason and Kala? Clark grabbed her upper arms and lifted her off the ground slightly, setting her down again squarely in front of him so that she had to look into his eyes, not at the elevator doors. It was done so smoothly and swiftly that Perry and Jimmy probably hadn't seen or recognized the immense strength behind that simple move. "Lois, get hold of yourself," he told her firmly. "You can't go running off like this; Luthor has a trap laid for you if you do."

She struggled in his grip, her hazel eyes brimming with tears. "Damn you, let me go!" Her voice was near breaking with the extremes of emotion, but she knew all too well that he was far stronger than she was. She had only one way to hit him hard enough to make him release her, and it was with words. "What if it was *you*, huh? What if Luthor had *your* kids, what would *you* do?" Lois glared up at him defiantly, practically spitting the words into his face. While part of her was reeling in disbelief over how close to the truth that was, the majority of her mind and heart hoped it would startle him into letting her go. Nevermind that he was faster, or that he was probably right. Gripped in the vise of panic, all she cared about was chasing down the maniac who had her twins.

And it did shock Clark, but not as badly as she hoped. *I suspect he does*, Clark thought distantly, but he held her and let the certainty in his blue eyes calm hers. "If it happened to me, Lois, I'd pray you were around to stop me from doing something like this."

That stopped her; Lois' eyes went wide as she stared up at him, both of them all too aware of the implication in their words, Lois realizing the inevitability of it. Neither she nor Clark noticed Jimmy whispering to Perry, both men turning away from the doors and shooing the other reporters back to their desks. Clark continued softly, "Getting yourself killed won't help them, Lois. Jason and Kala need you alive and free to act."

Then the tears began to spill from Lois' eyes, and she choked back a sob. "It's my fault, Kal-El," her voice low and trembling, and Clark pulled her close, cradled her in his strong arms, and she was unsurprised at that moment to finally feel at home at last. Closing her eyes at the momentary relief it gave her, she could only close her eyes and hold tightly to him.

"We'll find them," he whispered, and guided her out of the hallway, into the maintenance corridor, where the toughest reporter on the *Planet* could weep brokenly to the one person who had ever seen her that vulnerable.

Richard had found reasons to stay out of the office. The consulate fire needed following up, some other stories needed a bit of fact-checking, and it never hurt for the International editor to have lunch in the café across the street from the U.N. building. He'd picked up quite a

few leads there in the past.

One more thing required his attention, and in the afternoon he went to Centennial Park. A tent city had sprung up in the meadow, and Richard worked his way through the dispersing crowd. He'd timed this just right, arriving after Lana's show was over...

Flashing his press pass got him backstage, where the slim redhead was shaking hands and accepting congratulations from a crowd of admirers and fellow designers. Richard waited, smiling a little; Lana was unfailingly nice to everyone, even the one or two who were clearly jealous of her success and trying to offer a backhanded compliment. He couldn't help comparing the two women: Lois would have had a scathing reply delivered in the same falsely sweet tone, but Lana acted as if the compliment was sincere and defused any potential insult.

*What a genuinely nice person, he thought, mentally kicking himself in the next instant. What are you thinking, Richard? And while we're on the topic, what are you **doing** here anyway? You're engaged!*

For how much longer? Was that his conscience, speaking so coldly? Richard shook off the thought, silencing his doubts for the moment. He was just here to congratulate a source on her successful show. Nothing more than that. Really.

The press of people abated somewhat, and Richard was able to make his way to Lana's side. "Hi," he said, turning that winning grin on her. "I wanted to be the first to congratulate you on the show, but it looks like I was a little late."

The redhead seemed startled to see him, but her lips curved up in a smile that lit her green eyes. "Richard! What a pleasant surprise," she said with real warmth. Perhaps she had shaken hands with too many fans and rivals in the past few minutes, because Lana automatically reached out and took hold of Richard's hands.

The spark that leapt between them was tangible to both, and their eyes widened simultaneously. His fingers tightened on hers for an instant ... and then Lana dropped his hands as if she'd been shocked, chuckling nervously. "Well, it is good to see you," she said, and the comment sounded lame to her own ears. Lana scolded herself, *Quit fawning over him, you idiot! He's engaged to be married, remember?*

Even if he's unhappy... The traitorous little voice that whispered in her ear spoke the truth, but Lana didn't want to listen. He was a nice man and a good reporter; that was all. She couldn't let herself get close to him. "So how are Lois and the twins?" she asked, quickly trying to put some distance between them.

Richard flinched; that was pure icewater, there. "They're okay," he answered automatically. Then he remembered whom he was talking about, the conversation he'd had with Perry that morning, and went on. "I learned something else I wish I didn't know about Lois, but that's to be expected by now."

Lana smacked his arm. "Don't talk about your fiancée like that," she said sternly. "She can't be ... the way you make her sound, or you wouldn't be with her."

Her frankness surprised an uncensored reply out of him. "I might not be for much longer."

Dark auburn eyebrows rose questioningly. "Oh? Did she find out about your extensive background check?" *Darn it, can you be any more abrasive? What are you trying to do, make him feel at home? Thank God he couldn't hear the thoughts whispering in her mind. Did I just think that? My God, that was catty.*

Richard gave her back a look that was just as cool. "No, I found out she kissed another man," he replied. But this was Lana, so he amended, "Almost kissed him, anyway."

"What?" she asked. "Is this the guy you think is the father of the twins, or someone else?"

"Yeah, it's Clark," Richard replied, and bit his tongue a second too late. *Aw, damn. I can't believe I just did that.*

"Clark?" Lana's voice rose. "Clark Kent? You're out of your mind! I've known him since grammar school!"

"Keep your voice down," Richard hissed. "Yes, that Clark. Think about it, Lana. Have you ever seen the way he looks at her?"

"I've met her once," Lana replied, "and she was too busy tearing your head off for me to notice anything ... else..." *No, wait. He **was** watching Lois - and that scolding was as much for him as for Richard. She pretty much stalked over and marked them both as hers... Not to mention that day in the Chinese restaurant. Textbook definition of awkward there - and the look she shot me just screamed 'jealous.' Dear Lord, I think Richard's right.*

*Clark is the twins' father. That cashier didn't know how right she was - **Daddy's girl** indeed! And oh, what Richard just said he found out... Clark's been fooling around with an engaged woman?*

Martha Kent is going to kill him!

There was no more time to talk, or to think, however. Richard's cell phone buzzed, and he muttered, "Let me check this." The screen displayed Perry's desk, and little as Richard wanted to take the call, he knew he should. "Hello, Uncle Perry, I'm with a source... What? *What? Who* has them? Wait a minute - *Perry, where's Lois?*" He listened a moment longer, his complexion going pale as chalk, and Lana caught his arm, afraid he would faint. "Thank God. I'll be there as soon as I can," he said into the phone, and snapped it shut.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Lana asked. She didn't need to know exactly what was going on; his face and voice told her it was terrible, and her compassion moved her.

Richard looked at her blankly, as if he'd forgotten who she was and where he stood. Then his wild eyes focused, and she saw a little relief in them. "I don't know, but if there is, I'll call you. Lana, I have to go."

"I know," she replied, and everything left unspoken between them could stay that way for now. Whatever he'd just heard overrode all else. "Is it Lois or the kids?"

"The kids," Richard replied. "They've been kidnapped. Thank God Clark stopped Lois from running after them or she'd have been taken by now, too."

Sympathetic pain tore through Lana, and her sea-green eyes filled with fear and grief. "My God, Richard," she whispered, and squeezed his shoulder gently. "Be safe - and call me if you need me."

Richard placed his hand over hers briefly, mute gratitude in his glance, and then he was gone. Lana was left feeling suddenly alone in a sea of people, her mind in turmoil. *It doesn't matter that he's not their biological father, he loves those kids. And to have come so close to losing her as well... My God, please, don't do this; he doesn't deserve it. None of them do. Please, please, let the twins be okay...*

Jason cried out as the big man shoved him into the room, making him stumble and fall. Kala writhed in her captor's grip, kicking at his shins with as much accuracy and force as she could muster. He said a bad word when she connected, and dropped her. Before the girl could whirl on the man who'd pushed her brother, the other man put his hand between her shoulder blades and shoved her hard. She staggered into the room and hit Jason just as he was getting to his feet again, and both twins tumbled to the ground.

It took them a moment to disentangle themselves and get up, and during that time they

heard metallic noises on the other side of the heavy door. "They locked us in," Jason said in affronted tones.

Kala muttered one of Mommy's bad words, trying to keep a brave face. "They better leave us 'lone, or I'm gonna bite 'em next time. You okay?"

"Uh-huh," Jason said, looking down at himself. His knees and palms stung from where he'd caught himself in the fall, but the boy had hurt himself worse on the playground. His brand-new shirt was another matter, though. It had a rip in the sleeve, which he picked at sorrowfully. "What about you, Kala?"

I'm really scared and my arm hurts where the bad guy grabbed me, she thought, but she only shrugged and said, "I'm fine." The school fire drills and Officer Safety and her parents had told her again and again to stay calm in any kind of emergency, so that was what Kala would try to do. She needed something else to think about besides the bad men hitting Mrs. Mosley like that, and then picking her and Jason up like they were bags of groceries or something. Some way to keep calm until they could get rescued. *If Mommy was here, what would she do?*

Look for a way out, maybe. Kala looked around intently. This was a very large room, almost as big as the bullpen at her parents' job. It was hard for her to remember that all of this, and lots more, was actually on a *boat*. Not much else in it besides the two of them, a piano on a raised dais at this end of the room, and some couches and tables at the other end. This looked like the kind of room where grownups had really boring parties where they danced slow and drank too much. She did see one other door over by the seating area, and started toward it.

A sudden low throbbing caught her attention, and she turned in a slow circle. That noise sounded *big* somehow, and to her sensitive ears it was quite loud even in the insulated ballroom. It was almost like the roar of a furnace, or Daddy's plane engine...

They felt the movement at the same time, Jason turning to her with wide eyes. "They're takin' us out to sea!" he said anxiously, and his voice hitched as his breath grew shorter.

Kala had had enough asthma attacks to recognize the beginning of one, and she hurried to her brother's side. Those other doors were probably locked, anyway - grownups weren't usually as dumb in real life as they were in the movies. "It's gonna be okay," she told Jason, hugging him. "Mommy and Daddy are gonna find us, and they're gonna beat the snot outta these guys and take us home."

Jason locked his arms around his sister and hugged her back tightly. The painful knot in his chest started to ease a little; as long as the two of them were together, everything would be okay. "Yeah," he replied with false bravado. "An' I won't let them take you 'way from me, Kala. We're safe if we're together."

"Right," she said forcefully. "We'll always be safe as long as we're together. No ugly bald bad guy's gonna getcha while *I'm* here, either."

In spite of their courageous words, the two children clung to each other, desperate for comfort.

Richard made it across town in record time, his palms slippery on the steering wheel. The elevator at the *Daily Planet* seemed incredibly slow, and he paced the confined space. Finally, the doors opened on the sixtieth floor, and Richard rushed out.

Jimmy was waiting for him. "They're in the conference room in back," he said in a low, urgent voice. "Perry's already told everybody we're not rolling on this one 'til the twins are home safe, so it's none of their business."

"Good call," Richard muttered, but his mind was focused on one goal. He hurried down

the disused hallway, making Jimmy stretch his legs to keep up, and was at the door in moments. The international editor twisted the doorknob, not slowing down until he was past the threshold.

Lois was sitting at the big conference table, looking very fragile and frightened. Everything he suspected, everything he knew, everything he feared, shattered in the moment that Richard met her gaze. *None of that matters now*, he told himself as he crossed the room with quick strides. *The twins are all that's important*.

He had almost reached her when he realized who was standing behind her, his hand on her shoulder. Clark saw Richard, and started to step away, but Lois covered his hand with hers even while her eyes were locked on Richard's. He stayed, and squeezed her shoulder gently.

For the moment, Richard ignored him, ignored Perry at the other end of the table, ignored Jimmy closing the door behind him. He dropped into the chair beside Lois, caught her free hand, and cupped her cheek. "Lois," was all he could whisper, words failing him.

"Richard," she sighed, leaning against his hand on her cheek. "Thank God. Perry told you?"

"Yeah," he replied. "I'm so sorry..."

"It isn't your fault," Lois said, and the guilt in her eyes was heartbreaking.

"Okay, kids," Perry said gruffly. "Save the blame game for later. Right now we need to get those kids back. Any ideas where they are?"

Lois rubbed her temples briefly. "Not a clue. We need to check the Vanderworth and Luthor property records, although I doubt he'll make it that easy. The sonofabitch could be anywhere."

"Are we totally certain this is Luthor?" Richard asked gently. "I mean, Lois, you're a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. You've made other enemies..."

The raven-haired reporter was already shaking her head. "No, it's him. It reeks of Luthor. The timing, the precision, the sheer bastardy of hitting me through my kids - it's Luthor."

"But why now?" Perry asked. "He hasn't made a move since he threatened you at the Pulitzers, and you've left him alone."

Lois bit her lip, her gaze skittering away. Then she sighed heavily and tilted her head back, her raven curls blanketing Clark's hand that was still on her shoulder, still anchoring her. "I went to the Vanderworth estate this morning," Lois said.

"You *what*?" the four men said simultaneously.

"I checked all the specs on the security system," Lois said sharply in her own defense. "There's no way he should've known I was there. *And* I picked up an important piece of evidence."

"Evidence is for cops," Perry growled. "What the hell did you find?"

Now she hesitated. "A piece of crystal. Very small, but it was out of place. I wonder if it's part of a detonator or..." Lois trailed off as Clark's hand tightened on her shoulder, and she turned to look up at him, seeing his face, seeing his eyes suddenly full of horrified recognition. It was only then that a possibility occurred to her as well...

"But what does crystal..." Jimmy started to ask, and they were interrupted by Lois' cell phone ringing.

That wasn't the normal ring tone, however, and Lois clawed it out of her purse. Just as she'd suspected, it was a text message, and she hurriedly pressed the buttons to view it.

The first thing that appeared on the tiny screen was a grainy picture from a camera phone. Lois' breath froze in her chest, her lungs squeezed painfully tight, as she looked at Jason and

Kala being held roughly by their upper arms, forced to face the camera.

Clark and Richard saw the photo at same moment, and both drew in sharp breaths. That image held all three frozen in shock, fury, and terror, but it soon began to scroll upward. The message that appeared beneath was, if anything, more horrifying.

"Greetings Ms. Lane,

Such lovely children you have. They're fine, for now. Don't involve the police or the military if you want them to stay that way. Come looking for me yourself - or bring the Boy Scout. I've got a little present for him.

It might take you a while to find my island hideaway, but don't worry - I'm aware of your children's special needs. Nobody will feed them peanuts while your back is turned.

Just a reminder: Get your father's military contacts on this one, and I'll mail them back to you in pieces. First Jason's right pinky finger, then Kala's left ear.

Yours,

An Old Friend"

Lois' free hand trembled, and the text began to blur. "Oh, God, Clark," she whispered in a choked voice, holding his hand all the tighter. "The twins... Oh, God, he really does have my babies."

"We'll get them back," he told her, and his voice was firmer than the others had ever heard it. There was an underlying anger to the words as well, something that didn't bode well for Luthor. "In the meantime, let's get started tracing him down. Perry, Richard, and Jimmy can start looking at the property rolls - I'll see what I can do about tracing the phone he placed the message from."

The other three men glanced at each other speculatively; was this Clark Kent, taking command of the situation? They'd seen him protective of Lois before, but never like this.

He wasn't finished, however. "As for you, Lois, I think you need to get in touch with Superman. We can really use his help."

"After what happened last time, do you think he'll be easy to get hold of?" The question came from Richard, clearly reluctant to ask it but voicing all of their concerns.

"Superman would never deliberately abandon Lois Lane," Clark said seriously, meeting the other man's eyes steadily. "Especially not now."

Hearing those words, Lois' hazel eyes met his again, this time with gratitude and something else warring in her expression. Something a lot like love.

A child's sense of time is flexible. Joyful, exciting moments flash by too quickly to capture, and must be repeated again and again for their impact to be felt. The boring times, however, drag along forever and ever. The five minutes between each query of "Are we there yet?" can seem like five hours - or five years - to an active young mind spinning its wheels while the equally active body endures forced idleness.

Jason and Kala had no idea how long they were left alone. Long enough to thoroughly explore the ballroom, try to take a nap on the leather-covered couches, explore again in the hopes that their first search had overlooked something useful, and then sit for an interminable length of time staring apprehensively at the doors. After a while, the sheer boredom grew so oppressive that the twins felt as though they had always lived in that room, in that state of tension, and always would. There would never be an end to the waiting and wondering.

And then, suddenly, something changed. Kala's exquisite hearing captured the sound of the locks being turned, and she sat bolt upright, facing the potential threat, her heart

hammering. What she wanted to do at that moment was bawl, but she screwed her face into an approximation of her mother's best scowl. As the door opened a crack, the little girl made her voice sound angry and employed a threat she'd once heard Lois make. "Th' next one who pushes me or my brother 'round gets a kick in th' jools!" Kala didn't know exactly why the words had such an effect when their mother used them on Grizzly Lombard, but she hoped that it would impress whoever was opening the door.

Jason hadn't heard the sound, but when Kala sat up, he did, too. The person who came through the door wasn't scary except for being a stranger, though, and so he asked curiously, "Who're you?"

The dark-haired woman seemed a bit taken aback by both of them, but she recovered quickly, rushing into the room in a clatter of high heels and closing the door behind her. "My name's Katherine," she said, and her voice had a hint of false cheer in it. That tone is to a child's hearing what cherry flavoring is to cough syrup; instead of sugarcoating the bad thing, it makes it more obvious by contrast. "What are your names?"

Both twins scowled. Probably no one here could be trusted ... but they had been raised to be polite. "I'm Kala," the girl said warily.

"Jason," he answered.

Kitty frowned; these two were much more suspicious than she expected. Luckily, she had a trump card handy. "I'm sorry I can't let you out," she said, and that had the ring of truth behind it. She sensed them defrosting a little, and continued, "Lex - the guy you saw when Grant and Riley brought you on board - he's ... he's not a very nice man."

"He's bald," was Jason's blunt reply.

The twins looked at each other for a moment, and Kala wrinkled her nose as she added, "And creepy."

That startled a laugh out of Kitty, which she quickly stifled. "You're very right," she replied. "But you understand why I can't let you go, right? I mean, we're already at sea, there's nowhere you could go."

"Yeah," Kala said with obvious skepticism. "What do you want?"

That one's her mother's daughter, Kitty thought wryly. *I only saw the Lane woman on TV for a few seconds and listened to Lex harp about her longer than I like to think about, but I can spot that attitude already.* "Well, you could do me a favor," she said aloud. "Or we can say you're doing me a favor, anyway, so nobody gets in trouble. Do you like dogs?"

The twins glanced at each other again as if silently conferring. "All except the drooly ones," Jason replied cautiously.

"And the ones that bark all the time, even when there's nothing there," Kala added with a roll of her hazel eyes, thinking of Richard's parents and their Yorkies.

"Well, I have a little dog," Kitty said. "Lex doesn't like her - he's mean to her. And she's really lonely; there's no one to play with her anymore. Would you keep an eye on her for me, and play with her with her toys?" As she asked, she reached into the oversized purse on her shoulder and brought out Tala.

The little golden puffball barked twice and wagged her tail furiously, her inky eyes lighting up. Tala loved children; they gave her all kinds of people food, either directly or by dropping crumbs while they ate.

Kala and Jason tried to be reserved and watchful, but they couldn't help brightening up at the sight of the dog. Smiling, Kitty set Tala down, and the Pomeranian ran to the twins. Their wary demeanor dissolved as Tala jumped up on them, licking and wagging, and the twins

laughed out loud.

Kitty chuckled, smiling wistfully at them. It was the first time in a long time that she had heard such innocent laughter.

Her enjoyment of the moment would've been seriously lessened if she had known who was listening outside the door.

Lachrymosa

The air up on the roof was biting cold, and Lois pulled her jacket collar up, her breath frosting on the wind. Her mind was still spinning from all that had occurred in the past hour. Had it really been an hour? Amazing how your entire world could change in so short a time. If she thought about it much longer, she'd go insane just from being so helpless. Again, she raged at having been held back. She had to go to them...

*Dammit. Why does everyone think I have some special way to contact Superman? I don't. I never did, not even before. It's not like we had some kind of signal. He's just always there when I needed him- half the time because **Clark** was there a minute ago. No wonder I figured it out in the end.*

Rubbing her tense forehead, she closed her eyes and sighed heavily. *At least I managed to convince Richard not to come with me, which was a minor miracle.* That hadn't been easy - he didn't want her out of his sight. But she'd told him she would probably have to fly to the Vanderworth estate with Superman, maybe further afield, and it was difficult to carry more than one safely at his speed. Richard had reluctantly backed down. *That's one confrontation I really can't handle right now. I'll deal with everything, every last lie and misdirection, every mixed emotion - but once we have the twins home. There are more important things now than this little love triangle.*

Now Lois shivered, eyeing the cloudy horizon balefully, and waited on Kal-El to arrive. There were excuses to be made, an alibi to set up on his part. It would take a few minutes, she knew. *He knows something. The look on his face when I said that about the crystal...* She bit her lower lip in concentration, trying to puzzle this out. *He definitely knows something, and I'm going to get it from him. I know it has something to do with us, with the past. Luthor has to know about the twins, he was gloating too much for him not to. I've seen that kind of crystal before. And at this point, we need to be through with hiding from each other...*

"Lois." That one word nearly froze her heart. She whirled, biting back sharp words. *Talk about a heart attack. He's always so bloody quiet...* Kal-El landed and walked toward her, the brightest object in that gray November day. Why was it that she had always seen him as 'hope' on days like this? Silly, girlish, but undeniably true. "Let me see that crystal, please. I have a very bad feeling about this."

"You're not the only one," Lois muttered, bringing the envelope out of her purse. Her hands felt almost numb with cold, having left her gloves in the car, and she fumbled it. The eager wind nearly snatched it away...

Kal-El caught the light envelope, and Lois' hands, cupping them between his. The warmth of his skin flooded into her, and she closed her eyes briefly. It was only a moment, but one she needed badly. It seemed to soothe her again, in a way little else had.

Too soon, he had to let her go, examining the envelope carefully. The slight frown of concentration told Lois that he was seeing its contents as well. "Oh, no," Kal-El said softly. "Just what I was worried about."

"What is it?" Lois asked him, one brow arched, her curiosity clear. "What are you seeing?"

"I need to go," he said, his voice distracted, but she caught his arm before he even turned to leave.

"No way, you're not leaving me out of this," Lois said sharply, squeezing his forearm. Her gaze nearly nailed him in place. "This involves Kala and Jason. Wherever you're going, whatever it is, I'm going with you."

"Lois..."

"If it has to do with the twins or Luthor or both, and I can see in your face that it does, you're taking me. Or I'll try to find out for myself." Her tone brooked no opposition, eyes stormy as the cold front closing in on them.

Kal-El stalled for a moment longer, then sighed. "Okay, fine. Come here."

Now it was Lois' turn to hesitate. *God, what have you done now? Idiot, there's a reason you didn't fly with him last time. This was a brilliant idea, Lane.* But she wanted to know, had to know, so she stepped forward, letting him take hold of her waist gingerly. To cover her nervousness, she asked even though she had a sneaking suspicion, "Where exactly are we going?"

"The Fortress," he said, and his voice was a tiny bit strained. Having her in his arms again was no easier for him than for her. Kal-El rose into the air gently, and hid his own discomfort with words as well. "That crystal ... it's of Kryptonian origin," he said, not meeting her eyes. "I thought the damage to the Vanderworth basement looked familiar somehow, but I just couldn't place the resemblance. It wasn't an explosion; it was a crystal expansion like the one that created the Fortress."

She frowned at that. "I knew the shard looked familiar, but I just couldn't place it." Well, that somewhat explained the huge amount of damage at Vanderworth, although it did beg a question. "But if that's the case, it's not as if you left them lying around. Where the hell did Luthor get one?"

"That's what I'm afraid of," Kal-El replied. "He does know where the Fortress is." They were moving north now, the deceptively smooth motion belying their speed.

"But the last time he was there, both us were," she argued, trying not to think too hard on the occasion. There was a reason that event was burned into her mind. And they weren't happy memories. "He never had the chance to gain access to them, remember? You had gotten there before Luthor and the Zod Squad touched down with me. And then you were the one to take him back ... after we..." Lois felt silent then, having trapped her thoughts despite her deliberate avoidance. *We can still see each other. All the time. But it...just can't be...* Trying to ignore the pain that knifed through her, she cleared her throat and tried to pretend that there wasn't a catch in her throat when she continued, "Anyway, you would have known if he had had them on him. So the question is, how did he get them?"

"I don't know," he replied. "After I used my heat vision on the Fortress, only the rooms below ground were still anything approaching intact, and I had to move a lot of rubble to get in there when I ... well, when I built the ship."

Yes, you left me. I remember, okay? Could we drop it? Please, Kal-El, just rip my heart out all over again. Lois scowled at yet another reminder, and turned her face away from him. *Someone remind me how I keep getting myself into this mess? They passed through a large cloud, and only then did Lois realize how fast they were going, and she instinctively flinched toward him, throwing her arms around his neck.*

Kal-El stared at her in surprise, his hands on her waist pulling her closer almost unconsciously. Lois' wide hazel eyes looked up at him from only inches away, and the forbidden thought ran through both their minds at the same instant.

But after a moment, both of them turned away with an effort, Lois biting her lip. *Oh, yeah, that's how. Oh God, we'd better get there soon,* she thought, loosening her grip on his neck. *I don't know how much more of this I can take.*

Everything was progressing as planned, from the moment the hidden interior cameras had captured Lois Lane investigating the Vanderworth estate. Lex was humming along with an opera playing softly in the background, studying Stanford's notes, and generally feeling pleased with himself.

The sharp rapping of Kitty's heels down the spiral staircase, then onto the hardwood floor interrupted the flow of the music and his thoughts. Scowling, Lex stood up, wondering what was wrong with her now.

Kitty didn't give him the chance to ask. She simply stormed up to him and slapped him as hard as she could, her open palm cracking across his cheek loud as a gunshot. "How *dare* you bring kids into this? They haven't done *anything* to deserve this, Lex! What could you possibly accomplish by kidnapping *kids*?!"

"Bait," he replied shortly. "For their mother *and* their father."

"Their father? But she didn't..." Kitty's eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, my God. Lex ... those are *Superman's* children. That's why she left the blank line for the..." Her voice dropped to a horrified whisper. "Oh, my God..."

He just nodded, watching the realization hit her. "Besides, Kitty," Lex said matter-of-factly, "it's not as if they're human. Their father *is* an alien, which everyone on this planet seems to forget just because he's got blue eyes and a dimpled chin."

"That doesn't matter," Kitty hissed. "They're *children*. They're just sweet, scared kids!"

"So? Even if they were human, there are six billion more where they came from. The world can stand to lose a few," he said coldly, catching her hand as she swung a second time. "Ah-ah-ah, enough of that."

"You bastard," she hissed at him, struggling in his grip. Lex only pulled her closer and grinned. Too late, Kitty remembered that he loved a woman who hated him...

The Arctic made the *Planet's* roof seem positively balmy, and Lois shuddered as she drew her jacket closer around her shoulders as they touched down. Kal-El saw her, and wrapped the cape around her as well. That drew them a little too close together, however, and they walked the several feet to the Fortress in uncomfortable silence.

Kal-El was a little disturbed by the sight of it. It had been in a shambles when he last saw it; after losing his powers in the crystal chamber, the console had been damaged and the entire edifice subtly compromised. As he and Lois left, he'd destroyed the surface structure, knowing that the underground holding cells were secure. Zod and his cohorts had been confined there after falling from the upper levels, and Kal-El had locked Luthor in one of them before taking Lois home. He'd returned to carry the villains to the proper authorities, taking two trips to do it, and at that time the only intact section of the Fortress was the sublevel in which he'd later built the ship that carried him to Krypton.

The Fortress now looked more ... complete ... than he remembered. Unless his eyes deceived him, it had been totally rebuilt. But by whom? It was also utterly dark, and above the Arctic Circle at this time of year, that was quite foreboding.

Lois' eyebrows lifted as well. She stared up at the massive structure before her. The sheer size of it had dazzled her at first sight, the impression one of both palace and the Fortress that it was called. It had seemed quite surreal, impossibly beautiful that night. A place of warmth and light at the icy top of the world. A place perfectly fitting of her impression of him. A place where a miracle had occurred, an utterly impossible miracle. And now those miracles were lost to them. It only seemed right that they would be forced to come back here now, back to the

beginning of where the twins had come from.

She'd expected a ruin, her last sight of this place being a mist of ice and crystal shards rising from the leveled ground. Now, it was whole again, though ominous and black. Lois had never seen the Fortress darkened before. The memory of its destruction was clear in her mind. "At least you didn't leave the lights on," she joked weakly.

Kal-El guided her inside carefully, the déjà vu not lost on his companion. "They used to come on when I crossed the threshold... I don't like this. Lois, *I* didn't rebuild all this."

"You're not alone," she quipped uneasily as she started looking around, and then the end of his remark penetrated her uneasiness. "Then how...?"

Both of them fell silent, the oppressive atmosphere of the place choking them. To think that they had last stood here embracing defiantly before Luthor after the battle was over ... just over there was the spot where Lois had whirled on the de-powered Ursa and decked her, after that horrible moment when she had thought they had both been doomed ... the table at which they'd had dinner was through that archway ... and up there, beyond that ledge...

Lois felt her cheeks begin to burn even in the cold, remembering, and noticed that his eyes skipped away from the hall leading to that particular room as well. At least she wasn't the only one uncomfortable here. But when Kal-El deliberately looked away from places so fraught with memory, his eyes landed on the central section, and he gasped.

Hazel eyes widening, Lois' brow furrowed as she followed him into the central room. The last time she'd seen the console here, it had been blackened and broken by the power flux when Kal-El exposed himself to the red sun's rays. For love of her and in defiance of his father. Now it was whole again and glittering ... but the slots that had held crystals full of encoded information were empty.

Kal-El touched the surface as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Lois was watching his face, and she stepped back at the expression of wrath that crossed his handsome features. For a long moment, it seemed as if he couldn't process it, couldn't cope with the anger more than simply feeling it. Then something in him seemed to break loose. "Luthor, you thieving bastard," he muttered in a low voice, and brought his fist down sharply on the console.

Lois instinctively jumped back as the blow resounded through the crystal structure, making it chime oddly. Kal-El looked up then, and seemed to remember that he wasn't alone. "I'm sorry, Lois," he said, but that slow-burning anger still lurked at the backs of his blue eyes.

Seeing that, how furious he could actually get, made Lois suddenly wonder if keeping the twins' parentage a secret wasn't a very unwise decision. Right now, if Luthor was in this room, she wouldn't bet a nickel on his survival. All it would take would be one blast of laser-like heat from those eyes ... those eyes that were now trained on her... *Get over it, Lane, he just essentially had his parents stolen from him. And if he suspects as much as I think, he knows we've lost more than that. Tell me you wouldn't do the same.* "For what? Kal-El, stop," Lois said, trying to soothe, "we'll get them back, right? I mean, we know who has them..." For the first time since that dreadful call, she was entirely focused on something other than her children, and she didn't realize how closely her words echoed his back at the *Planet*.

Only Lois could truly understand what he had lost. And in spite of what *she* had lost, which was so much greater, she was trying to comfort him. *Is it any wonder I love this woman so much? There's no one else I'd rather have by my side on a search like this.* But he didn't voice any of that, only shook his head. "It isn't just that. To think the Fortress rebuilt itself just in time for a maniac like Luthor to rob it... The knowledge encoded on those crystal is extremely dangerous, Lois. It's like ... imagine if someone had given Genghis Khan nuclear

weapons."

"*That's one hell of an image,*" she muttered. "Scary thing is, it doesn't seem far off."

"I don't know, Khan was said to recognize the worth of his followers," Kal-El said absently, and his gaze at the plundered console was more sorrowful than savage now. *Luthor only wants the knowledge, but he has everything that's left of my birthplace, my parents, my childhood ... and he may very well have my children, as well. But this is not the time to ask her...*

Lois narrowed her eyes. *Oh yes, compare Luthor to Genghis Khan while he has our kids - unfavorably at that. Great. What a way to reassure me.* Aloud, she merely said, "Thanks, that's really what I need to hear right now."

Chagrined, he stepped away from the console and came to her. "I'm sorry, Lois. There's this - using the crystals apparently triggers an EMP. That must've been what caused the Genesis plane to almost crash. I never knew that because there's no electrical equipment for miles up here, but it means that wherever Luthor tries to use the crystals, we can find him. And the twins will probably be nearby - he won't want them out of his sight." Kal-El took hold of her shoulders gently, his eyes on hers serious. "We *will* find them, Lois. And this time, Luthor's not getting out of prison on a technicality."

"I know," she sighed, dropping her eyes, her hair falling forward to shield the worried expression on her face. *But my faulty memory was what got him out last time. And it's my fault he has them in the first place. Me and my stupid 'need to know'. God, they're just tiny babies yet. Please let Kala not smart off to him. Please don't let either of them have a panic attack. Please don't leave them in the dark.* She had to fight back tears. "It's only a matter of time."

Please be right, Kal-El, please be right.

Island hideaway. For all we know, that could be a ruse. Richard rubbed his eyes, staring at the list in front of him. The Vanderworths - and the dozen or so corporations they'd set up to dodge taxes - owned an obscene amount of property. Most of it was turning out to be office buildings, warehouses, apartments, and condominiums. None of them were islands, or hideaways for that matter. This was maddening work, but it was their best lead on Luthor so far. Too bad it was going so slowly with just the three of them, Clark having left to see if he could figure out where the text message had originated. He had figured he'd get a faster answer if he went in person, and Richard could see the logic in that. Perry was also right - they didn't really trust too many of the others to keep quiet about this. Besides, *someone* had to do the actual reporting to keep the paper in business.

But you know someone with some free time, don't you? Someone who's already volunteered to help, at that. Richard sat up, thinking. They did need all the help they could get, but he would have to be very careful... "Uncle Perry, I'm calling Ms. Lang. She's got the free time, she can help us."

"Ms. Lang? The designer?" Perry's brow furrowed, and then he scowled. "Richard, you - Olsen, get us some coffee, will you?"

"What, Chief?" Jimmy looked up in surprise, but quickly accepted the task as a way to escape the endless fine print before him.

Once they were alone, Perry sighed heavily. "You're mixed up with her, aren't you?"

Richard tried to look blank. "What? Uncle Perry, what the heck are you talking about?"

The editor glared at him, growling, "Drop the stupid act, boy. What's going on with you

and the designer?"

"Nothing," Richard said forcefully. And for the moment it was true. "Listen, she's an old friend of Clark's; we know she's trustworthy. And given the way he acted when he got the news, don't you agree I was right earlier? He *is* their father - and I think he suspects it, if he doesn't already know."

Perry considered, and Richard pressed a few more reasons into his pause. "We need some more help here. Just going through these lists - the Vanderworths have property stashed all over the place. And there's no guarantee we'll find it here. You're right, we can't pull reporters off stories, but Lana's show is over now and she's got spare time."

His uncle leaned forward, met his eyes, and said calculatingly, "Fine, call her. But I'm not saying a word when Lois sees her here."

Richard rolled his eyes as he got out his cell phone. "I'll burn that bridge when I come to it," he muttered, his mind still preoccupied with worry. As soon as the words left his lips he heard the slip and corrected, "*Cross* that bridge. I meant to say cross."

Perry just raised an eyebrow as Jimmy walked back in with the coffee. Richard glared as he opened his cell phone and dialed, thinking, *I don't need his approval anyway; what I need is help, and Lana volunteered.*

The flight back was ... interesting. He'd slipped an arm around her waist as she stood next to him this time, and taken her hand to balance her as he took off. It was much like their first - well, first *planned* flight together, with him flying leveled out and Lois held by his side.

Lois and Kal-El were both wrapped in thoughtful silence. They had each lost someone dear to them. Even if he wasn't yet certain that the twins were his, he adored them, and beyond that, Luthor had robbed him of his childhood memories. He and Lois were both feeling violated and vulnerable at the moment, knowing that Luthor had taken what they treasured. Worse yet, they were both plagued by memories: of the last time they had been in the Fortress, of their last days together before he left.

It was in that mood that Kal-El suddenly said, seemingly apropos of nothing, "I'm sorry I left you, Lois."

She turned to look at him, eyebrow rising. *Was that 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was leaving, ' or 'I'm sorry I split up with you'?*

The look was lost on him. A part of his mind was charting their course, flying low to avoid radar. The less Luthor could track their movements, the better. But the majority of his thought was centered on those last two months. *That was a terrible time for me. Lois suspected nothing - not yet anyway - and I couldn't give her reason to. I had to keep seeing her, in both guises. And every time she'd flirt with Superman, every time she'd smile at Clark, my heart died a little.*

It was almost a relief when I stumbled across that article in the back of Science Monthly. The new satellite telescope had been discovering new stars and even planets for months; it wasn't front-page news any more. Only when I saw just where this latest planet was found did my hair stand on end. And the possibility of non-natural formations on the planets surface ... a few of the new planets looked like they might have evidence of intelligent life. The majority of scientists agreed that those were probably like the supposed 'face on Mars' that everyone's been talking about for decades; just an accident of form. But on that planet, in that particular section of the sky? I had to go.

At least, that's what I told myself then.

Lois' voice brought his attention back to the present, her tone striving for merely curious. "Did you know, the last time you saw me? Not as Clark - I know you wouldn't have told me as Clark. But did you know you were leaving that last time?"

He sighed. "Not ... precisely. I kept telling myself building the ship was an exercise, that I'd have it if I needed it. I always thought that it was about fifty-fifty, stay or go..." *I really was in denial about it. I kept thinking things like that right up until the moment the ship's hatch closed behind me.* Taking a different tack, Kal-El told her, "I tried to tell you once. I went by your apartment meaning to tell you everything - this was after I'd seen the images myself in Paris. You remember, the woman who fell into the Seine and Superman just 'happened' to be there? The observatory outside Paris was getting some of the clearest images from the space telescope at the time. I kept going back there while the crystals were growing..."

Lois remembered. He'd been in Paris? Well, of course, she *knew* he'd been in Paris, he'd saved that woman not a week after the last time she had seen him. And come to think of it, he had been a little on edge at that last meeting... "Why didn't you tell me, then? The last time we talked. You say you went there specifically to tell me. Why didn't you?"

He took a deep breath, and she felt the expansion of his ribs beside her as he held her close while they flew. "I couldn't figure out how to start ... and then you, you didn't remember anything that happened. You said something sweet and flirtatious, the way you always were with me, and ... I couldn't. I just couldn't. If I'd said anything to you, I probably would've wound up definitely not going." Kal-El sighed at himself. "I'm rambling, I know. I was ... very torn, then. Seeing you hurt worse than anything I'd ever felt, but I still thought I'd done the best thing for both of us by erasing your memories." A low, sarcastic chuckle. "It took six years and an Ella Fitzgerald song to show me how very wrong I was."

"You loved me too much to tell me you were going," Lois mused, and then her tone turned a trifle sharp. "But not enough not to leave me wondering. And waiting, like a fool." *And just about the time I got over the abandonment, I started gaining weight. Surprise!*

Kal-El winced. "Lois ... I am sorry. Sorry I didn't tell you what was going on, and sorry I ever left at all."

To that she had no reply, other than to reach out with one hand as they flew close to the river, and let her fingers skim the water's surface. *Here's a miracle, a man who can fly and the woman lucky enough to have reached the heights with him ... and to the rest of the world it has no more impact than those ripples.*

Abruptly she turned back to him, and there was a flash of fire in those hazel eyes. "You hurt me," she said, and with that simple, painful declaration the last of her long-cherished anger evaporated.

"I know," he whispered, pulling her closer against his side. "I know that, Lois. And I'm sorry for it. But I also hurt myself by hurting you - I didn't forget, not even for a moment."

Lois sighed. Like a rotten tooth, her grudge had finally been extracted. Closing her eyes, she rested her cheek on his shoulder.

The hour was growing late. The twins had eaten dinner, though they had little appetite. A large man had brought it to them, not one of the ones who'd dragged them onto the boat. He had smiled and said hi, but Jason and Kala had only watched him warily. Kitty hadn't been back, and though they trusted her only tentatively, they were still cautious of everyone else on the ship.

This large room was lit by a skylight high above. Jason had played a few tunes on the

piano before he realized that it was growing dark, and he looked up with trepidation. "Kala?"
She was already by his side, looking upward as well. "It's gettin' late."

"Yeah," Jason replied. Neither child spoke of it, but they had never liked the dark. Nor had they ever had to face its coming alone. Mommy and Daddy weren't here, neither was Nana or Uncle Perry or Uncle Ron and Aunt Lucy. They didn't even have Tala to keep them company, as the little dog had eventually scratched at the door, needing to go out, and one of the men had opened it for her.

They needed something to distract them, but Jason didn't have it in his heart to play just then. Kala turned her gaze away from the lengthened shadows, and looked into the clear blue of her brother's eyes instead. "Jason, there's something I gotta tell you."

He turned away from the worrying sight and looked at his sister. "What, Kala?"

"Remember when we were fighting that night when Mommy left the house? An' I said I had a secret?"

Nodding, Jason said, "Uh-huh. I've got one too. But you wouldn't tell 'cause you were being a booghead."

Kala rolled her eyes with a long-suffering sigh. "*Anyway*," she said, "I'm gonna tell you now, okay?"

Jason just nodded.

"We're gonna be okay 'cause our real daddy's gonna come save us," Kala said softly. "That's what he does ... our real daddy is Superman."

Much to her surprise, Jason gave her a perplexed look. "Nuh-unh, he can't be! Superman's Mr. Clark. I mean, Mr. *Clark* is Superman."

It was Kala's turn to startle back, shaking her head. "Nuh-uh! Mr. Clark can't be Superman! 'Cause if he was Superman then *he'd* be our daddy..."

"Kala, *look*," Jason said. "They're the same! He just combs his hair different and wears glasses when he's Mr. Clark!"

His sister opened her mouth to reply, and really thought about it. Her jaw gradually shut, and she frowned. "But ... yeah. Yeah. But then if he's Superman why would he pretend to be Mr. Clark?"

Jason huffed. "Haven't you ever wanted to be *normal*? All that stuff you can hear, radios in other people's houses, Mommy and Daddy yelling?"

"Well, yeah," Kala admitted. "Sometimes it makes my head hurt. But that's just the way I am."

"Sure, like I'm strong. I wish I didn't hafta be so careful with my stuff all the time. Sometimes it's nice just to be normal." Then something dawned on him, and his eyes widened. "Kala! The reason we can do stuff - me being strong and you hearing really good - that's probably 'cause Superman's our daddy!"

Kala rolled her eyes. "Well, duh," she replied, never letting on that she had figured out the same thing only recently. "Just like me being so smart is 'cause Mommy is our mommy."

"D'ya think Mommy knows? That Mr. Clark is Superman?" Jason asked.

Kala sighed explosively. "Of *course* Mommy knows! She *kissed* Superman, you dweeb! That means she was in love with him. Don't you know where babies come from?"

Affronted, Jason wrinkled his nose. "Eww, that's kinda gross. Superman and Mommy kissing ... yuck."

Raising one eyebrow, Kala gave him a look. "You're such a *boy*, Jason."

"Well, *duh*."

Another few moments passed in silence, and both children eventually looked up. The skylight had grown even darker; the sky outside was now a deep blue, nearly black. Kala glanced longingly at the light fixtures above them; she hadn't been able to find a switch or a pull chain or anything. Desperate for something to say to distract them both, she wondered aloud, "How come nobody else figured out that Mr. Clark is Superman?"

Jason shrugged. "They didn't want to, I guess. People think that bein' Superman is so cool, he'd never wanna be anything else." He glanced at Kala and offered her a wan smile. "*You* didn't figure it out, and you're pretty smart. For a girl."

Hazel eyes narrowed, but in the deepening shadow Kala couldn't summon an angry reply. She settled for another of her trademarked sighs, looking elsewhere in the room.

That only emphasized the growing dark, however. Kala scooted closer to her brother, and in a small voice said, "I want Mommy."

Jason put his arm around her shoulder and whispered back, "Me, too."

Chiaroscuro

No words between them when he dropped her off on the roof; Lois turned to him mutely as he let her down, and he smiled sadly. Touching her cheek once, so lightly, Kal-El left before he couldn't bring himself to go, not trusting himself to speak.

Lois had turned her face into his palm, closing her eyes for a second to savor his touch. *Oh, yes, when all of this over, we have a lot to talk about. All of us.*

Shaking off her melancholy mood, Lois headed downstairs. She had much more important things to think about at the moment. Like where the twins were... Lois had to suppress a shudder. *God, please.*

Hurrying the rest of the way down to the *Planet* offices, Lois kept her mind turned resolutely forward. She'd no sooner stepped into the conference room, however, than she stopped cold.

Four heads turned to look at her. Jimmy, Perry, Richard ... and Lana. *Lana? What the hell is she doing here?*

For one instant her expression must have been obvious. Jimmy cringed, Perry looked away, and Richard flinched. Lana, however, met her eyes frankly.

Whatever unfortunate thing Lois was about to say was forestalled by the door behind her opening - and knocking into her arm. "Oops! Gee, sorry, Lois," Clark said earnestly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she growled, thinking *I know you could see me right through that door!* But then she realized how much of a hypocrite she was being over Lana. *What right do I have to be territorial?* "Hi, Ms. Lang. Thanks for helping us."

"If I'm going to be helping you find the twins, Ms. Lane, I think we ought to switch to Lana and Lois, don't you?" The tone was perfectly friendly, her sea-green eyes without a trace of irony. "Sit down; let's bring you up to date. Clark, what have you found?"

Perry looked a little nonplussed; having his authority usurped twice in one day - and not by Lois - was a record. Clark adjusted his glasses as he sat down, and said, "Well, the number that the message was sent from belongs to a woman in Schenectady. But when we called it back, she answered. The phone wasn't stolen or anything; apparently there's some kind of program where you can set up a cell phone to give out a different number each time it dials. The false callback number can be anyone from the network."

"So it's a dead end," Lois sighed, biting her lip. *What did you expect, Lane? The poor man only had a couple of minutes anyway.*

"Well, not totally," Clark said. "The phone he actually sent the message from is GPS-enabled. So we can find out exactly where he was."

"All right, then, let's do it," Lois said. "Who do we have to call?"

"That's the problem," Clark replied. "It's private information. Only a police officer or a properly authorized government official can access it."

"Neither of which we can contact," Richard griped. "Dammit."

"The police already know, and there's nothing we can do about it," Lois said, remembering suddenly. "Todd Thomas called them when he found the twins' teacher hurt... My God, I left the phone hanging. Barbara must've panicked..."

"I took care of that," Perry said. "The hospital's gonna keep us updated on Mrs. Mosley. And as for the cops, I told Lieutenant Sawyer about Luthor's threat. Maybe she can help with getting the cell phone information."

"Let me try first," Lois said earnestly, and glanced at Clark. "I can usually wheedle any

kind of confidential information from a source. And the less we involve the police, the better. I don't trust Luthor not to have some way of knowing exactly what we're all doing."

"Speaking of you, I assume you got a hold of Superman?" Perry asked. "What did he have to say?"

Lois managed to keep from glancing at Clark, though it wasn't easy. "Well, my hunch about that little chip of crystal paid off. It's Kryptonian - Lex Luthor has been to Superman's Fortress of Solitude. The bastard stole ten crystals containing a vast amount of information about science and technology."

That left all of them silent with foreboding; even Clark managed to seem shocked by the news. "Where?" Richard asked, and Lois shook her head to let him know it was confidential.

"His ... retreat, I guess you could call it. And no, I can't say where it is," Lois told them. "Unfortunately, the only other human being who knows the location is Lex Luthor. Superman just found out about the theft today, when he saw the chip of crystal I found."

"I know," Lois said grimly. "Taking the twins is just a ploy to buy time, I'll bet. Once Superman - or I - found out about the missing crystals, all hell was sure to break loose. This is Luthor's way of keeping us busy while he does God-alone-knows-what."

"Us?" Richard interjected. "Superman is going to help us look for the kids?"

Lois hesitated for a fraction of an instant, and this time couldn't stop her eyes from darting to Clark. A tiny mistake, but one Richard would be sure to spot. To cover it, she replied quickly, "Yes, he's forgiven me for being a complete bitch to him in print, as Toby Raines would say. And I've forgiven him for leaving the entire planet without a forwarding address. So yeah, he's going to help."

Everyone at the table shared a speculative glance. Of them, only Lois had seen Superman with any kind of frequency. Jimmy and Perry had each met him once or twice, but for Lana and Richard seeing the superhero was going to be a novel experience.

"First things first," Perry said gruffly, "we'll see if we can narrow down this list. I know he can see through anything except lead, but that doesn't mean he's got the time to look over every square inch of the city. If the twins are even still *in* Metropolis. Lane, Kent, grab some paperwork. We ought to be able to knock this out pretty quickly with all six of us."

"Okay, boss," Stanford said. "Here we go." Riley and his camera hovered in the background. Lex merely nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak.

On the lighted worktable in front of Stanford lay fragments of the meteorite. The outer pieces were black and charred, but the ones from the center of the rock were a deep, translucent green. The largest remaining piece was a smoothed cylinder about the thickness of Stanford's bicep, and it was currently fitted into a padded vise with a large-bore drill bit just touching one end.

He took a deep breath, glancing at Lex again as he started the drill. Now everything he knew about mineralogy was being put to the test; if he'd calculated the flaws in the stone, its stress lines, incorrectly, the whole thing would shatter.

And Lex would probably kill him. Trying to ignore the trickle of sweat running down his spine, Stanford touched the drill to the stone.

Slowly, slowly, the diamond-tipped bit polished its way through the kryptonite. Riley leaned in close, and Stanford bit his lip; this was *not* the moment to distract him! Didn't that idiot realize this was incredibly delicate work?

Probably not - none of these guys had any appreciation for things that required more

dexterity than pressing buttons. Not even Riley, with his camera obsession, had any true technical skill. Even as he guided the drill further into the kryptonite cylinder, slowly boring a channel into its center, Stanford couldn't quite stop himself from reflecting on the difference between himself and the other three men Lex had brought on this mission.

They're thugs, plain and simple. Hired for their muscles, not their brains. And I shudder to think too much about what goes on in their minds, anyway - never again will I try to make friends with these goons by going to one of Riley's movie nights. He suppressed a slight tremor at the memory of those films, which Riley called his little documentaries. They all followed one theme, and it wasn't one that Stanford, whose worst offense had been fraud, could possibly enjoy. *Even Brutus stays away from it, which is really saying something. Of all the 'security' guys, he's the oddest. Never talks about what he did time for; never talks about anything much, really. And he doesn't get in on all the macho strutting the rest of them spend so much time and energy on. Maybe he doesn't need to, since he's the biggest and burliest of them?*

More than halfway through, and Lex was still watching with almost reptilian concentration. Did the man ever *blink*? Speaking of people who made Stanford nervous, Lex topped the list. *I may be useful to him, more so than these guys,* he thought, slowing the forward progress of the drill even more. *But he made it plain that he takes no prisoners. 'Your life expectancy is directly proportionate to your usefulness multiplied by your loyalty.' One hell of a quote, and I bet no one else realized that the way it's worded, the minute either your usefulness or loyalty drops to zero, you die.*

*Of course, he's paying everyone well. Very well. But he asks a lot, too. No outside contact. No women at the facility in Nevada - and **that** was pretty unpopular. No fighting amongst each other, which is practically a hobby for some of them. And no questions, ever. Do as you're told and you'll end up rich. Defy Lex, and die.*

The drill bit stuttered, and Stanford hastily backed it out an eighth of an inch. Oblivious to Riley and Lex, he walked around the vise, peering at the crystal. It had only struck a tiny flaw in the kryptonite that ran counter to the rest of the planes of crystal growth. Stanford backed the drill the rest of the way out and started to blow the dust off of it.

"Don't," Lex said. "Save it. It doesn't exactly fall from the sky like manna six days a week, you know."

The mineralogist glanced at him again, but carefully tapped the kryptonite dust into a tray. As he did so, Stanford noticed that one of the large shards was missing from the worktable. The one that happened to be shaped a lot like a blade...

I'm not thinking about that, he told himself as he put in a fresh, sharp bit and eased it into the nearly-completed channel, Riley's camera practically on his shoulder. *This with using those kids for bait is bad enough, but I don't want to speculate on why Lex needs a kryptonite shiv. Questioning the boss' motives is bad for your health around here...*

At last they'd sorted the likely locations from the probable and merely possible ones. The lists were still depressingly long; there were so many places that Luthor could hide a couple of frightened kids. Many of them could even be easily soundproofed. Lois looked at the list of Vanderworth properties in and around Metropolis, and for a moment her heart quailed. *They could be anywhere ... and we still don't even know if his hint was genuine or a red herring.*

But then that fighting spirit rose. *Lex is just arrogant enough to give us a real clue. And I'll see to it he regrets that before I'm done.* "Okay, people, let's split up. We'll each take a section and start searching." In her mind she was already planning which sectors Richard

should search, which she would take, and which Clark ought to handle.

Suddenly, as everyone seated at the table reached for the lists, Lois remembered Perry's heart, and Jimmy's naïveté. And Lana - she had *no* idea what she was getting into here. But before she could even decide what to say, Clark intervened.

"We ought to go in pairs," he said. "And someone needs to stay here and monitor the situation, keep us in touch with each other. Keep checking the news and keep an eye out for Luthor's next move. Chief - there's no one better to command headquarters."

That was ... pretty damn deft for the clueless goober he pretends to be, Lois thought, but Perry accepted it for now. "Sounds reasonable. Olsen, you're here with me."

"But Chief..."

Perry cut him a glare that was somehow still fatherly. "Olsen, what're you gonna do if you're stuck alone in an alley with Luthor? Beat him with your camera?"

Jimmy glanced around the table, and replied, "Well, are Lois and Ms. Lang going?"

"Lois'll shoot him," Perry said sharply. "As for Ms. Lang..."

"I have no intention of being caught alone in an alley with a maniac," Lana said quickly. "Isn't that why we're going in pairs? At least I'll have company."

"Lana, you don't have to..." Richard began, but she silenced him with a look.

"I said I'd help you," the redhead said with quiet composure. "And I will. Besides, Lois has her gun - I've got a can of Mace in my purse. Girl's best friend in the big city. That seems to make us the only ones armed around here - although I definitely bow to Lois' superior firepower."

The four glanced at each other, and Lois realized just how this would have to pan out. "Fine. Richard, you and I will take everything on this list north of 51st. Clark, you and Lana take everything south." *At least he can keep her safe. Lana shouldn't be in on this ... neither should Richard. Neither one of them have any idea just how low Luthor will sink to get back at the both of us.*

Richard glanced at her, then looked out the window. "C'mon, let's get moving. Daylight's wasting."

Perry and Jimmy watched the three reporters - and one brave fashion designer - head out. The editor-in-chief cursed his age, but mostly his heart; cursed every steak he'd eaten, every cigar he'd smoked, every cup of coffee he'd drunk. He was paying the price for those decisions now, forced like an aging bloodhound to remain at the kennel while the younger, stronger dogs took up the hunt.

Jimmy sighed heavily. "Well, Chief, I guess it's up to us to see what else we can track down on Luthor."

"Course it is," the older man said, feeling an echo of pride and valor rise in his chest. "And I'm the best one for it, the kids know that. Nothing like an old reporter for digging up secrets. C'mon, kid, let's go down to the archives."

Lois headed for her parking spot, and then remembered that her car was out of commission. *And that seems so very coincidental now. Feels like it happened days - months - ago. Damn Luthor. He's plotted this from beginning to end.* She refused to let herself think what that meant for their chances of finding the twins. *Luthor's been beaten before. He may be smart, but he's no match for Lois Lane and Superman on the warpath,* she told herself.

Beside her, Richard was already fishing his keys out of his pocket, and she mentally added, *And Richard.* He went to his car, a gunmetal-gray Saab Aero Sport Sedan which he

adored about as much as Lois loved her Audi, and paused by the driver's side door.

Blue eyes met hazel. "Do you want to drive?" Richard offered.

Lois smiled sadly. "You don't want me behind the wheel right now, Richard. But thanks. I understand..." *What an amazingly good man he is. Offering to give me control of something, even if it's just a steering wheel. And I know how he feels about his 'born from jets' car. But no...*

"Okay," he said quietly, and unlocked the doors for both of them. "You want to head for the furthest out and work our way in?"

"Sounds good," Lois muttered, looking at the list. "Go up Bond Avenue to Neill Street, then."

Silence ruled between them for a long time, each busy with their own tumultuous thoughts. Richard was finding it surprisingly awkward to be with Lois at the moment, questions about her meeting with Superman nibbling at his mind. Lois was swinging between anger and anguish, trying to be strong for the twins, but terrified for them.

After a while, Richard asked, "So what else did you find out?"

"Huh?"

"You were gone a while," he replied, not accusingly, his voice just curious as he kept his eyes on the road. "Since we've got a few minutes, tell me what happened."

Oh, like that's not awkward as hell. My conversation with my ex is so not any of your business. Lois sighed in aggravation, and said simply, "He recognized the crystals, and I made him take me with him to the Fortress. I've never ... I never realized he could be so furious. Luthor's in for a surprise."

Richard's eyebrows rose, but he changed the topic a little. "The Fortress. That's twice you've mentioned it. What, does he have some castle up in the Himalayas or something?"

At least it made Lois chuckle. "No, nothing like that. Well... It's kind of... The Fortress of Solitude is where he keeps the remnants of his Kryptonian heritage. More a museum and library than a home. And no one - except me and that bastard Luthor - knows where it is."

"How'd Luthor find out?" Richard was trying to keep her talking, stop her from plunging back into despair.

That worked; Lois bristled, her hazel eyes brightening with spite. "Somehow Luthor tracked him. And he led those Kryptonians - General Zod and his little friends - right to the Fortress. With Non carrying *me* as bait."

Richard glanced at her. "But Luthor's trial..."

Lois cleared her throat angrily. "I had amnesia; I'd seen Superman very nearly killed, or so I thought, and I'd been held prisoner by *three* psychotic intergalactic criminals, each with *his* powers. It was post-traumatic stress or something that made me block it all out. By the time I got the memories back, Vanderworth's fancy lawyers had already gotten my testimony blocked, and Luthor was out of jail."

Richard's hands tensed on the wheel. "God, I hate how much money can do in the wrong hands."

"Tell me about it," Lois said softly, staring out the window as they threaded their way through traffic.

Perry's eyes weren't quite up to the microfiche, he grudgingly admitted, so he let Olsen search the archives while he handled the phones. Before he could even place the first call, however, his direct line rang. "*Daily Planet*, White," he said gruffly into the phone.

"Peregrine White, you tell my daughter to drag herself off of whatever story you've got her chasing and get home right this instant. She and the twins are missing Nora's birthday party!"

Perry winced. "Elinore..."

"Don't even start with me, Perry. Lois isn't answering her cell phone, and you'd think she would learn her lesson after what happened earlier this week. Don't make me drive up there to get her..."

Perry closed his eyes, remembering that the phone was now in his desk drawer, turned off. "Ella, listen," he said, his voice getting a little hoarse. God, he could hear the other kids in the background, and it just made the present situation all the worse.

"This had better be good," she replied sharply, as Lucy called her name admonishingly from somewhere near the phone.

"It's isn't," Perry told her, and something about his tone finally silenced her. "Ella, I think you should take the call somewhere away from the kids. I'll hold."

"Oh, God..."

"Ella, go pick up the other extension. Do it." None of his usual jocular flirtation now. Perry was all business.

Elinore Lane had been a general's wife, and she coped. The phone clacked against the table briskly, and he heard her say to Lucy, "Hang it up in a minute; I'll take this in your room."

"Mom?"

"Lucy, do as I say."

In a moment, Perry heard another receiver picked up, and after a pause, the first one was replaced in its cradle. "Well, Mr. White?" Ella said.

Perry took a deep breath and ground his knuckles against his eyes, hating what he would have to tell her.

"Your car or mine?" Lana said in the elevator, lifted an auburn brow at Clark.

"Well, you know, I only live a few blocks from work," he replied with only half his attention. The rest was listening to Lois, trying to decide if she was going to be all right. So far it sounded promising.

"Ah. My car by default." Lana nodded, reaching into her purse for the keys. "I warn you, it's a rental. One my assistant picked, no less. *I* don't normally drive a Cadillac."

"A what?" Clark said, turning to look at her with a slight frown.

"She says I'm supposed to travel in style. I vetoed the red convertible, so she had to get a high-end Cadillac DTS instead. I mean, really. How pretentious can you get?" Lana said.

"Couldn't you exchange it?" Clark was having trouble reconciling the Lana he knew, whose parents had been well-off by Smallville standards but were strictly Oldsmobile drivers, with the fashion designer who was presently walking up to a pale green Cadillac.

"All they had left were SUVs and a couple of sports cars. This was the most sensible option," Lana replied. In spite of her disparaging remarks, she smiled fondly at the car. "It looks good with my hair, too. The color's called Green Silk."

Clark just stared, and she chuckled at him as she unlocked the doors. As long as he'd been in Metropolis, he was still a bit overwhelmed by a car that was probably worth as much as his first year's salary with the *Planet*. "Sorry, having a designer moment. Where do you want to start?" Lana turned somber again as she thought about their mission, the twins' peril

suppressing her normally cheerful personality.

Looking at their list, Clark quickly figured out which ones were closest and which were more distant. "Let's start nearby and work our way out," he replied. "The first possibility is this office building just over on Stamp Avenue."

Lana nodded as they both buckled their seat belts. "I think I knew which one, too. The 'for lease' sign in the front window looks fairly old." As she steered the Cadillac out of the garage and onto the street, she glanced at Clark and asked, "How do you plan to get in, anyway?"

Clark hadn't thought about that one. He was pretty sure that Lois had sent Lana with him so he could keep her safe, knowing that his x-ray vision meant they didn't actually have to break in. "Oh, I wasn't planning on going inside," he replied diffidently. "We ought to be able to tell if there's been any, uh, recent activity without having to break and enter."

Lana nodded. "Sounds wise. Of course, Lois is probably planning to shoot locks off doors and God knows what else."

"Richard won't let her," Clark said quickly. "Not to mention, she wouldn't make all that noise when she could just pick the lock."

"Easy, boy, you don't have to get all defensive," Lana said, raising an auburn brow at him.

"Lana, I didn't mean..."

The redhead sighed. "Clark, I know ... you're in love with her." It was on the tip of her tongue to say *I know you're the father of her children*, but she paused and demurred instead. That wasn't her place to say, if he didn't know; and if he *did* know, she'd wait for him to tell her.

"Lana..."

"You made your feelings on this topic perfectly clear at the restaurant the other day," Lana said, forestalling his objection. "But even if you're uncomfortable admitting you love her, it's still true."

"And Richard's still her fiancé," he pointed out, rather abruptly.

"Clark ... he's not blind, either," she said, not noticing the alarmed look on Clark's face. "As a matter of fact ... Clark, he thinks..." Lana brought the car to a halt in front of a stop sign at the corner, and turned to look at him. "Just how involved *were* you with Lois Lane?"

Blue eyes opened wide, and for a moment no answer was forthcoming. "Lana ... I don't know what you're talking about..."

Oh, the heck with it. If he's searching for them, he ought to at least know. "Clark, please. You do know. Richard ... he thinks the twins are yours."

The glass floor was black as pitch now, and the twins stayed away from it. It just looked way too creepy, like anything that wanted to could just swim up from underneath and take a bite out of them. Of course, that forced them away from the skylight and into the deepening darkness.

After several minutes of tense silence, Kala whispered, "Jason?"

"Yeah?"

"You scared?"

"A little." His tone was so hushed that only she could've heard it.

Another pause as they watched the shadows grow, seeming to pulse with malevolent life. "Me too," Kala finally murmured, and leaned against his shoulder.

In the moment before absolute blackness descended on them, before hope of salvation vanished forever, the overhead lights suddenly came on. Instead of cheering, the twins

flinched, the bright lights stinging their eyes. "Ow," they complained in unison, trying to shade their faces with their hands.

The main door opened, and a friendly voice called, "Hey, it's getting kinda dark in here. Thought you guys could use the light."

Blinking rapidly, Jason recovered first. He recognized the man who entered the room and locked the door behind him as the same one who'd brought their meals. "Thanks," Jason said cautiously. "It was gettin' dark."

"Me, I don't like the dark," the man told them. "You never know what's in it, right? Better to have lights on at night. I even keep my lamp on in my bedroom - the guys tease me about it."

"That's mean," Kala opined. "How come they tease you?"

"Well, 'cause I'm a big guy," he replied as he moved toward the couches on the other end of the room. He was carrying several blankets and a couple of pillows, and he started to arrange these items into beds for the twins. "They think I'm a scaredy-cat because I'm a grownup and I don't like the dark."

"They're mean," Jason said sullenly. "They hurt me an' Kala when they brought us here."

The big man went still for an instant, then turned around. His eyes were suddenly scary, but his voice when he spoke was more outraged than angry. "They hurt you?"

"Squeezed my arms, threw us in here," Kala replied, intrigued now.

"I didn't sign up for no job that involves hurtin' kids," the man said. "And it ain't gonna happen where I can see it, lemme tell ya. I'll have a little talk with those other guys, and they'll leave you alone from now on."

"Mister, can you get us out of here?" Jason asked, trying not to let his voice tremble at the thought.

He came over toward them, not too close, and sat down at the piano bench. "Kids, there's nothing I'd like more than to jump this ship and take you both with me," he said sincerely. "But we're already out to sea, and I don't know how to steer this boat. The only other way out is the helicopter, and I can't fly that, either. We're stuck."

That news depressed the otherwise irrepressible twins. For a few minutes they sat in silence, absorbing the inevitable. But eventually the thought of their father - their real father - coming to their rescue cheered them again. *He* could fly, after all.

The man touched the keys of the piano lightly, playing a few notes. "You know, I never even got your names. I'm Brutus."

The twins hesitated a moment longer. He didn't seem mean, like the others. He was trapped in this situation, like the twins; he was afraid of the dark, just like them. Kala was the first to give her name, and Jason followed suit.

Brutus nodded. "Nice to meet you, kids. Well, do you need anything else?"

"You're leaving?" Jason asked.

"Well, Mr. Luthor has stuff he wants me to do," he replied. "That guy ... I wouldn't want to upset him, you know?"

They both nodded. "Are you coming back?" Kala said.

He grinned at them. "With breakfast in the morning. I'm gonna switch the side lights on and the overheads off, okay? Make it easier for you guys to sleep. It won't be too dark, though."

"You're sure?" Jason's voice trembled a little, though he tried to hide it. Kala scooted a little closer to him, looking up nervously.

"Nah, it'll be fine. See that bar along the wall? There's a light set under each one of them, every couple feet. You'll have plenty of light. They're dimmer than the ones overhead."

The twins nodded, both still a trifle wary. Brutus went out, giving them a brief wave, and they heard the door lock.

What they had both thought was a merely decorative strip of metal, running along both walls at about shoulder height to an adult, now proved to be a low-intensity light. A moment after those lights switched on, the brighter overheads went out.

It was dark ... but not *too* dark. With the reassurance provided by the lights, the grand ballroom became intriguing and mysterious instead of forbidding. The light also began to attract fish to the glass. Not giant, scary, child-eating fish, but pretty little darting fish. The twins dragged the sofa cushions, blankets, and pillows over the glass floor and stared into the magical underwater realm.

A casual observer might have thought the children were enjoying a holiday, but no one who knew them well could mistake the signs of strain. Jason wasn't taking the opportunity to show off his science knowledge by naming the various types of fish, and Kala wasn't claiming that he made some of them up. In fact, both of them were nearly silent, and not arguing with each other - a sure sign to those who loved them that things were far from normal.

Somewhere

Lana was being pushy, and that made Clark anxious. This wasn't the sweet, pretty girl he'd known years ago; Lana thought for herself now, and she didn't let go once she'd decided to pursue something. *A little bit like someone else I know*, he thought, chagrined. *I guess it's no wonder I fell in love with Lois at first sight, practically. I was looking for an echo of her in Lana before I ever came to Metropolis and met Lois...*

The redhead pulled the car to a stop at the corner and turned in her seat to look at Clark. "Just how involved *were* you with Lois Lane?"

He fumbled for an answer, trying to put her off that train of thought. She'd caught him unawares, however, and he could only pretend typical Clark cluelessness. "Lana ... I don't know what you're talking about..."

An auburn brow arched at him, and sea green eyes bored into his blue ones. Then she sighed, and shook her head slightly. Lana's expression was concerned and sympathetic when she said, "Clark, please. You do know. Richard ... he thinks the twins are yours."

Clark's jaw dropped. *Richard thinks... Oh my God.* And his brain vapor-locked on that thought for a long moment. Here was yet another indicator that he might actually be a father. Though Clark would never dare to treat the thought with any certainty until Lois herself confirmed it - he would be crushed if he convinced himself that Jason and Kala were his own children, and then found out otherwise - it was becoming a more and more likely possibility. *Me, a father. A father to those two, whom I already love so much...*

Meanwhile, Lana touched his shoulder, looking worried. "I'm sorry, Clark. I just ... I thought you should know, with them being missing. Richard and Lois are both going out of their minds, and it's only a matter of time before he blurts it out to you or to her. I wanted you to hear it from me first before one of them confronts you."

"Lana..." He couldn't get any further than that. *And Lana doesn't know who I am. So Richard thinks that **Clark** is the father of the twins? Holy... How the heck did he dream that one up? I never had a chance with Lois until she knew the whole of who I am.*

"I don't care whether it's true or not," Lana said, although Clark saw the curiosity she was trying to deny. "That's your business and hers - not mine. Not even Richard's. But the way you've thrown yourself into the search wholeheartedly, I thought you at least suspected they might be..."

"Even if I was absolutely certain they aren't mine, I'd be here," Clark said, unaware that he'd dropped the nervous vocal mannerisms that distinguished this persona. "Lois is, first and foremost, my closest friend. I'd help her when she needed me, no matter what."

Lana nodded slowly, temporarily satisfied with that noncommittal answer. After a moment, she replied slowly, "She's a lucky woman, to have friends like you and Superman to count on no matter what."

Clark nodded thoughtfully as she put the car back in gear and drove off. He had so much to think about... When Lana spoke again, the sound of her voice surprised him almost as much as her words.

"If they are yours ... I won't want to be anywhere around when Martha Kent finds out she has a pair of six-year-old grandkids she's never met."

"I don't understand why we had to be in pairs," Lois muttered as she picked the lock on the warehouse door. Richard stood by, keeping a nervous lookout and growing increasingly irritated at her constant grumbling. The lock's tumblers finally succumbed, and Lois swung the

door wide, still fuming. "We could've covered the lists in half the time and been working on the next set outside Metropolis by now."

They had been sniping at each other ever since they'd walked out of the *Planet* offices, both troubled by their own secrets and those they suspected each other of keeping. They also each blamed themselves for the twins' being missing, though they both tried to ignore that and concentrate on finding the children. But with Lois' constant grumbling, Richard finally lost his temper as he followed her inside. "Lois, the whole point of us going in pairs was so that we could watch out for each other. Personally, I think it was brilliant. And about the only way to stop *you* from doing something stupid."

Lois all but skidded to a halt, whirling to face Richard. Her flashlight beam seared his eyes, making him wince. "*What?*" she hissed.

Richard crossed his arms. He realized that he could've said that more diplomatically, but backing down wasn't in his nature. "Tell the truth - if you were alone, you'd still break in, wouldn't you? Knowing Luthor could be in any of these places, lurking around any corner, you'd still go in. Hell, if you knew for sure he was there, you'd run faster."

Her lip curled in a sneer. "Hmm, let's see. He has my kids - *of course I would!* You have no idea what this man is capable of, Richard! Not a frikkin' clue! They're *six* - and it's dark now!"

Chagrined, Richard remembered all the times he'd had to inspect the twins' closets for monsters. "Honey ... please. It's bad enough them being gone - I couldn't lose you, too. Luthor would snatch you up in a heartbeat..."

"Only if he can dodge bullets," Lois snarled. "Besides, even if he did manage to get me, it'd put me a little closer to where the twins are, wouldn't it?"

Richard stared at her. "Lois ... he'd kill you!"

"Not while he can use me for bait," she said coldly. "Alive I'm a hostage. Dead I'm nothing but trouble. Luthor won't harm one hair on my head unless he has a death wish."

Disbelievingly, Richard shook his head. "My God, Lois. You're talking about your own life like it's just a bargaining chip..." He hadn't known how utterly cold-blooded she could be. Once again it was all too clear that Lois had secrets Richard had never even imagined.

"I'd gladly risk mine to spare theirs," Lois replied hotly. "Richard, let's split up before we get into an argument."

"Lois..." he began, but she was already moving off, and he had little choice but to let her.

The black-haired reporter stalked away, practically steaming, swinging her flashlight in wide arcs through each room before she entered it. All the while, though she was irritated with Richard, her mind swung back to Luthor and the twins.

Luthor held a grudge against Superman, and he spared no mercy for Lois. She also had an awful feeling that he knew or guessed whom the twins' real father was. What he might do to them was beyond her capacity to imagine. *Please, let Kala keep her mouth shut. If she smarts off to Luthor, God only knows what he'll do. In a way, it's a good thing that Jason's with her. Maybe he'll keep her calm. Keep them calm.*

Oh, if he hurts my babies, that son of a bitch won't have to worry about prison. I'll kill him myself. And God help Kal-El if he stands in my way.

There was another sore spot eating away at her. As distant as she had been in these last months, how vocally dismissive she had been to him, from the moment she had received the phone call, he had been right there. Stopping her from running headlong into Luthor's clutches, soothing her tears, telling her that they would find the twins no matter what. And he meant it,

she knew, better than anyone else. The guilt over her past actions stung now, in spite of the reconciliation they were gradually coming to. No matter how angry she had been, how true her accusations had felt, Kal-El had yet to even do more than even slightly raise his voice to her.

Her emotions overwhelmed her, so strong that she could no longer hold back her tears. Biting her lip to keep from sobbing aloud, she berated herself for all of the wrong choices she had made and the ones that she stubbornly refused to make. If she had given more thought to her car suddenly breaking down ... if she'd been there to pick the kids up herself... Something. Anything. Why did life have to be so unfair, so intent on taking everything she had been so slow to realize that she wanted? When she already knew that only things she wanted now were impossible? Was this punishment for her traitor's thoughts about the man she had loved, to have an exchange? Him for her twins? Is this what it was?

...And gnashing your teeth like a repentant idiot is doing nothing for anyone, especially you, most especially not for those kids. You're human is all, impossibly capable of mistakes in some cases. Stop behaving like a fifth-grade drama queen. Snap out of it, Lane, and act like a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, commented a sarcastic, somewhat disgusted voice. Seemed that the General's Daughter had had enough.

And Lois knew the voice was right. This wasn't the time or place to fall apart. Brusquely, she rubbed away her tears as she forced herself to breathe more slowly. Shaking her head to clear it, she focused on the narrow, dark hallway ahead of her. Right now the twins were counting on her, more than ever in their young lives. Any personal issues she had could wait until they found Kala and Jason.

Being as cautious as she knew how, despite the urge to just go barreling onward, Lois made her way through several of the huge abandoned building's storage rooms. With the exception of river rats, of which Luthor was one only in Lois' system of classification, the area was deserted.

Her growing desperation showed in the way Lois startled at every sound and, instead of playing it safe and moving away, she headed directly to it. According to her watch, it had now been four hours since Barbara had called her after finding Mrs. Mosley unconscious on the entrance walkway, two hours since Lex's message arrived on her cell phone. It had been more than twelve hours since she had last seen their faces, barely awake as they bounded into the bedroom for a kiss goodbye before leaving for school. And the dark had closed in fast.

They had only recently been allowed to play in the yard until just after dusk, something that seemed to have a forbidden thrill to it. Yet they always seemed to come in before the allotted time. Her twins had never been alone in the dark, not even in their bedrooms. They had nightlights, both of them, still being at that age that they were afraid of the Boogie-Man...

Well, Lex certainly fits that description, her mind commented disloyally and that was enough to turn her back in the direction of Richard's car. She had to get more batteries for the weakening flashlight, had to keep looking, no matter how hopeless the area looked. Even if Kala and Jason weren't here, maybe there was a clue. One of Kala's hair-ties, maybe one of those goofy-looking Godzilla pens from Jason's bag. Maybe one of the backpacks themselves. She had to keep looking...

Lois froze. There, in the hallway leading to this area, a shadow that hadn't been there before. An elongated shadow, like a man's. Lois' hand crept into her purse, seeking the familiar rosewood grip of her Ladysmith.

Brutus finished his meal in the galley and set his plates in the sink. Stanford, Riley, and

Grant were playing cards, cheating each other as usual. "Hey, Brutus, I'll deal ya in," Grant said with that funny sideways grin.

The bigger man glanced at him and shook his head slightly. "Nah. Not tonight. 'M gonna check on the kids. Luthor says they gotta be watched."

Riley chuckled. "Watch the girl, man. She's a fighter. Like to see her again in about ten years."

Brutus didn't have to move fast or be overtly violent to make a point. He simply sauntered over to Riley, caught the front of his shirt in one fist, and lifted the man gently out of his chair. "Don't touch them kids," he said quietly. "I see a kid in one of your home movies, Riley, we're not gonna be friends no more."

"Yo, chill, man," Riley said with a nervous laugh, as Brutus slowly lowered him to his seat. "I didn't mean nothing by it, it's just talk, ya know? I'm not like a child molester or nothin'."

"I don't like people who hurt kids," Brutus said slowly, for emphasis. Riley laughed again, but he wouldn't meet Brutus' gaze. Grant was trying to watch him without seeming to, eyes skittering up to his face and away like a cornered rat trying not to see the cat approach.

And Stanford, who probably had the least to hide of any of them, looked up once and then back at his cards. Well, he might've been in stir with them, but Stanford wasn't like them. The mineralogist didn't get involved in stuff like this.

Brutus just looked at Riley for another long minute, and walked away. He took his time heading for the grand ballroom, shaking his head in contempt of Riley and Grant as he went. They had fought with the kids, opting to use force to get them on board. That was dumb. Kids were pretty easy to win over, if you were nice to them. Even smart, wary kids like these. There just wasn't any such thing as a six-year-old cynic - although that Kala got pretty close.

Brutus paused at the door. Gertrude's conceit had been to make every single door on the ship have a porthole in it. Not too great for privacy, and after a while all those little circular windows got on your nerves. But times like this they were pretty handy.

He cupped his hands around the window, peering into the darker room. The lights were still on, and in the dimness he could see them lying on the glass floor. Kinda cute - kids watching the fish. Brutus stepped back to unlock the door, and felt something brush his ankle.

It was only Tala, that powder puff of a dog. Brutus grinned at her. "Hey, fluffy-butt. Did she leave you out again?"

Tala stared up at him with dark, unreadable eyes. The tip of her tail wagged slowly.

"Wanna go keep the kids company?"

Tala knew the word 'kids', and her tail wagged faster. As soon as Brutus unlocked the door and opened it for her, she darted inside.

He followed more quietly. The kids were actually asleep - not even Tala's cold nose expertly applied to Jason's forehead woke him. The Pomeranian ran around the twins, her claws clicking on the glass, before leaping over Kala's back and settling down in between them.

"Good girl," Brutus whispered. Kala and Jason had made themselves a pretty comfy nest there, and they'd probably sleep all night. Good enough. Brutus put a couple of mints - the sugar-free kind - on the edge of the piano bench for them.

As he walked past, Jason moved restlessly in his sleep and murmured, "Mommy, I don't wanna go t' school t'morrow..." Kala's hand came out of the pile of blankets she'd burrowed under, and clasped his shoulder.

Brutus couldn't help smiling at them. "Wish granted, kiddo," he said softly. "Tomorrow's Saturday anyway, but there's no school on this ship any day of the week." Kneeling, he lightly ruffled Kala's tousled ebony curls, all that was visible of her other than her hand on Jason's shoulder.

"Lois?" the shadow's owner said, and the voice was so very familiar ... and so very not Lex Luthor's.

Lois had already slipped her index finger along the guard, preparing to pull the weapon from her purse, when the realization of her stalker hit her. Dammit! Why couldn't he ever be bothered to warn her when he did that? Stiffening at the embarrassment of his having startled her, the dark-haired woman clenched her jaw as she snatched the first thing that came to hand out of her purse, and hurled it at his broad chest. Her lighter only made a weak thump as it hit him, but that was quickly drowned out by her frustrated snapping. "Would it kill you to even let me know you're here? Instead of popping out of the shadows like some kind of psycho killer?" she hollered, holding her flashlight up at him like a nightstick. There was a moment of sadistic joy as she shined the light up into his face. She really did feel as though she had nearly had a heart attack. "For God's sake, Kal-El, I could have shot you ... how would you explain THAT?! What are you doing skulking around here in the dark instead of looking for the twins? Other than scaring the hell out of me?"

He didn't respond to her anger or her accusations. Superman, for he was in uniform now, simply walked up to Lois and enfolded her in his arms. The strength that could crush coal into diamonds drew her gently close to him as he murmured, "Lois, we're going to find them, I promise."

"How do you know that?" Her voice broke even as she struggled to pull away, hating herself for behaving this weakly. They didn't have time for this. Not with Richard somewhere in this building. Not with the stakes so high. *God, please ... let them be alright. I'll slit Luthor's throat where he stands once I find him, but please protect my babies. Let them be right. I beg you.*

Giving in, leaning against him, she sobbed, "You can't be sure of that! He wants revenge and from that note, he plans to take it from both of us. He knows about the Fortress, he knows what we were to each other. And he used it. He has my kids, Kal-El." *Our kids.* Her face came up then, the pain in her eyes sharp enough to cut. "They're so little. Still afraid of the dark, even. Especially Kala. And they've never been alone overnight before. They're scared, I know it. And it's all my damned fault."

"It's not your fault," he told her, a note of sternness in his voice. "It's *Luthor's* doing, Lois. If anyone should take the blame for Luthor's work, it's me. He's my nemesis; he wouldn't have done this if he didn't know what you mean to me." Superman sighed, his breath ruffling her hair. "As for the twins, they'll be strong. They might be scared, but they'll stay strong. Look at who their mother is - the woman who cold-cocked a Kryptonian criminal. Not even the entire Council of Elders made that much of an impression on Ursa."

That seemed to calm the hysteria somewhat. Unable to help herself, she reacted to his cautious teasing with a soft laugh between snuffles. It would have been easier to think on it if she didn't have to remember what had led to that battle, but her memory of that moment was clear as day. She had owed that monster Ursa a shot after nearly breaking her arm defending Perry hours before. Nothing had felt more satisfying than that haymaker. Well, short of the look of unfathomable shock on the other woman's face as she fell into the holding cells below

the Fortress itself. And the expression on Kal-El's face, his amazed laughter, when she turned to him afterwards. *At that moment, I hadn't the slightest doubt in the world that he loved me.*

Head leaning slightly against his chest now, she tried to absorb a bit of his calm, his power. The urge to tell him was strong enough to weigh her down, his compliment arguing that she return it. But she couldn't, not now. Not like this. "Yes, well. The difference is that Kala has a hard time with authority that isn't me or Richard, as well as the fact that she will tell you exactly what she thinks of a situation. You've heard her. Jason will behave, for himself and Kala, but ... with my daughter... I shudder to think of what her smart mouth might provoke him to do." Closing her eyes to push back the fear starting to swell again, she allowed herself only these few moments with him.

"We're going to find them, Lois, we'll get there in time," he told her again, stroking her hair lightly. How could he explain to her what he had done once before to save her life, what he would do again to save her children if he had to? *Once upon a time, Lois, I wasn't in time for you. You died in that desert, and I sent myself back in time to save you.*

The touch of his fingertips was light over the strands, but she felt it as if he had run that warm hand down her cheek. Her eyes closed at that delicate touch. Unable to help herself, Lois felt herself snuggle into his comfort. It still seemed the most natural thing in the world, the way she seemed to gravitate to him as much as he did to her. After all, wasn't he the father of her children? It was clear to her that she still loved him, painfully clear. Couldn't he see that? He had to, in spite of all she had tried to deny it. How could she keep lying to him, to herself? To Richard?

That simple thought threw her eyes open, a flush rising to her cheeks as she pulled out of his embrace to step away. Almost immediately, everything in her protested. Even the General's Daughter gave one of her rare silences. It was dark enough in the building to assure that he couldn't see her torn expression. Neither could anyone else, for that matter, she thought with a mix of relief and knowingness. Already feeling guilty, she said firmly in a quiet voice, avoiding his gaze, "This ... this isn't getting the twins found. Richard and I made it through our list - this is the last stop. What about you and Lana?" Thinking for a moment, she added, "Where *is* Lana, anyway?"

"We finished our list - I didn't have to actually break in - and I sent her home," he replied, watching her with a faintly puzzled expression. One moment she was in his arms, the next, distant. His father had always said that no man would ever understand women - Pa Kent, that was, not Jor-El. Funny how the most useful advice came from the farmer and not the scientist renowned for his wisdom. "She was getting exhausted, and she needed to get some rest. So do you, Lois."

Those eyes, which he could see much better than she thought he could, narrowed then. Her reply came quietly, firm as he had ever heard it, despite the many hours she had been awake and running. "I'll sleep once Jason and Kala are safe and sound, asleep in their beds."

"Lois, you can't run on nerves forever."

"I can do anything I damn well want to, Kal-El," Lois snapped, all the more vehement. "Are you trying to tell me I'm too *old* for this? Because I used to do it all the time. And *long* before *you* showed up."

Before Kal-El could try to reply, a beam of light entered the room. "Lois? Who are you ... talking..." Richard stopped, staring, as his flashlight found Superman.

Kal-El turned to look at him, reminding himself that he'd supposedly never met this man before. "Mr. White, I presume," he said, emphasizing the richer timbre of this person's voice.

"It's good to meet you at last, although I wish it were under other circumstances."

Lois' flashlight beam swung back and forth between the two men as she bit her lip. Richard was staring ... hopefully he was just surprised by the sudden appearance of the hero, hopefully he didn't have a clue that he'd been working with Superman for several months. When he finally spoke, Richard allayed those fears. "Yeah ... always wanted to meet you, but not like this." He seemed to shake himself slightly, adjusting to the presence of this superhuman being, and continued, "No luck?"

"I haven't found them yet, no," Kal-El replied, and genuine sorrow colored his words. "I scanned this building, too - the twins aren't here."

Lois' shoulders slumped in defeat. "Dammit. Well, come on, there's still upper 86th street."

"I've already been there," Superman told her gently. "I got a complete copy of the list from Mr. Kent and Ms. Lang, and I've checked all the addresses within the greater Metropolis area. There's nothing more you can do tonight."

"No, we can head back to the office," Lois said, shaking her head. "Perry and Jimmy will have stayed late digging up more leads."

"Ms. Lane, you need to get some rest," Superman said, glancing at Richard as if seeking his support. "Go home - I'll look into the out-of-state and foreign properties you found."

"I told you I'm not going to bed until they're found," she replied, glaring. *Get off the 'Ms. Lane' nonsense, Kal-El.*

"Lois, he's got a point," Richard said. "I don't like leaving the search tonight, either, but we can start again early."

"It's safer for you both in daylight," Superman added. "Searching these warehouses at night is very dangerous, Ms. Lane, as you know."

"When has that ever stopped me?" Lois challenged. She would never let either of them see the exhaustion that dogged her, a weariness born as much of constant anxiety as of physical and mental exertion.

"Lois, go home," Kal-El said to her, and completely missed Richard's sharp gaze flickering to him. "You don't want to pass out halfway through tomorrow. Go home and try to get some sleep. I'll keep on trying."

She began to argue it, but the fatigue weighing on her prevented it. Brow furrowed, Lois demanded, "Promise me."

He had always understood her so well. "Lois, I promise you I won't stop searching. Whatever it takes ... we'll find them. Somewhere."

Finally she nodded, and Richard took her arm. "We'll see you in the morning?" he asked the hero.

Kal-El's deep blue eyes met his, and he nodded. "Until then."

As Richard and Lois left, she turned one last time, and the fear that shone in her eyes was no longer under her control. It broke Kal-El's heart to see it ... and strengthened his resolve to find the twins.

Brutus left without waking the kids, looking back into the room as he opened the door. Only Tala's eyes glowed red in the faint light, and he smiled for a minute. Kids and a dog - it was a nice picture.

What waited for him outside the door was not. As he closed it, hand on the lock, he revealed Kitty standing behind it. Brutus' pulse raced, but he didn't let it show. Instead he simply locked the door casually, sparing the dark-haired woman no more than a glance. Her

full lower lip was even more swollen than usual; would she ever learn not to defy Lex? You just didn't cross a man like that.

"How come you were in there, Brutus?" she asked, trying to sound demanding, but her voice came out skittish. Weak. Brutus could break her neck one-handed, and they both knew it.

"Checkin' on the kids," he replied. "They're sleeping."

"Why?"

"Luthor said to." She didn't need a lengthy explanation; the shorter and more matter-of-fact his responses were, the less likely she was to guess his fondness for them.

Kitty seemed to accept that. She almost walked away, but halted, glancing up at him nervously. *I'm not Riley*, the big man thought of saying to her. As he looked back silently, Kitty added, "Have you seen Tala? My dog?"

Brutus jerked his head at the door. "In there. I guess she likes the kids, and they're good with her. You put her in the last time, right?"

"Yeah ... yeah, she likes them." Kitty looked at the door again, and Brutus saw some unnamable emotion flicker across her face. Just another thing about women he'd never understand, apparently. "She's better with them ... Lex doesn't like her much."

Brutus just nodded, filing that fact away for future reference. "G'night, Miss Kowalski," he said, and turned away.

Kitty remained, looking through the portal at the sleeping children, for a moment longer.

Richard's mind was spinning throughout the drive home, barely conscious of Lois beside him with her forehead pressed against the window, staring out into the tumultuous night.

He'd been a Superman fan pretty much ever since the hero had made his famous debut. The mere thought that a man could fly, without needing a plane or a jet or a glider, was intoxicating. To soar as the hawk soars, to scythe through the air like a falcon - no, even more free and powerful than the raptors, able to hover motionless or accelerate past the speed of sound in a moment, laughing at gravity and glorying in never-ending strength ... that was the stuff of Richard's boyhood dreams. How could the man that boy had become *not* idolize this living symbol of everything heroic, when Superman could *fly*?

Meeting the superhero today had been ... weird. He hadn't been this in awe since he met Lois - which, if he was brutally honest, had been partly due to her connection to Superman. *Good one, Richard*, he thought to himself with an ironic internal chuckle. *You got the ultimate Superman fan's collectible: his girlfriend.*

That had been the next thing to cross Richard's mind, after the head trip that was meeting his idol. Suspicion. Lois had been speaking very familiarly to Superman; she'd actually been quarreling with him, from the sound. As he'd looked from one to the other, a tiny jealous part of his brain had whispered, *He's awfully friendly with your fiancée.*

Immediately on the heels of that thought had come chagrin. *She was his girlfriend before I ever came back to the states. If anyone's the interloper here, it's me.*

More than enough to leave any man confused and melancholy. If that wasn't enough, the loss of the twins gnawed at him. Even more so when they arrived at the house and saw everything as it had been that morning, before their world had fallen apart. Both twins' drawings on the refrigerator door, Kala's hair tie on the table, Jason's other sneakers by the coat rack - those things seemed fraught with meaning, haunting Richard. It hadn't quite been real to him until that moment, a part of him still believing that this couldn't possibly happen to

people he loved.

Lois froze in the hallway, shivering, her eyes lingering on each of the twins' belongings as if concentrating could bring them home. Richard slipped his arm around her shoulders wordlessly; nothing he could say would comfort her.

For a moment she accepted the touch, but then Lois moved away slightly. He let her; both of them had too much to feel, too much to think about. She went into the kitchen and got something out of the fridge. Food didn't sound very appealing at the moment, but Richard supposed he'd have to eat something too.

He paced through the darkened house, his mind full of the twins - Kala's laugh, Jason's smile, their silly arguments, and the absolute seriousness with which they would suddenly unite in defense of each other. God, the house felt empty. Everywhere he looked was heartbreak - the couch that was often bereft of its cushions when the kids played at building forts, the piano Jason practiced on, the stereo system Kala sang along with.

And as awful as this was for him, it had to be infinitely worse for Lois. The twins were the most important part of her life, and her love for them was greater than any other emotion she'd ever known. She'd raised them basically alone through their infancy and toddler years, and only trusted a few people to look after them even now. Richard's throat closed in sympathetic pain.

Enough of this. We need to get some rest and get back to the search tomorrow morning. Richard headed upstairs to look for Lois.

His heart broke again when he found her in the twins' room, sitting on Jason's bed. She hadn't gone into the fridge for herself, Richard now saw. She had gotten out the mix of raw vegetables that Jason gave Gazeera every evening, and was hand-feeding the iguana. Wonder of wonders, the lizard was accepting the greens from her without trying his usual tricks; it seemed the pets knew something was wrong, too. Captain Jack's food bowl had been freshly filled, but he was ignoring it, standing in the corner of his cage closest to Lois and pressing his nose against the wire.

Richard started to come in; she didn't need to be in here, where the reminders of the twins' absence were a thousand times stronger. But when Lois offered Gazeera a piece of zucchini, he saw her reflection in Jason's mirror, saw the tears streaming down her cheeks silently.

Lois wouldn't rest that night. Richard knew it to look at her; she'd stay up, pacing and worrying, until she collapsed from exhaustion. That would do them no good tomorrow. Something had to be done, and Richard went downstairs silently to do it.

Her sleeping pills were in the downstairs medicine cabinet, well out of the twins' reach. Richard took down the bottle and shook one pill into his hand. He paused, thinking carefully, and added another. He'd seen her take two at once before, but not the way he planned to give them to her.

Richard replaced the medicine bottle and dropped the pills into a glass. He added a generous splash of Scotch and swirled until the pills dissolved. Then he topped up the glass with milk and carried it upstairs to her.

Lois had finished feeding the lizard, and accepted the drink gratefully. If she noticed anything funny about the taste, she probably attributed it to an extra dose of alcohol. Still without speaking, Richard sat beside her and rubbed her shoulders as she watched the animals move around their cages, probably wondering where their true owners were.

Within fifteen minutes, Lois's eyelids were flickering. She had already been tired, and

Richard caught the empty glass just as it tumbled from her hand. He was just fast enough to support her as she slumped against him.

She'd gone under awfully quick, and Richard felt her pulse as he held her close, worrying. The beat seemed steady, and her breathing was deep and even, so he must've dosed it just right. Gathering her into his arms and marveling at her lightness, Richard carried Lois down the hall to their bedroom.

Now all he had to do was figure out a way to make *himself* fall asleep.

Tipping the Scales

Lost in the darkness, hoping for a sign
Instead there is only silence,
Can't you hear my screams...?
Never stop hoping,
Until I know where you are
But one thing's for sure,
You're always in my heart...

~*Within Temptation, "Somewhere"*

Lois clawed her way up from sleep stubbornly, ignoring the heaviness in her limbs and the gentle insistence in the back of her mind that it would be so much easier just to lie here... The reporter forced her eyes open and tried to sit up, but her head felt fuzzy. She yawned, and immediately shuddered; her mouth was dry and tasted awful. *What the hell was I doing last night?* Lois wondered, but her mind was blank. Thinking felt weird ... furry somehow. Like her tongue.

Gagging at the thought, she quickly climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom. Lois splashed her face with cold water, rinsed her mouth, even drank straight from the tap. She took twice as long to brush her teeth, even scrubbing her tongue to get rid of the last foul taste of whatever she'd been drinking. Now she felt somewhat refreshed, and took a shower, letting the hot water pound on her skin and restore her a little more. It had been years since she had been able to imbibe the way she had in the old days, but those were instincts you never forgot, especially for a military brat.

Her mind was still rather hazy, but at least she felt better. *As soon as I find out what I was drinking last night, I'm swearing it off forever.* That would have to wait for her thought processes to start functioning a little better, though. As it was, Lois couldn't seem to remember much of anything.

Force of habit took her downstairs and past the study to the kitchen. She could hear Richard talking on the phone, his voice muffled by the closed door. Odd, for him to be up and on the phone this early on a Saturday ... was it Saturday? Usually the kids were up by now, concocting some culinary horror for breakfast. Maybe they were already watching cartoons. Lois went into the living room, but they weren't there, either. Strange.

Slowly, she turned around. The house was awfully quiet. A deep sense of unease was working its way past her hangover. Lois methodically went through each room downstairs, excepting only Richard's study. He was still on the phone, and they couldn't be in there with him - Jason and Kala just couldn't keep quiet while a phone call was in progress.

Upstairs, the eerie silence continued. She stopped outside the twins' bedroom, locked in place by a disquieting feeling of loss. It was as if, by opening the door, she would cause something irrevocable to happen. Lois felt certain the kids were just sleeping in, but the gooseflesh prickling along her arms seemed to tell her that if she opened the door to check, they would somehow vanish.

That was absurd. Lois shook herself and turned the doorknob stepping in. Her gaze landed on Jason's empty bed.

The memory of sitting there last night, tears running down her cheeks as she fed the godforsaken lizard, returned with all the force of a hurricane. Lois staggered, her hand flailing to catch the edge of the bed, and she fell against it instead of to the floor.

Sudden remembrance blew apart the haze in her mind, letting in all the terrible details of

yesterday. The Vanderworth estate, her car, Luthor, the twins ... *the twins*. *He* had them. Realization dawned horribly bright on her.

In the conference room at the *Daily Planet*, the rest of the team listened carefully as Richard murmured into the phone, "No, she's still out, I think I'll let her sleep as long as she can."

"Sound decision," Perry replied. Lana, Clark, and Jimmy all nodded; Lois had been running on nerves and rage. Best to let her get what rest she could. "You sure she's okay, though?"

Richard laughed ironically. "Oh, yeah. Our friend in the cape dropped by last night. Apparently he can hear her heartbeat from anywhere and wondered why it was so slow. He said she was all right, I didn't... Oh, shit."

They were left listening to the phone thump against the desk, and in the background, a rising howl of anguish, terror, and rage. Clark closed his eyes, grief burning in him. The very sound hurt his ears to hear it, hurt his heart to know the pain that caused Lois to scream.

Lana's hand covered her mouth, and tears glistened in her eyes. That didn't sound like a woman, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist. It sounded like a wounded bear, like a wolf whose pups were taken from her... *My God. Oh, my God, how can such a thing happen?*

Jimmy looked away while the scream rose, wavered, and broke off. Presumably Richard had gone to her, but there would be no comforting Lois, not until they had the twins safely back. The best he could hope for was her fighting spirit to rise, the anger to overcome the despair. In the meantime, his chest felt tight with sympathetic pain.

Even Perry had to blink rapidly, forcing back tears. He more than anyone else knew how strong Lois was, how terrible this must be to make her cry out like that. A sound like that shouldn't come from any living creature - it seemed a portent of death. Only a handful of times in all the years he'd known her had Lois even wept - to hear that long, agonized wail rising from her throat made him wish he could bear this and not her. Even if it killed him.

Brutus brought the twins' breakfast and let Tala out. Jason and Kala looked up at him blearily, their necks still stiff from sleeping on the floor. "Hi, kids," he said warmly, setting down the tray. "Did you see any big fish last night?"

Kala met his eyes, her hazel gaze sharp. "You came in while we were sleeping," she said.

"Yup," Brutus replied affably. On the inside, he applauded her. This one had rare maturity and insight. "I let Tala in for ya. She needed the company."

"How come she doesn't sleep in Miss Katherine's room?" Jason said with a frown. "Tala's her dog, right?"

"I wouldn't want Captain Jack to sleep anywhere but in my room," Kala added.

"Yeah, Tala belongs to Katherine," Brutus told them. Then he let his mouth droop into a slight frown. "She can't stay with her at nights, though."

"Why not?" both twins asked in unison.

Brutus sighed, looking down as if embarrassed. "Well ... Luthor doesn't like her much. He's mean to the little dog - it's best if Tala sleeps somewhere else."

Both twins were scowling now. "Why'd Mr. Luthor be goin' in Miss Katherine's room, anyway?" Jason asked.

"She didn't say?" Brutus asked. When they shook their heads, he pursed his mouth, pausing for a long moment. The kids waited for him to decide to tell them whatever it was,

both of them antsy at the thought of a secret. Finally, the big man gave another heavy sigh. "Well, I don't know if you guys will really understand, but Katherine is Mr. Luthor's girlfriend."

Cocking her head to the side, Kala figured it out first. Her face showed shock and disgust as she said, "You mean ... Miss Katherine is Mr. Luthor's *girlfriend*? Like grown-up girlfriend?"

"Like Mommy and Daddy?" Jason's nose wrinkled in horror, his expression mimicking Kala's.

"That's *gross*," Kala added. "Ewww!"

"But he's the bad guy!" Jason complained. "Nobody ever wants t' be the bad guy's girlfriend!"

"Miss Katherine *can't* be his girlfriend," Kala added. "She's *nice*, and he's mean."

Brutus merely shrugged. "I don't understand it either. But that's the way it is."

The twins just shook their heads, still in denial. Jason voiced both of their opinions when he said, "But we *like* Miss Katherine."

"Kinda." Kala's sharp eyes were on Brutus again, and he forced himself to look merely puzzled.

Lois hated being merely a passenger. Especially now. With her breakdown firmly behind her - never mind the tremor in her hands or the shiver in her soul - she wanted to be *doing* something. Sitting here while Richard drove them both to the office, where the others were already assembled and gathering more information, was nearly unbearable.

She darted a look at him, caught by conflicting emotions. On the one hand, Lois wanted to knock him senseless for daring to drug her - that was the only explanation for how quickly she fell asleep last night, and how groggy she'd been this morning. On the other hand, she would never have gotten any rest if he hadn't done it, and Lois knew that Richard had her best interests at heart. *What a Hallmark moment. 'A man who cares enough to slip you a Mickey.'* *My God.*

Richard sensed the look, and glanced at her. "You okay, Lois?"

"Fine," she replied, deciding not to call him on the doctored drink. However, that didn't prevent her from poking at him about it. Yawning theatrically, she added, "Still a little hazy. You must've put the good Scotch in my drink last night."

He avoided her eyes then. "You needed the sleep. I didn't want you up all night, pacing and worrying. We've got a lot to do today."

"Mm-hmm," Lois replied, stifling another yawn, this one genuine. "Did you get any sleep?"

Just an instant's hesitation, then Richard said, "Only after I borrowed one of your sleeping pills. You're almost out of them, just so you know."

Lois made a noncommittal noise, staring out the window, and thought, *They aren't as good or as fast, but I can always use Tylenol PM. Those usually help me fall asleep.*

By then they were approaching the office, and Lois steeled herself. She couldn't let her demeanor show the others how close she'd come to utterly breaking down this morning. She had no idea that they had heard that awful cry, and no one would let her find out, either.

Although the way they all looked up concernedly when she stepped into the conference room was a little suspicious. It might've just been the fact that she was dressed casually - jeans and a blouse instead of her usual suits. Perry was the first to speak, and his gruff tone sounded

like everything was normal. "Well, now that you've had your beauty rest, Lane, we can get to work."

Lois just rolled her eyes as she dropped into a chair, stifling a yawn along with the urge to flip him off. "So bring me up to date, old man."

Perry glared, but she saw a hint of a relieved smile on his face. "All right, this is what's happened so far. First of all, your mother called yesterday, and I told her what's going on. She and Ron are keeping it a secret from Lucy - she's too far along to upset with news like this. But your sister's pretty pissed at you for missing Nora's birthday party."

"Let her be mad," Lois said. "It's better than telling her what happened. Okay, what else?"

"Well, it turns out we've got two things for you to check out. First, that Karla Smith-Bennett is in private practice, but she does a helluva lot of work pro-bono. Usually on behalf of kids." Perry raised a grizzled brow.

"Sounds like someone's got a guilty conscience," Lois said, her hazel eyes glittering. "One of us should drop by her office in person and see what she knows."

Perry nodded agreement. "Next up is the phone company. That one has to be in person, too. Lois, I think you ought to go with Kent and talk to the same woman he spoke with yesterday. You're the kids' mother, and the call went in to your phone. You can probably convince her to bend the rules."

Lois agreed. "So that leaves Richard and Lana to talk to Ms. Bennett. What about you, Perry? Find anything else in the archives?"

Now the editor-in-chief looked disgruntled. "Olsen's run up a couple possibilities, but nothing concrete. I got a call from that girl at the *Daily Star*, Raines. Apparently Sawyer tipped off the competition, and Raines is going over their background information to see if they have anything we don't. It's gonna take longer because she has to do it herself - obviously we don't trust just anyone over there. Not even sure if I trust Raines, but the lieutenant does, so I have to bow to her judgment."

"All right," Lois said. "Let's get going."

"Be careful," Lex said unnecessarily, and Stanford bit his lip yet again. *As if I didn't know that one drop of seawater on this thing will start it growing.* He carefully fitted the kryptonite cylinder, with one of the large crystals from the Fortress inside, into a steel sleeve. Trying to ignore Riley filming and Lex looming, the mineralogist screwed the sleeve together tightly. It was almost watertight - simulations showed that it would take about half an hour for enough seawater to reach the main crystal to make it expand and burst the sleeve. That gave them time to get away.

Not enough time, in Lex's opinion. The resulting EMP would knock out every electrical system on the yacht, and Lex would take no chances of their computer simulations being wrong about the speed of crystal growth. He insisted on being well out of range, so Stanford had chosen the simplest delay method possible.

A life raft, spray-painted dark blue just in case someone happened to see it, was lying on the deck nearby. At first Lex wanted to fire the crystal with a missile launcher, but the stress of hitting the water at such speeds might have caused the seams to widen, letting in water faster and causing the crystal to expand prematurely. Stanford punched a few tiny holes in the life raft, enough to let the air out very slowly, and placed the canister inside. Grant and Brutus lowered it - "Gently!" Lex cautioned - and they watched the unassuming device bob away on the waves.

"Not exactly the historic moment I envisioned," Luthor muttered. "It lacks the panache of a missile launch."

Only Stanford dared contradict him. "Safety or panache, Mr. Luthor? I'll admit, the missile launch might've gone fine. But if one seam of that sleeve cracked early, we might've foundered this ship."

Lex's dark eyes cut to him, and the boss gave one of his rare smiles. "True. Not that I don't intend to spend a lot of time on my island, but I'd prefer to keep this mobile base as long as I can. Gentlemen, you're dismissed. Grant, bring us around south by southwest."

The others looked bored as they headed downstairs. Only Kitty, clutching her dog, remained on deck with Lex and Stanford. She looked troubled, and Stanford spared her a pitying look as he passed her. *Poor girl had no idea what she was getting into on this ride*, he thought. But considering the fates of others was counterproductive on this trip. All Stanford wanted to do was get back to the desert lab and his experiments there.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I really can't..." The customer service representative trailed off as Lois pulled out her wallet and held it open so the photos were right in her face.

Clark squeezed her elbow gently, and Lois modified her tone. "You see these kids, Ms. MacKenzie? Look very closely."

"Yes, well..."

"Now look at this picture." Lois held up the cell phone with that damned text message on the screen, and saw the woman's eyes widen. The wallet photo was recent, and the grainy phone picture was obviously of the same two kids. "Pay particular attention to the end of the message," Lois added dryly, controlling her temper.

Ms. MacKenzie's mouth slowly opened in dawning horror. "But ... no one would..."

"Ma'am, we're reporters," Clark said gently. "We see all the statistics. Unfortunately, people do that and worse to children every single day. I'm afraid the threat is genuine."

Lois swallowed hard. That wasn't a reminder she needed at the moment. All she said was, "You can see why I won't involve the police or the military in this, then."

Ms. MacKenzie nodded. "I'll run that trace for you now, Ms. Lane. It may take a few minutes."

"Thank you," Lois said with sincere relief. "We'll wait."

Clark seemed about to add his thanks as well, but something in his pocket chirped. Lois arched an eyebrow at him as he excused himself and walked out into the lobby. "Hello?"

"Son? I haven't heard from you in a few days, other than the news. Is everything okay?"

Clark gave a shaky laugh. "No, Ma, far from it." He lowered his voice and turned away from Lois to continue, "Luthor kidnapped the twins."

"*What?*" Martha exclaimed. "That lowdown, no-good cowardly son of a... Oh, Clark. My poor boy! When - how? My God, what about Lois?"

"He nabbed them after school. Lois and I - and Richard and Perry and Jimmy and Lana, of all people - are trying to track him down. We can't let the police or the military in on it." He didn't have to tell her why, and lowered his voice even further to add, "Lois isn't taking it very well. I really hope I find him before she does - Ma, she'd shoot him. In a heartbeat."

Martha huffed. "That's normal, Clark. Any mother would protect her children. Heck, I'd be tempted to take a shot at him myself. Speaking of which... Is Lois there with you?"

"Yes," Clark murmured, noticing Lois watching him keenly.

"Has she said anything about what we talked about last time?"

"No," he replied. "But, well, I'm starting to think it's a strong possibility."

"Hmm," Martha mused. "And you said you're all working on it? Even Lana?"

"Even Lana," Clark said. "She's really thrown herself into this."

"Because of you?"

Now that was a question he *really* couldn't answer with Lois anywhere nearby. "No ... it's complicated. But it's not about me."

Martha heard the hesitation, and sighed. "Son, I know you have to be busy. And she must be listening to you, too. Call me when you can, please. I'll be praying for you."

"Thanks, Ma," Clark told her. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Please take care of yourself, Clark. I know you'll find them."

He had no reply to that, and hung up with a soft "Goodbye."

Lois was still waiting for Ms. MacKenzie, and she pounced on Clark as soon as he walked back to her. "Well?"

"My mother's praying for us," he replied.

Lois started to say something sarcastic, then halted. "Tell her I said thank you next time you talk to her. We need all the help we can get, including divine."

Brutus set down the tray, saying, "It's not much, but it's breakfast."

"Oatmeal?" Jason said. "But there's no jicama..." Kala wrinkled up her nose; she wasn't particularly fond of oatmeal.

"Sorry, kids," Brutus said. "We don't have a lot of choices around here." He looked so dejected on their behalf that the twins hushed and ate their breakfast anyway.

For once, Brutus didn't leave immediately. He sat down at the piano, idly plinking a few notes. Jason watched him thoughtfully as he finished his oatmeal. Swallowing the last bite, he asked, "You okay?"

Brutus seemed startled by the question. "Huh? Oh, yeah. I'm fine."

But he didn't act fine. He acted sad. And Jason had always known at least one sure way to cheer up any adult in his vicinity. Putting his spoon and bowl back on the tray, Jason went over to Brutus and hopped up on the bench beside him.

Kala, eating more slowly because she really didn't like oatmeal all that much, paused to grin at the sight of them. Jason picked out a now-familiar tune, and Brutus grinned at him, playing the accompaniment. The big man caught Kala watching them, and gave her a cheerful wink.

Heart and soul, I begged to be adored. Lost control, and tumbled overboard...

"Mommy likes this song," Jason said.

"It's a neat one," Brutus agreed. "You play it really good."

"Thank you for seeing us without an appointment," Lana said, giving Karla Smith-Bennett her warmest smile.

"This is about Luthor, isn't it?" the attorney asked. She looked weary and sounded disgusted. "I'm sure you're aware of attorney-client privilege."

"We are," Richard answered, his voice a trifle sharp. "However, I don't think that *you* are aware your former client kidnapped my fiancée's twins yesterday."

"Allegations like that..."

Richard flipped open his own phone and showed her the forwarded text message.

"Admittedly, he wasn't kind enough to send his thumb print or signature, but we know it's

Luthor. He's the only person with enough of a grudge to take it out on children. *Children*, Ms. Smith-Bennett. They just turned six this month. And their favorite presents - an iguana and a ferret, God help my uncle - are pining for them."

The woman bit her lip, and for some reason glanced at Lana. "I'm sorry ... this must be very stressful for you."

Lana caught on before Richard did. Rather than deny the attorney's assumption, she leaned forward and caught the blonde woman's gaze demandingly. "Unless you have children, you have *no* idea. If you know anything that might help us find them ... please."

Her gaze, trapped between professionalism and ethics, shifted between the two of them. Richard held his phone out. "Read the message. He's not kidding - my fiancée has dealt with him in the past, and she'll tell you he's perfectly capable of such a thing."

"I don't need to tell you, do I?" Lana said shrewdly, watching Ms. Smith-Bennett's face go pale as she read the part about returning the twins in pieces. "You already know. That's why you quit the firm. That's why you do so much pro-bono work now, isn't it? Trying to atone?"

"You know as well as we do that Luthor's guilty of murder, at the very least," Richard chimed in. "Prison didn't rehabilitate him; if anything it made him *worse*. You couldn't go on aiding a psychopath, and now you're trying to expiate your guilt for your part in setting him free, aren't you?"

Karla Smith-Bennett suddenly rose from her chair, turning her back on them both and pacing to the window. Her voice was taut when she replied, "If I help you, I could be disbarred."

Lana touched Richard's wrist lightly; this line belonged to her. "If you don't help us, you could be a party to the murder of two young children. Jason and Kala need you."

The blonde gave a short, bitter laugh. "All those damn lawyer jokes ... sometimes I wish I was as self-interested as they portray us. You're right - I'd rather lose my license and wash dishes for a living than have this on my conscience. Fine." She came back to her desk and sat down, defeated. "I'll tell you everything I know."

Lois was pacing, twiddling a pen instead of raking her fingers through her hair. Nothing Clark said could calm her at this point. Truth be told, he was anxious, too. This was their best chance at a lead...

Ms. MacKenzie came back out with an apologetic air. "I'm so sorry. My manager says I can't track that down for you. It's against the law..."

"**What?!**" Lois began, but Clark saw the look on the woman's face and caught Lois' wrist tightly. Her dark head whipped around, and she glared at him in outrage.

"Is there any way you can help us, Ms. MacKenzie?" he asked softly ... very softly.

She gave a slight nod, nearly imperceptible. "I'm afraid not. But I have your mobile number, Ms. Lane, and if I can get an authorization from the police department I'll be glad to call you with that information."

Still hanging on to Lois, and ignoring the look she was giving him, Clark replied, "Thank you very much for your help, Ms. MacKenzie. We'll have our contact in the police department call your manager directly. When would be a good time?"

"He's on-duty until eight o'clock," the representative told him, a glimmer of relief in her eyes. "However, he takes lunch around five-thirty, so I wouldn't call between then and six-thirty."

"Thanks again, ma'am," Clark told her, and hustled Lois outside.

She was still blinded by fury. "Dammit, Clark, I do *not* want Maggie calling here..."

"She won't have to," Clark murmured, practically pulling Lois to the curb where she had left Richard's car. "She'll call us when her boss goes to lunch."

Lois blinked at him, and felt extremely sheepish. "Clark..."

"You're wound tight," he said, giving her a small smile. "C'mon, let's see what Perry and Jimmy have found for us."

Before going around to the driver's side, Lois stood on tiptoe and kissed Clark's cheek briefly. "Thanks. You've always kept a cooler head than me."

Clark actually blushed. A compliment, a kiss on the cheek, and the sight of her in jeans - to which he *still* had not adjusted - were enough to render him speechless as Lois fished the spare key to the Saab out of her purse.

Just as she was putting it into the lock, her cell phone rang. Lois tried to grab it, nearly dropped the keys, got the phone out and nearly dropped the purse, started to fumble in her haste - and Clark was suddenly by her side, catching the purse in one hand and the phone in the other. Since it was on the third ring, he flipped it open and said brusquely, "Kent."

"Hey, Clark," Toby Raines said, her normal cheerful sarcasm subdued by the circumstances. "I see you've signed up as Lane's secretary?"

Lois could hear her voice, and snorted derisively as she unlocked the car. Toby continued without waiting for an answer, "I've got a live one for you, I hope."

"Go on," Clark said. He didn't need a note pad - his memory was keen enough.

"Way back when Gertrude Vanderworth's husband was alive, they owned a vacation house in Nantucket."

"We found that in the tax rolls; it was sold last year," Clark told her.

"Aha, the house was, but what about the *land*?" Toby said. The phone started to beep as she continued, and Clark ignored it. "We've got a notation in our files about a sizeable acreage somewhere in the Cape Cod area. In fact, the reporter who worked this story thought the Vanderworths might own a whole island. One of the smaller ones, sure, but still..."

"Toby, you're a lifesaver," Clark said. "Any idea *where* exactly the island is?"

His tone and his words made Lois snap to attention, holding the door partly open and staring hard at him. Toby sighed in aggravation. "Unfortunately, no. My guess would be somewhere in Buzzard's Bay. The Elizabeth Islands are mostly privately owned, so it wouldn't surprise me if some of the others are too."

"It's good enough for me," Clark said. "We may have a little, um, help on this one, so we can search a wide area."

"Caped help? Good deal," Toby said. "I'll keep looking, but that sounds like your best bet."

"Thanks, Toby," Clark said. "We'll be in touch." She hung up, and he turned to Lois. "The Vanderworths may own an island north of the Vineyard, somewhere in Buzzard's Bay."

"Let's go," Lois said. "That's about six hours by car, so we'd better fly."

As Clark got in the passenger side, he said, "I'll get us there, but you'd better leave the car at the airport to prevent questions. It's only a forty-five minute ride..."

"Fifteen," Lois said dryly as she revved the engine and looked at the traffic. "Twenty, tops. Buckle up, Kal-El."

"Oh, dear," Clark muttered, as she made the 'born from jets' brand motto live up to its name.

"Dammit," Richard growled, flipping the phone closed. "She never answers the bloody phone."

Lana, in the co-pilot's seat beside him, eyed the instrument panel warily. "Richard, are you sure it's a good idea for us to just fly out?"

"She's with Clark," he replied, flipping a sequence of switches and knobs with familiar swiftness. "They're probably chasing after their own lead by now. I left her a voicemail and I called Perry to update him; that's the best we can do. Here, put on a headset."

Lana settled the large earphones delicately, and her voice came over the mic as Richard started the seaplane's twin engines. "I just hope they're not after the same lead as us."

His reply crackled with static as he taxied out onto Hobb's Bay. "Probably not. The land north of Mackinac Island was never officially owned by the Vanderworths, but Luthor definitely knows it's there."

Lana had been half listening to him and half bracing herself against the bumpy acceleration the waves caused. When Richard pulled back on the yoke and the nose of the seaplane began to rise, however, she was silenced by the immediacy of this flight. Nothing like a big jet, where everything was smooth and gentle... The designer's nails clenched in the leather-covered seat, and her eyes widened.

Breakfast was long over, lunch too, but Brutus came back with the twins' dinner. He'd somehow managed to make burritos for them, and Kala and Jason were overjoyed. The last of their reserve seemed to have dissolved, and Jason was more than happy to sit beside the big man and go through his repertoire of songs. Brutus even managed to teach him a new tune, *Chopsticks*.

Kala was getting a little bit bored, though, and she wandered over to the couches across the room to draw. Brutus had also managed to sneak some copier paper and colored pens in for them - not the best artistic materials, but they'd made do with all kinds of office supplies at the *Planet* before.

Jason had nearly gotten the new song perfect, and Brutus patted his shoulder. "Good work, Jason. You're a natural; you pick this stuff up way faster than me."

"Thanks," he replied, beaming. Of course, the distraction made him miss a note, and Jason scowled as he started over.

Brutus just chuckled. "You work on that for a minute, okay? Let me see how your sister's doing."

At first Jason watched him sitting beside Kala, the pair of them leaning over her drawing. But then the little boy got caught up in the music, trying to make the notes perfect. He was getting really good at it; pretty soon he'd be almost as good as he was with *Heart and Soul*.

The first hint Jason had of trouble was Kala's voice rising shrilly. "*No!*" she shouted, leaping off the couch, but Brutus had hold of her wrist and she couldn't leap far. "*Lemme go!*"

Jason stopped playing, standing up to see what was happening. His eyes felt like they were bulging out of his head, and his breath started to whistle in his throat. Why was Brutus, who had been so nice, suddenly holding Kala's arm so tightly? He was telling her, "Shh, shh, it's okay, it's just a game, don't yell..." Jason didn't like it; didn't like the way Brutus was bending over his sister, didn't like to see Kala throwing her whole weight against his grip on her wrist.

"Hey, it's all right, hush now," Brutus said, and Kala kicked him in the shin, hard.

At nearly the same moment she brought her little fist down on the hand that held her

opposite wrist and Brutus's grip loosened enough for her to eel away and run, still yelling. "*Don't touch me! Don't you ever touch me!*"

Brutus followed, and now he was scary-quick, Jason's chest tight, seeing the large man's powerful hand clamp down over Kala's face. Her eyes wild, fighting for air, Brutus holding her arm and shushing her, but his hand covering her mouth so she couldn't breathe, and Jason's heart thumping loudly, his little hands squeezing down on the piano, squeezing...

Over the roar of his own pulse, Jason heard a few faint pops, the source of which he couldn't trace. His vision was growing dark from lack of oxygen, his throat closed in terror. Kala tried to scream, but her voice was muffled, her eyes so full of fear...

Echoes from the recent past. Kala's voice: *I won't let anybody take my brother away. Even if you are a boogerhead.* And Jason's own: *I love you, too, Kala. I'll never let anyone take you away from me either.*

Nobody hurts my sister! With that thought renewing his determination, Jason managed to take a noisy, rasping breath.

Brutus turned at the sound, just in time to see the piano, airborne...

Come Undone

Who do you need...?

Who do you love...?

When you come undone?

~Duran Duran, 'Come Undone'

"You almost hit me!" Kala wailed, her eyes huge and accusing as she looked from the piano to Jason and back again.

Jason couldn't reply, fumbling his inhaler out of his pocket. But when he held it up to his mouth, he realized his breath was coming freely now. *Weird*. "I didn't hit you!" His voice was wounded.

"But you almost!" Kala replied, still anxious. She ran to her brother's side, and then he could see she was shivering. Jason just hugged her, and they clung together for a long moment.

At last Kala got herself under some kind of control and stepped back. "You saved me," she said quietly.

Jason just nodded. "Did he hurt you?"

Kala looked at her wrist, where the faint red marks of Brutus' hands were fading. "No ... he was scary. Creepy-scary."

"Yeah," Jason replied, looking nervously at the wreck of the piano. At any moment he expected the big man to push it off him and come toward them again.

Just then, the door opened, and the twins leaped back, Jason putting a protective arm around Kala. Kitty stepped in, and gave them her usual too-bright smile...

... which quickly faded. "What happened to the ... piano ... oh." The dark-haired woman saw it now, on the other side of the room, and her eyes grew very wide when she saw Brutus' feet sticking out from underneath it. "How ... what happened?"

"He tried to hurt my sister," Jason said, and his tone carried a hint of belligerence. "I knocked him down."

"Yeah, you certainly did," Kitty muttered. She finally tore her eyes away from the piano, and returning her full attention to the twins, she asked, "Do you two know who your daddy is?" It was a dangerous question to ask, perhaps, but with that display of superhuman strength...

Jason and Kala both looked shocked by it, and they glanced at each other for an instant before answering nervously, "Richard."

Kitty nodded slowly. Any normal kid would've looked puzzled and replied *Daddy*. But these were clearly not normal kids. Just as clearly, they were hiding whatever they knew about their true parentage.

The kids were still eyeing her warily, and she seemed to come to some kind of decision. "You know, you guys were never supposed to be in here. They had a nice room all set up for you, but Grant and Riley were such chickens they dumped you here. How about we go to your room so we can get the piano fixed?"

"Nuh-uh," Jason said sternly. "We're not going anywhere with you."

Kitty looked at their accusatory glares, and asked, "Why not? I'm not like Brutus."

"No, but you're the bad guy's girlfriend," Jason shot back. For once Kala was being quiet, just giving Kitty a withering stare of disappointment and betrayal.

"Wha..." Kitty shut her mouth before she said something foolish. Obviously Brutus had been trying to alienate them from her - why, she could guess, and the thought sickened her. She came toward them, but the kids backed up, and Jason tried to look as menacing as

possible.

Kitty stopped, sighing. "Listen... I didn't know how bad Lex was when we started going out."

"So break up," Kala retorted. "Suzie broke up with two boyfriends in one day, and she's only in second grade."

"Things are complicated for grownups," Kitty told them, unaware that she was echoing Lois' own words to them. "It's kinda like ... why doesn't your Mommy break up with Richard to be with your father?"

Kala bit her lip in sudden realization, and Jason started to nod before catching himself. "Richard *is* our daddy," he said, a little too loudly.

"I mean your father," Kitty said gently. "Superman."

The looks of panic that crossed their faces wounded her, but Kitty just kept her questioning gaze on them. There was no other way a little boy could throw a grand piano, after all. Especially not one as frail as Jason seemed to be.

The strain of the secret was too much for Kala on top of everything else that had happened in the last few minutes. Not only had Brutus scared her, but then Kitty made her realize for the first time that she couldn't have her real father *and* the daddy she loved at the same time. Leaning against Jason's shoulder, she started to snuffle.

He hugged her protectively and cut Kitty a look that could've been Lois in miniature, full of anger and frustration. "Leave us alone - you're *mean*."

"No, no," Kitty tried to soothe. "Listen. I didn't mean to upset you guys. It's just - I can't break up with Lex. He wouldn't let me. Plus we're on a boat and I can't get away. I'd never hurt you."

"Don't believe you." Kala's voice was muffled against Jason's shirt.

"Your mommy knows who has you," Kitty whispered, glancing over her shoulder. If Lex walked in and heard her telling them something like that, she wouldn't have to worry about breaking up with him. "Your mommy's going to come get you. And then Superman will come too and rescue you. Lex thinks he's a lot smarter than he is ... the bad guy doesn't ever get to win, does he?"

Jason looked over at the piano. Brutus hadn't moved, but he really didn't want to be in this room when the big man finally woke up. "Fine. But if you try anything funny..."

"I'd never hurt you," Kitty repeated, shivering a little at the thought of being threatened by a six-year-old with superpowers. She held out her hands, and after a minute, the twins came toward her cautiously.

Kitty took a deep breath of relief. Now all she had to do was get them to the stateroom without anyone seeing them, and *then* tell Lex about the piano.

"Dammit," Richard muttered, glaring at the airport clock. "What are we gonna do now?"

"Richard," Lana said, with a little force in her words. "You can't fly anymore today - you're over the amount of time you can legally - *safely* - pilot the plane. *Furthermore*, you're exhausted. We have to stop for the night."

"I know, but Perry says Lois is running a lead out toward Buzzard's Bay in Massachusetts. If she called to check in with him, then she reserved us rooms out there, and I've got no way to get there without leaving the seaplane here." His voice was full of frustration, and he paced the lobby of the private airport incessantly.

"I can cancel my room," Lana said. "Or heck, I'll pay for it. Whatever. This was a bust,

but it needed to be checked out. We'll meet Lois and Clark there tomorrow, and we can survey from the air while they cover surface streets."

Richard smacked his palm down on the table. "Dammit! Lana, I didn't want the kids to spend another night away from us!"

Lana caught his wrist, held it until he turned to face her. "Richard, we're going to get them back. There's just nothing else we can do tonight, okay? C'mon, let's get a cab. Gotham's only a half-hour away."

"Gotham?" His blue eyes were faintly puzzled, still troubled by his worries over the kids.

"Gotham City," Lana explained patiently. "Where I have an apartment and a sleeper sofa. I don't trust you to stay in some hotel and actually *sleep*."

Richard's eyebrows lifted in surprise. He'd never expected Lana to invite him home ... even if she *was* prominently mentioning the sofa. "Lana..."

"Oh, knock it off, Richard," she said. "The way you are now, *someone* has to be around to slip *you* a Mickey."

A little chagrined, Richard finally allowed himself a chuckle. What was he worrying about, anyway? Lana probably wasn't interested in him as anything more than a friend, no matter what he tried to read into her intentions. "All right. Just let me try Lois' cell phone one more time, so she at least knows where we are." Not that he would mention just where they would stay tonight...

Lois flipped her phone shut and sighed heavily. "Isn't that fantastic," she muttered.

"What?" Clark was watching the weather; a cold front was moving through the area, hampering their search with high winds and icy rain.

"Richard can't fly out to meet us tonight. After we choreographed everything through Perry, he's stuck out somewhere near Gotham City and can't fly until morning. Worse, they didn't find anything in the lake islands."

"Another red herring," Clark said glumly. "Luthor's got more layers than an onion. And every one smells as pungent."

Lois couldn't help chuckling tiredly. "Well, I guess we can go look at another of the islands before we turn in. There's still time..." Her voice trailed off into a forcibly stifled yawn, and Clark touched her shoulder.

"Lois, you need some rest. C'mon, let's go to the hotel."

"This will be their second night in *his* clutches," she whispered in wounded frustration. This was tearing her apart, the not knowing, the instinctive fear for them. "I can't. I have to keep looking. There might be something we missed..."

So very gently, Clark caught her chin and made her look at him. "Lois, I'll keep looking. I don't need sleep, really, as long as I can get sunlight. You have to get some rest."

"I slept last night," Lois began, and her voice trailed off into another yawn that she couldn't hide. Clark just looked at her steadily, and in the face of her body's betrayal, she had to relent and drive to the hotel. But when she parked the rented car, she turned to Clark and said with guilty misery, "I want them home. I *need* them home. God, Kal-El..."

Clark squeezed her shoulder, his blue eyes as melancholy as hers. "We'll get them home, Lois. I swear it." Nodding, she got out of the rented car and grabbed the overnight bag she had hastily packed that morning, then headed for the hotel they'd reserved earlier in the day.

Lois walked into the lobby of the Hilton Garden Inn with none of her usual sense of purpose, exhaustion weighing heavily on her even as she fought to keep her eyes open. The

dreary overcast day had been as dark and threatening as her emotions, as her outlook. Clark followed her, with more energy but the same weary look. Frustration had gnawed at both of them all day, and the news about Richard being stuck in the lakes region did nothing for their morale. The thought tolled through both their minds: *Another night away from home. Another day trapped somewhere with Luthor.*

Silence reigned as they checked in and then took the elevator up to their floor. Lois trudged to her door and flicked the key card through the little scanner, but there was no welcoming click of the door unlocking, just a flashing red light. "Damn," she muttered, and tried it again a little slower. Still nothing. Maybe it was too slow ... nope. "Goddamn piece of..."

Clark reached around her, took the card, reversed it, and scanned it. The green light blinked and the lock clicked open. "Dammit," Lois groaned, leaning back slightly against his chest to look up at him. "I hate you."

"No, you don't," he said gently, opening the door for her. "You sure you're going to be okay by yourself?"

"As long as I can remember not to stick quarters in the electrical outlets, Kal-El, I'll be fine," Lois answered in a quiet but cranky tone not too unlike Kala's after a long day. "And I swear I won't play with the plastic garment bag in the closet that has 'DANGER OF SUFFOCATION - NOT A TOY' printed on it."

"Okay, okay. I just worry about you. This is ... it's hard on all of us, but you most of all."

"I'll be fine; I'm a big girl," Lois told him, trying to keep her mind straight enough to not start bawling yet again. The twins needed her to be strong, not ringing her hands like a hysterical mother. The only thing that was keeping her from continuing the search even now was the fact that the man beside her was clucking at her like a mother hen - and would be going out again to look for them. Moving forward to hold the door for herself, she arched an eyebrow as she glanced up at him again. The exhaustion she had denied was starting to take its toll, and his concerned look was starting to get on her nerves. She'd gotten along without him for more than six years; she could survive one night alone. "You're not going to have stay in here to keep guard, or keep me distracted, so don't get any ideas."

He looked down at her, dark eyebrows raised. "That was the furthest thing from my mind. Who do you not trust, Lois? Me or you?"

In spite of her fear for her children, the deep-down truth of his statement hit a little too close to home. There had not been a moment the entire day that she hadn't felt their attraction stronger than ever and knew that the steel walls she had built were in ruins. That she hadn't just wanted to break down and just confess all...

Calling herself a fool, her hazel eyes narrowed. "Doesn't matter. I'm going to take a bath." She seemed to think on that for a moment before almost teasingly adding, with a tiny smile, "And no x-ray vision or I'll kick your butt."

"Lois!" Clark realized how tired she was with that remark; her smart-aleck attitude had been wired directly to her mouth, without passing through the brain first. "Anyway, I'm not going to my room yet. One more flyover, remember."

"Yeah, you promised, despite the rain. Maybe there will be something else, anything else. When you get back, come in and tell me what you find." Lois held the door open and handed him her key card.

"I think you'd better just go to sleep," Clark said, trying to refuse the key, but Lois caught him with that steely glare.

"If you find anything - *anything* - or nothing at all, I want to know," she said, rallying her strength. Her will had always been indomitable, and determined as she was now, the fatigue barely showed. "And when I hear you come in without coming over here, which I *will*, I'll find a way to get over to your room. *I mean it*. I want to know the minute you find something out. Understood?"

"All right, Lois, I'll let you know," he said gently. "Try to get some rest, okay?" Impulsively, he hugged her tight to his chest and rested his cheek on her hair.

For an instant, she stiffened in surprise, and then her resistance melted. Lois all but slumped against him, all of the snappishness drained from her, only fatigue in its wake. This had been something she had needed for hours now, something no one else had seemed to think mattered. She sighed heavily, gratefully, luxuriating in the relief of finally letting down her façade. Unable to help it after all this time, Lois simply let herself surrender to the one she had always been safest with and snuggled closer with the relief of simply being able to finally do so. "I'm starting to worry..." she whispered with a tone of bitter amusement.

"Lois, we'll find them," he murmured, trying to envelop her in his warmth and strength. She was so small, so fragile, and it was only when she was in his arms that he remembered it. *She's practically a force of nature when she's angry, but like this... I'd give anything to protect her. Anything.* "I promise we'll rescue them."

"Good," she said softly against the fabric of his shirt, "because you can't lie to me... If you say we'll get them back ... has to be true..." For the second time in as many days, she was struck with how absolutely right it felt to be so close to him. *Home. It feels like home.*

There was no reply, no words for how much he treasured her renewed faith in him. All he could do was hold her, letting his arms around her waist and his heart beating beneath her ear speak for him.

After a long moment, Lois forced herself to pull away and headed into her hotel room reluctantly. Just before she stepped over the threshold, their eyes met long enough for her to say softly, "Thank you. For being here ... for me..." Her gaze, so full of mixed emotions, held his for a heartbeat longer before she slipped through the doorway, closing it behind her.

Clark watched her go, and then went into his own room to change. As he flew off the balcony, he prayed as he had been praying for the last two days: *Please, let me find them. Let me find the twins safe and sound. Let them still be okay.*

Kitty rarely came into the galley when the men were playing cards, so her appearance today drew notice. She didn't look at them, however; her eyes were only for Lex, in the formal dining room just off the kitchen. "We had a problem," Kitty told him, "but I handled it."

Grant snorted, and Riley guffawed, but Lex just turned to look up at her, his eyes somehow flat and reptilian. "What kind of problem?" His voice was silky and dangerous.

"Brutus," she replied succinctly. "I don't know what he was doing around the kids all the time, but it wasn't good. He pushed them too far, and one of them threw the piano at him."

"Threw the piano?" Lex repeated, his eyebrows rising. Kitty could almost see the gears in his mind suddenly whirring to new speed as he came to the galley door.

"Told him they were vicious," Riley said under his breath. Louder, he continued, "Boss, what do you wanna do?"

Kitty was faster. "*You* don't have to do anything," she said with mock sweetness. "I already moved the incredibly dangerous *six-year-olds* into the room they were *supposed* to be in all along. They're fine, so you brutes don't have to go dragging them around and scaring

them all over again, and getting someone else killed."

"Thank you, Katherine," Lex said. "That was very neatly done. Stanford, the surveillance equipment is in place?"

"Yes, sir," he replied.

"Excellent," Lex said. "Grant, Riley, I want Brutus' body removed. Just put him overboard. The piano too - I doubt it's repairable."

The two men were a bit nonplussed, and glanced at each other. At last Grant said cautiously, "That's it? Just chuck Brutus over the side?"

"You can have a funeral service if you want," Lex said sarcastically. His dark eyes bored into the men's before he added, "Of course, you do realize *why* they killed him, don't you? He never told anyone why he was sentenced, never complained about the lack of women in Nevada. I suppose we know why, now. Throw him to the sharks, gentlemen. They're not so choosy."

Richard was supremely uncomfortable in Lana's house. The sofa he was lying on wasn't the problem, nor were the cozy furnishings in the room. No, the two things that kept him staring at the ceiling long past the hour when he should've been asleep were both troublesome thoughts.

First, the twins. For the past three years, he had been there for them most nights, tucking them in, talking to them, and reading them stories. True, he'd shared that time with Lois, but now the twins didn't have either of them. The thought of Jason and Kala, alone somewhere with only each other for comfort, gnawed at the back of Richard's brain.

The other thought that simply would not go away, no matter how hard he tried to banish it, was a comparison of Lois and Lana. As often as Richard told himself it wasn't fair to either woman, his mind kept returning to the contrast between them. Under pressure, Lois became tense and tended to lash out. Anytime she felt herself to be under attack, she fought back - and she generally won out of sheer stubborn refusal to accept defeat. Lana, on the other, would ignore anything short of a physical attack. She seemed to personify the playground advice so many parents gave their children: Don't stoop to their level.

Lana was gracious where Lois was abrasive, and yet both of them always seemed to emerge the victor of any situation. Contemplating the vast differences that led to such similar superiority, Richard still couldn't fall asleep.

And now it seemed he wasn't the only one. A moving shadow caught his eye, and Richard sat up to see Lana standing in the hallway in a long bathrobe, as if his guilty thoughts had somehow conjured her. She was completely covered from neck to ankles, but the tightly-belted robe still followed her curves, and Richard's traitorous mind seized on the image. He blushed in spite of himself, thinking, *Idiot, it's not like she can read your mind. Quit acting like teenage boy caught peering into his neighbor's windows with binoculars!*

Lana looked at him silently for a moment, her auburn hair merely dark in the dimness. "Having trouble sleeping?" she quietly asked at last.

"Yeah," Richard replied, his voice as hushed as hers. *Stop being a fool. You're just trying to distract yourself from the real problem. She's not at all interested in you...*

"Me too," Lana said, and chuckled softly. "Let me see if I can do something about that, hmm?"

Richard's eyes widened as she walked toward him and past the couch, leaving a trail of some light, floral scent in her wake. Half unable to believe what she'd just said, he watched her

disappear through the door.

After a moment he tossed the covers aside, his expression dazed, and stood up. In only an undershirt and boxers Richard padded after Lana, wondering if this were some kind of dream.

Lois moved with a deliberate slowness born of despair and the knowledge that, in her exhausted state, she could easily do something forgetful. Like climb into the bath with her blouse on - she'd done that once, after staying up for sixty hours chasing a story. But she soon sank into the comforting embrace of the hot water, immersing herself up to her chin and letting her hands fall to her sides.

Something went *clink* faintly. After thinking about it for a moment, Lois realized the sound was her engagement ring hitting the porcelain. Hot water with lavender bath oil in it would soon make the ring slide off her finger, so she took it off and set it beside the tub. Then she slid back into the water until only her eyes and nose were above it, and tried to clear her mind of everything.

It wasn't working. As tired as she was, her mind was still spinning crazily, running on fumes and fear. Where were the twins right now? Who was giving them their nightly bath, or were they being forced to endure grime along with captivity? Had they had dinner tonight? Had anyone spoken kindly to them since they'd been taken? Were they scared, right now, had that bastard left them in the dark?

The water gradually became saltier as Lois' silent tears slipped from her eyes. *I can't do this. I need to sleep; I have to be rested tomorrow.* In the makeup bag beside the bathtub were several essentials of Lois' life, and she reached for the Tylenol PM. Swallowing two pills dry, Lois set about getting herself cleaned up. No sense in soaking now that she had taken the drugs. She knew from experience that in about half an hour, she'd be totally unconscious and stay that way until dawn. Or until something woke her, preferably Clark telling her that he'd found the twins and accidentally dropped Luthor onto a sidewalk from two thousand feet.

When Lois finally slid between the sheets, her mind had gone pleasantly foggy. All the things she worried about seemed to be at a distance, and she closed her eyes gratefully, ready to sink into slumber. She was falling into a deep black well, letting sleep rise up and close over her, sweet respite...

Normally, she remained in that state until morning. But this time her nerves were still wired, and she began to rise toward awareness. For a long time she hovered in blessed darkness, and then after several hours she started to dream...

...the silver material was cool and smooth against her skin, like the finest silk and yet not like it. He was beside her, so warm, and she curled closer to him, the circular design of the bed making it easier for them to cuddle in the center of it. Kal-El, she was finally lying beside Kal-El with no more secrets between them, no more hesitation. Lois sighed softly and burrowed closer. In some way, she knew this for a dream, a memory more than six years old, but she let it comfort her anyway. Drifting as she'd drifted that morning, she felt peaceful and content and loved as she never had before. Her sleep deepened...

...he moved beside her, tucking the sheets around her. It was cool in the Fortress, not cold but cool, and even with his warm body beside her she would've been uncomfortable in just the thin nightgown. How sweet of him to do that...

...his lips brushed her forehead once. So brief a touch, and yet her desire woke purring like a sleepy cat. Lois turned her face up to his, caught his lips with her own, and kissed him with all of her adoration and satisfaction. Kal-El kissed her back softly...

...Lois ran her fingers into his thick dark hair, pulling him down closer to her. His very mouth tasted faintly sweet - was there nothing about him that wasn't perfect? She smiled against his lips, thinking, *No, of course not, he's always been breathtaking*, and kissed him again. And pulled his glasses off, tossed them aside, and kissed him again. And again...

...Kal-El drew back from her slightly, and Lois rose up with him, letting the sheets slide down around her. Her arms around his neck, his hands on her shoulders, even that simple touch making her skin tingle. Now he was sitting up on the edge of the bed, running a hand down her back, and she could feel his fingertips trace each vertebra...

...Murmuring wordlessly, Lois slipped free of the sheets and into his lap. He gasped, and she took advantage of it to deepen their kiss. Wonderful, it was as amazing as kisses in dreams should be, and a deep part of her grieved that this was only a dream, that she would wake alone. The rest of her concentrated on melting into him, her skin finally as hot as his, knowing that her nightgown was riding up her thighs and not caring. Only thin satin panties under it, but no matter. Let him see, let him touch, let him lift her up as he'd done six years ago and kiss the hollow of her hip...

...Lois drew back from the kiss to catch her breath, and started to unbutton his shirt, purring as his bare skin came into view. He caught her hands, his blue eyes serious, and murmured, "Lois, no." She silenced him with another kiss and took his hand and placed it on her breast, letting him feel her heart beating so fast and her nipple rising for him...

...Moaning into his mouth because oh, God, she missed that so much, arching her body against him, so what if this's a dream it's a good one so let it be. He tried to whisper, "We can't," and she ground her hips against him and his hand caressed her breast and she moaned again, feeling her pulse beat between her thighs that were wrapped around his waist now...

...His voice so husky, "Lois, wait... Don't, Lois, we shouldn't..." and no matter what he said, she knew he wanted her, no way not to know given where she was sitting. Ignoring her waking life, she wanted this moment for her own, if she could have him only in dreams then by God she would have him here...

...Moving her body against him seductively, the gown almost up to her hips. Holding his hand against her breast, she whispered back, "This is *my* dream, Kal-El, things have to happen the way I want in my dreams, it's only fair... Nothing else matters now but the dream, and in my dreams you don't ever say stop..."

"You're not dreaming," his voice so low, the need in it. "Lois, please... We shouldn't... Please, Lois, wake up, this isn't a dream."

Everything stopped as Lois woke up fully.

No silky silver sheets, only white cotton ones. No magnificent Fortress of Solitude, just the Hilton Garden Inn's generic décor. But the man whose lap she was straddling was real, as real as the ache in the pit of her stomach. It was all real, from the kiss, to his hand on her breast, to the feeling of him pressed against her just there. Clark's eyes were wide and his breath was fast, but he hadn't simply picked her up and moved her off of him.

Lois realized then that the damn drugs had made her think she was dreaming; Clark had come in as requested to tell her about his search, and had gotten a whole hell of a lot more than he expected.

She also realized that he was still disconcerted, so much so that he hadn't taken his hand off her breast. For a long instant, she stared at him, full of the knowledge that five little words would bring him to her with no more hesitation, words she'd breathed into his ear six years ago. *Just say it... You can have this, it worked then to conquer his fears and it will work now. Just*

look him in the eyes and whisper "I want you inside me," and you can have him...

No. No matter what the possibility felt like, the reality was that it wasn't worth making Superman an adulterer. He'd tear himself to pieces over the guilt. It wasn't worth betraying Richard like this, either. Even if she knew that things were nearly over between them. But oh dear God how she wanted it ... she was literally trembling with desire...

Lois slithered off his lap, curling herself into a ball with her back at the headboard. Her hazel eyes, so wide she looked almost frightened, never left his, never looked away from the terrible yearning in those blue depths. After a long, breathless moment spent staring at each other, Lois whispered shakily, "I guess it's *still* too late to play hard to get."

That broke the spell slightly, the memories of six years ago close to the surface of both their minds. He laughed a little, running his fingers through his hair nervously. "Yes, well, it's not like you didn't always know how I felt about you," he replied, voice just as unsteady. "Even in that first interview I was grinning like a fool every time I so much as looked at you. And you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

That felt like a knife twisted in her heart. *How can I say no to this? Why am I even trying to deny it to either of us?* Again she cursed herself mentally for having anything resembling a conscience. "I had no idea back then. And... I... I'm sorry, I got a little ... carried away... I was dreaming ... about..."

"I know," he whispered. "I dreamed about it for three years in that damned ship, heading to Krypton. I should've realized then that, even if I had a home waiting for me there, it would never *really* be home without you. Even though I was sick from kryptonite radiation on the trip home, I still dreamed of you. And I never said stop in *my* dreams, either."

Lois had to close her eyes. One more second, looking at him, and she'd lose control of herself entirely. *No more bullshit, Lane. Not when you've come this far.* "Kal-El ... I'm still in love with you. I've always loved you. Angry or not, I've never stopped."

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "Oh, Lois... I love you, too. I had guessed ... hoped ... but you don't know what it means to hear you say that face to face."

"Oh, I know what it means. I remember the first time you said it to me." Their eyes met again for a painfully intense moment that made her again regret her restraint. With a shuddery sigh, Lois pulled herself together, and finally began to say what she'd gradually realized she *had* to tell him. But it was so hard. "Kal-El, the twins..."

"I know. We shouldn't even be thinking like this while they're missing," he said, rerouting his train of thought with visible effort. "No sign yet, Lois. I looked everywhere within a hundred miles of our last lead."

It was on the tip of her tongue to correct him, but she bit it back. *He's got a point. Not now, not here, not like this. Not when we're both still shivering with need for each other. But I have to tell him they're his. He deserves to know now; I was wrong to keep it from him for so long. It doesn't leave me any less frightened of what he'll think or what he'll say, or what his bastard father will do ... but it's time to give up the last of my little secrets.*

"Kal-El," she murmured, biting her lip briefly before finally looking up at him. Her mind was made up. He had to know now. "There's something I have to tell you in the morning."

"Is it something important?" he asked nervously.

"Yes," Lois replied seriously, the look in her still-dark eyes still worried. "Something I probably should've told you a long time ago. But it just...it's been difficult to make the decision. Now's not the best time for either of us, but tomorrow..."

"I'd probably better go," he said huskily. "Before... We both need some rest."

Not like I'm going back to sleep anytime soon, she thought. "Even if it makes me sound even more like a scarlet woman ... does it make you feel any better to know I don't want you to leave?"

Her sad little chuckle was echoed by his own. "Yes and no. We both care about Richard, though. I guess this is the price of being the good guys, huh?"

"I can never claim to be one of those, especially these days," Lois told him with a pained look he completely misunderstood. "And yes, I do ... *care* ... about Richard...but..."

"I know. You're a better person than you think, Lois."

She gave a soft snort of bitter amusement at that. *Would I be an entirely awful person if I said I don't care at all at this moment? That all I want is you? All I ever wanted was you?* The yearning in her eyes was clear when she whispered back, "Actually, to be honest, I feel like I'm being more selfish than ever. And I wish I cared."

He had no reply for that, just a longing look. "Goodnight, Lois," he said as he rose awkwardly to leave.

It seemed like Lois would say something more, but she tore her gaze from him as he left.

After the hotel door closed, Lois sighed. Unable to help herself, she said it again, just to hear the words out loud. "I love you, Kal-El."

Heart and Soul

Be my friend...

Hold me

Wrap me up,

Unfold me...

I am small

And needy,

Warm me up

And breathe me...

~Sia, 'Breathe Me'

Clark leaned against the door of his own hotel room, breathing raggedly. Inwardly, he cursed his eidetic memory for filling his mind with images of Lois, both the long-cherished ones of that night in the Fortress six years ago and the more recent ones of six minutes ago.

My God, all I did was go in to give her an update, he thought, but that wasn't totally accurate. When he'd seen her lying so still, breathing so deeply, he had known almost immediately that she had taken something to help her sleep. There were times when she had come to the office still groggy after taking a dose the previous night, so waking her up should've been impossible.

He shouldn't have counted on it. She looked so beautiful and vulnerable that he couldn't help coming closer, letting his eyes feast on her. Lois, always so fragile in sleep, like a porcelain doll, an exquisite mask of perfection liable to shatter if touched too roughly. But the opposite was really true, and he knew it, but he couldn't help feel protective of her while she slept. So he had tucked the covers more closely around her, and bent to softly kiss her forehead.

And that was when the trouble started.

He could've stopped it then. He knew he was more than strong enough to hold Lois away from him. But it wasn't the strength of his arms in question, rather the strength of his heart. And he was simply too weak not to kiss her, not to respond to her desire.

It would've been both better and worse if he could've let himself think she was expecting Richard. But no, she'd said his name even while she slept. So now it was undeniable, Lois still wanted him, still loved him - for no mere physical lust would make her voice shake like that, make her eyes go so wide with longing and a little fear of her own emotions.

The memories came back, haunting him, rising from every corner of his mind. One night and one morning they'd had, and within that short time an intimacy so total it was almost frightening. He remembered it perfectly, remembered telling her how often he'd wanted to simply reveal everything, especially when he had to sit next to her at work every day and listen to her talk about Superman. Listen to how much she loved him...

Kal-El had trailed off then, realizing just how much he had been eavesdropping on her while he was Clark. Lois had merely smiled at him over the champagne and said, only half-teasing, "I guess it's a little late in the game for me to play hard to get."

That had led to them talking about Clark, and about secrets, and finally she had said, "It's kind of confusing," and he had taken her hand and looked into those amazing eyes and replied, "Not for me it isn't. For the first time in my life, everything's clear."

To see her understanding dawn, to see Lois Lane actually surprised, was priceless. She who had made a hobby of startling people with her boldness was now almost shy of him. And then the hesitancy from both of them, that initial nervousness when he blushed all the way to

the roots of his hair and whispered, "Lois, I've never..."

Thank God, she'd understood. She'd silenced him with a kiss, a gentle one. "It's okay," she'd told him. "Let me."

And he had, letting her set the pace, letting her lead the dance. No other moment in his life was as sharply etched in his memory as watching her unzip the back of the dress and let it slide down off her shoulders, revealing the delicate silk slip underneath, seeing her look at him so very seriously as he drew in his breath with wonder. At a loss for words, he'd slid one arm around her, pulled her close, and she had deftly guided his other hand to cup the swell of her breast...

Lois' mind had drifted to the same place as his, lying in bed staring at the ceiling, listening to the patter of the storm that had finally begun. It had been threatening all day, but only now had decided to make good on its promise. Every nerve twanged, her body still alive with need, as if with lightning running through her veins. And it didn't help that this tonight - which she refused to think clearly about - was bringing back her once-lost memories in even clearer detail.

Like the way his eyes had widened, the first time he'd touched her, his hands so warm, Lois herself so very conscious of the dress lying puddled on the floor beneath her. Even now, she wondered what she had been thinking, wearing blue chiffon when she could have worn anything else for him. She had been worried, wondering if she looked good enough, but the hungry rapture on his face convinced her. Lois had tried to ignore the way her hand shook as she had taken the clip out of her hair, letting the dark length of it fall past her shoulders. And all the while a little voice in the back of her mind whispered, *The first, you're the first, he will remember this forever so stop mooning like a silly teenage girl! For one time in your life you can be a goddess, so get a hold of yourself. Forget about being in awe of him for once and let him just be a man. Show him what love is ... show him how much you love him.*

He'd been so gentle, so scared of hurting her, his kisses were like whispers on her skin. She had been more bold to reassure him, running her nails over the perfect muscles of his back, letting him feel the hint of her teeth when she kissed his neck. Just getting the clothes off had been an excruciating torment, her pulse beating so hard it made her ears ring when all that was left to remove were her thin slip and his pants.

Both of us were as scared and awkward as a couple of schoolkids in the back seat of Dad's car, she thought. Me, with my sophisticated views of love and sex, reduced to wishing I could turn off the lights before he saw me - gasp! - naked. Like he didn't have x-ray vision, like he hadn't taken a peek inside my lungs before. He could have seen me naked any time he wanted.

But Lois had to admit the results were a lot better than the teenage fumbblings she'd experienced and he had completely missed. He had been a quick learner, oh yes indeed...

At the first, every time Lois had breathed in sharply he had thought he'd hurt her. His powers were supposed to be gone, but what if they weren't *entirely* gone? Besides, she was so much smaller than him, so much more delicate. He had shivered in fear of hurting her with each sudden sound, in spite of her reassurance, until she had spoken huskily into his ear and pleaded that he never stop. *Pleaded.*

Until that moment he had never dreamed of Lois sounding so needy, had never imagined she could plead for anything... Of course, since then the image of her face haunted by desire,

the sound of her voice gone molten with it, were branded into his memory.

I want you inside me...

The surprise he'd felt when she slipped onto his lap, the shock of actually... For a moment sensation had overridden all else, he even forgot to be afraid when she cried out sharply and clenched her nails in his skin. And then, holding her while she trembled, that mysterious fey look in her darkened eyes, and Lois had whispered so huskily, "Trust me, that didn't hurt me." He'd had no words then, just kissed her, let his mouth and his hands speak of his desire for her. It had been the most overwhelming pleasure of his life for a minute or two, quickly surpassed when she started to move against him...

He shuddered, pressing his palms against the wall, and willed the memory away. *I can't think about this, if I do I'll wind up walking right back into her room, and God only knows what will happen. I have to get my mind off this...*

Richard stopped in the kitchen doorway, perplexed. Reality and his half-hopeful expectation simply didn't jibe. He'd followed the lovely redhead assuming ... what, really? Now he felt like a fool.

Lana looked up at him with a knowing smirk, stirring a saucepan of milk on the stovetop. "Richard, I'm not Lois," she said quietly. No hint of rancor in her tone, but her point was made.

Richard winced. No, she wasn't Lois. If Lois had tossed off a line about helping him sleep, she surely wouldn't mean a cup of warm milk. And furthermore, Lana *also* wasn't Lois in that she was not his fiancée, and he had no right to make such presumptions. "Lana..."

"Hush. It's late, you're exhausted, I'm not exactly bright-eyed myself," she told him. "I just wanted to let you know ... things aren't any different just because I invited you into my apartment. To *sleep*. On the *couch*."

"Okay, point made," Richard muttered. "I'm sorry, all right? I just... You're right, it's late. I'm sorry I assumed ... you've got no reason to be interested in me..."

"It *must* be late," Lana said casually, tipping a few drops of vanilla extract into the milk. "Because I know you're not normally this ... this *unobservant*."

He looked blankly at her, wondering what the hell was going through her mind.

Sea-green eyes met his, the frank honesty in them incredibly attractive - and just a little frightening. "Richard, I *am* interested in you. *But* you're engaged to Lois. The fact that she's possessive and licensed to carry a gun means *nothing* next to the simple *wrongness* of trying to steal someone else's man! Furthermore, even if you were single, we barely *know* each other. I don't even kiss on the first date, Richard - and we aren't even *close* to dating."

"I know that," he replied earnestly. "Lana, I don't want you to think I'm just some kind of unfaithful, lecherous..."

"Oh, faithful and pure-minded, parading around my house in your underwear?" Lana had to bite her lip to keep from smiling.

Richard looked down. "Boxers and a t-shirt!" he protested.

"Underwear, Richard. If a woman walked around the house that way, it'd be considered obscene."

Unfortunately, Richard had a very visual imagination. "That's not obscene, that's sexy."

"On you it's obscene," Lana replied sweetly, and now the smile couldn't be hidden any longer.

"That was cold," Richard complained, trying to suck in an already flat and toned stomach.

"This is warm," Lana shot back, pouring a mug of milk and handing it to him. "Now drink

up and go to bed. To the *couch*. We have to get up early."

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered, sipping the hot, sweetened drink as Lana poured one for herself.

For a moment silence reigned between them, each alone with their own thoughts and fears. Richard wondered about the twins, about Lois - alone somewhere with Clark, who was probably the father of her children - and about the woman beside him. Lana worried that she had protested too much - did Richard guess how much she already cared for him, how his dark blue eyes sent chills down her spine?

With both of them so preoccupied, it was no surprise what happened next. Richard finished the cup of milk first and reached around Lana to set it in the sink. She drained the last sip only a second later than he had, and the way he leaned into her personal space unnerved her by how much she welcomed it. So she stole a glance at his face as she started to put her own mug in the sink, and knocked it against the counter by accident, jarring it from her grasp.

Lana gasped, already imagining the ceramic in shards on the floor. But even this late, Richard had a pilot's sharp reflexes. He caught the falling cup before it could shatter, but then he was face to face with Lana from only inches away.

One solemn moment looking into each other's eyes, one chance to back down. Neither did. Before she was even totally aware of what she was doing, Lana kissed him. Richard slipped one arm around her waist and kissed her back.

It was not the simple little brush of lips they'd both imagined. This was passion, sudden and enveloping and utterly in disregard of propriety. Lana ran her fingers into his hair and delighting in the sweetest kiss she'd had in a long, long time. Richard reveled in the tenderness of it, the slowness. It had been some time since he'd had a kiss that wasn't just a brief brush of lips or a fiercely-burning expression of momentary lust.

All good things must come to an end, and it was Lana who pulled away, breathless. "Richard..."

"I know," he breathed, and kissed her forehead once. "But later ... after all this is settled..."

"Maybe," she replied, firmly closing the door on that topic. "Right now we have more to worry about."

"Yeah, we do," Richard sighed, and then with the ghost of grin added, "So much for not kissing on the first date, Ms. Lang."

The slap surprised him, though she didn't hit him hard, just enough force to show him his error. "*Good night*, Richard," Lana said with a hint of frost. "I'm going to my room - and locking the door. I'll see you at 5 AM." With that, she turned on her heel and left.

Looking - and feeling - like an errant schoolboy, Richard slunk back to the couch, thinking, *What the hell am I doing?*

And some deep, uncensored part of his brain caught a glimpse of Lana in the hallway, and replied, *Not what you **want** to be doing...*

"I'm going to sleep," Richard muttered, dropping onto the couch and pulling the pillow over his head.

Lois was still not in control of her own mind, her defenses swamped by Tylenol PM and aching need. She'd curled herself into a ball with her face buried in the pillow, trying to muffle her pleading whimpers. *Why the **hell** did I send him away? He's all I want right now, all I ever wanted, all those sensible reasons we can't be together look so flimsy measured against this.*

And if was only that, the way we fit together perfectly, maybe I could forget all of this again somehow. Could shrug it off. But looking into his eyes that night, seeing the way he watched me with nothing but stark emotions. It felt like a dream to me then, too, from the moment I pushed things farther. From the moment I felt him move.

There were no words for the firestorm that rained down on her then, the feeling of reality and fantasy blurring as they moved so closely together, the intimate dance between them reaching its zenith as she had quickened her pace, her cheek rested against his hair. He was here, he was with her. He had chosen *her*. Had given up all just for the sake of being *hers*.

Her breath was coming in throaty whimpers now, his just as harsh, the sensations almost painful in their intensity. She just couldn't stop touching him, reassuring herself that he wouldn't disappear abruptly to leave her alone in her lonely bed with yet another dream to torment her. Until that moment her mind was still somewhat rational. Then he was caressing her breasts more boldly, the sensitive skin of her belly, and she was lost with a husky wordless murmur of need. The pleasure was almost painful, nerve endings afire.

Starting to gain surety that he wouldn't hurt her, she felt him catch her hips, responding to her arches with tentative thrusts of his own, a slow and irresistible rhythm that he even now tempered. Lois bit back a moan as she felt him deep inside, his movements rocking her within her, his hands on her hips so careful but with a degree of possessiveness she had only hoped for.

Her arms slipping around his neck in a gesture all too familiar to their flights, her cheeks and chest flushing as the intensity between them rose, Lois did something she had never done with a lover before in her life. As the tension built higher, the fire stronger every second they moved together, the urge was too strong, and as the first shivers ran through her, Lois raised her head. Wide eyes caught his and stayed riveted to their stormy cerulean depths as he moved inside her, their connection even more immediate and intimate. And in a more profound way than ever before between them, Lois fell. Plummeting in free-fall. Only this time it was with vulnerable and desperate cries of pleasure, although his arms were there to catch her as they had always been.

And in the present, she was alone in her room, with her face turned into the pillow to muffle her sounds while the storm outside her window raged. As the world exploded around her, Lois ignored the tears slipping down her cheeks. In her memories, she lay against his chest as his arms came up around her, holding her tightly. Nuzzling closer, she had felt her heart seize when he whispered *I love you* against her ear. Dear God, she loved him, too, she thought as her memories began to blur, raising the fire lit within her even higher.

He could hear her breathing rapidly in the next room, despite the thunder that had begun to rumble, and to be so close to Lois tormented him worse than the memories of the past. Memories ... if only they weren't so achingly clear...

Kal-El fled the room, seeking the sky, putting distance between himself and the swift beat of Lois' heart. The temptation was far too strong...

Temptation. Waking that next morning to find she'd rolled slightly away from him, seeing her body bared to him while she slept, he had been unable to resist the temptation of her perfect form. At first he had simply admired her, his eyes lovingly tracing her curves, but soon his hands moved to follow the path of his gaze.

He stroked the plane of her cheek, her long dark lashes lying over her porcelain skin, concealing those jeweled eyes he loved so well. And then he caressed the hollow of her throat,

where her pulse beat slow and steady, satisfied and sleepy. With each breath, her chest rose, inviting him to run his fingertips along the curve of each breast, tracing a leisurely spiral path around to the peak, which stiffened to his touch.

That had brought a smile to his lips, and smiling he had kissed her there, brushed his lips against the silken skin. Lois had sighed softly in her sleep, turning her head, arching her shoulders up toward his mouth. Slowly, gently, he had begun to suckle, his tongue touching her nipple softly, evoking a soft moan from somewhere deep in her throat. Still mostly asleep, she ran one hand into his hair, cradling his head closer.

Lois slept very soundly, as Kal-El was learning. He was free to explore her body, sometimes with feather-soft kisses, sometimes with a bolder caress. She made an inarticulate murmur of pleasure as he kissed the back of her neck, but wasn't fully awake yet. Gradually he moved from the sweet fullness of her breasts down to her softly curved belly, nuzzling his face into the curve of her flank. Such bliss, to lie there with her, Lois asleep still and in total surrender to him. He could lick a wet line of warmth from the top of her hip up to the tip of her nipple; he could stroke his fingertips across her sides until she whimpered in protest at the tickling sensation.

Her legs, so impossibly long on someone built so delicately, were utterly fascinating. The strong muscles in her thighs and calves contrasted with her dainty ankles and feet, the sleek curves suggesting power as well as grace. Kal-El adored her, kissed the top of her thigh... and then a wicked thought came to him.

Last night, the first time had gone swiftly, his fear of hurting her mixed with his overwhelming desire. Neither of them had been exhausted by it, and Lois had roused him to passion again with something he'd never expected. Her raven-black hair lying against his thigh, her mouth... He shuddered to remember. The sensations had been so incredible, so far beyond anything he ever imagined he could feel. Now his blue eyes darkened at thought of bringing her such pleasure. Surely she couldn't sleep through *that*...

Lifting her had been so easy, even without his powers, Lois was so light. Her legs curling naturally around his shoulders, he'd kissed the thin, soft skin of her inner thighs first. Anxiety gave way to desire; could there be anything more erotic than this, his breath on the most sensitive part of her body? And then to taste deeply, feel her shudder, see those eyes fly open wide with shock even as she cried out huskily...

In the present, high above the earth, Kal-El tossed his head back and pressed his hands to his eyes, trying in vain to block out a vision that was branded in his mind. *Please, no more*, he begged of his faultless memory. Oh, his recall was perfect in all five senses: her breathy cries, her hips arching helplessly in his hands, the faint trace of desire perfuming her skin, her hazel eyes stained with need, and the taste of her... *No more specters of the past, no more reminders of what I gave up. I can't bear this, not now.* The rain beat against him, but could not cool his skin or his desire.

The past overwhelmed him again, the memory he'd been trying hardest to avoid. His tongue had teased Lois until she cried out in desperation, her nails clawing his shoulders to pull him up to her. "Please," her voice rough and needy, "please, Kal-El ... please, I need you..."

He had never heard her beg for anything before that night, never imagined the pleading note in her husky voice or the craving it woke in him. Kal-El had slipped one arm under her shoulders to support his weight and caught her hip to steady her. Looking into Lois' eyes, those eyes he thought he knew so well, seeing the wanton hunger there, hearing her whisper, "Yes, please, oh yes, *please*," he had taken her then, gasping at the molten heat of her desire.

Lois' eyes had slipped closed, a long low moan breaking from her throat, as she shivered and wrapped her legs around his waist. "My God, Kal-El," she'd murmured against his ear when she could speak, lifting her hips to his next thrust. His hesitancy forgotten, he had done as he had dreamed of doing, spurred on by Lois' breathy cries of rapture. Even then he had held back a little of his strength, though with every move Lois sought to draw him closer, pull him deeper.

The first two times the previous night, Lois had mostly been in control of their lovemaking, and that experience had been beyond Kal-El's most explicit dreams. Still, though, he had expected her to take the lead - had expected to offer her his tenderness and inexperience. Now, though... Lois was helpless, utterly surrendered to his will, and he found that more erotic than he could ever have imagined. This woman, whom he loved for so many reasons but chiefly for her fiery independence, now writhed under his touch and begged wantonly for more. Kal-El would never have guessed how Lois' craving and capitulation affected him; inflaming his desire for her as well as his need to protect her and care for her. Love and lust had twined together in his heart as Kal-El watched her stormy eyes, his own growing hazy with passion.

Her breathing was all the swifter now, almost shuddering painfully in the present as her mind swept back over that moment. Eyes closed tight as her brow furrowed deeply, the teeming images of the last time they made love tearing at her exquisitely. She was biting her lip so hard, her dark hair tossed and rumped again the white sheets, soft sounds escaping her nonetheless...

The searing look in his eyes that once again trapped and held her as thoroughly as his body held her own. That night on her balcony, all of the almost childish fantasies she'd had of this man, from the first time her gaze had locked with his own, were nothing compared to the reality that they now arrived at. Never had she thought this possible, that he could ever want her with the same unbearable intensity that she had always known for him. But just one gaze in those cerulean depths ... oh God, the expression on his face... To see the same need in those eyes, to feel him closer and closer, deeper and deeper, enveloping her, driving her utterly mad in sensation...

Even now she could hear her own voice, so breathy and broken and desperate as she urged him on, "Please, oh dear God, *please*... Kal-El... *Fill me up* ... I need more..."

No denying the end of it, the force of emotion and sensation that threatened to drown him in shattering intensity. Kal-El had gone so far beyond anything he could ever have imagined or dreamed that words would have failed if he'd ever tried to describe that morning. The only light in the Arctic pre-dawn hours was the faint illumination of the crystals themselves, their glow limning Lois' face and gleaming on the tears that began to slip from her eyes.

Tears? Oh yes, this was a moment so sublime he could weep for the perfection of it, lost in a sea of passion, so close now... The only experience that came anywhere close to this was flying, the moment of intense pressure and striving urgency just before he broke the sound barrier and soared. Lois threw her head back, her body arching completely up off the bed to meet him, her nails raking his back as she tried to pull him even closer.

And then, the finale, at last Kal-El had found a force stronger than himself, more powerful than the sun's hot rays - and found it in the arms of Lois Lane. He drove into her one more time, shuddering with the strength of sensation. Lois caught the back of his neck, pulling

his face down to hers, and he felt the dampness of her tears when she pressed her cheek against his and cried out softly, lost in a fog of passion...

Memory. All a memory, more than six years old, and the reality was this: a man not from this earth, shivering at the mercy of his perfect recall as he hovered far above his adopted planet's surface. Even the thin, cold air at this height didn't chill his ardor or slow his racing heart.

I can never forget, he thought, feeling tears on his own face, freezing in the upper atmosphere. No matter what I do or where I go, she'll always be in my heart. Even if she never comes back to me - just because she loves me doesn't mean she will - Lois will always be mine...

Revelations and Famous Last Word

The new room was smaller than the grand ballroom, but much cozier. Kala and Jason cuddled together in the bed, arms protectively around each other, the comforter pulled up to their ears. It had taken them awhile to fall asleep last night, and Kala in particular had woken up several times for no reason apparent to the two men watching the closed-circuit television.

"I'm not sure," Stanford said, wishing Lex would leave so he could take another gulp of Mylanta. Just knowing about the kryptonite hidden in the vent above the bed made him queasy; this was no way to treat children, half-alien or otherwise. "They were complaining about headaches and blurry vision last night. And they seem not to be sleeping well."

"Inconclusive," Lex murmured, watching the pair with a keen aquiline gaze. "It might be affecting them, it might not. The sample's too small."

"We didn't want to risk more," Stanford replied, thinking, *I didn't want to use more. I really don't want them hurt - but what can I do?* "Prolonged exposure could have unforeseen effects."

"Hmm." Lex's mind was now obviously occupied elsewhere, and Stanford returned to nervously watching the two children and counting the minutes until his boss left the control room.

When Lois thought back on that morning later, she wasn't even sure what made her wake in the half-instant before it happened. As her eyes opened slowly, still dozy from the fog of the Tylenol PM, Lois heard the keycard in the lock, and then the door opened. She blinked hazily as she slightly tossed her loose locks out of her face, still more than half asleep, and saw the broad-shouldered shadow filling the doorway. He had come back after all, several hours having passed. Unable to help herself, she lay there on her stomach and watched him move forward, heat flaring within her even as she felt a chill of nervousness. *Dammit, Kal-El, I hope you know what you're doing coming back in here... I only have so much self-control.*

Last night's storm of memories and emotions circled back to haunt her, and she couldn't control the sultry smile that rose to her lips even as she shaded her eyes from the light spilling into the room. Anxious as she was, fully aware of how wrong it would be, a part of her had hoped desperately that he would return to finish what they'd started.

"Lois?" His low, concerned voice sent a spike of shock down her spine as Lois snapped fully awake. *Oh my God, you stupid woman. It's Richard, not Kal-El. Oh, shit. Thank God I didn't open my big mouth and say...* Her mind raced to the previous night, hoping nothing in the room seemed amiss, even as she reflexively clutched the sheets to her chest.

The room was black when Richard stepped inside, having used the keycard the desk clerk had given him. Thankfully the room had been reserved in his name as well, or he would've had to wait while the clerk rang Lois. The way *she* slept, he'd be here 'til noon waiting for her to answer.

He'd seen Clark in the lobby, nodding off in front of a newspaper and looking as though he hadn't slept a wink. Richard's hand on his shoulder started the poor man so badly he almost leaped out of his chair, and hurried to get his own room packed up so they could all leave. *Poor devil. He looks as tired and achy as I feel - the Lang couch was not designed for comfort.*

And his awakening this morning had been far less than pleasant. Perry had called, seeking Lois, and the editor was less than pleased to learn that Richard had spent the night at Lana's

apartment.

Once in the room he should've shared with Lois last night, though, Richard had to pause. Something just seemed ... off. She was sitting up hastily, drawing the blankets up around herself and wincing in the bright light coming from the hall. "Richard?"

He didn't answer right away. Richard's journalist instincts were on high alert. The covers were tangled, as if Lois had spent a restless night thrashing in her sleep, and her hair was similarly ruffled. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first glance, though... "Hey, honey. It's almost seven. If you want to start getting dressed, I'll pack up for you."

Lois' voice was still a little rusty with sleep, her eyes still closed against the sunlight. "Yeah ... thanks, Richard." He had reached the bedside by then, and bent to kiss her forehead, noticing the way she stiffened slightly at his touch. Something was *definitely* up. "I hadn't realized what time it was. I need a shower before we go," Lois muttered.

"Give me a minute," Richard said. "I need to shave - my razor's in your bag."

Lois blinked at him and started ask a question, realizing only then that they'd never quite gotten around to packing separately. She wouldn't have thought yesterday that she would be spending the night with *Clark*, not *Richard*...

The thought made her blush, which Richard fortunately didn't see. He had already gone into the bathroom, annoying stubble making his face itch - this was the last time he went *anywhere* without a razor. The absolute *last*.

As he stretched his neck, running the Norelco over his chin, Richard caught a glimpse of gold in the mirror. He turned, frowning, to see the ring he'd given Lois sitting on the edge of the tub. *She always does that*, he told himself firmly, ignoring the chill of apprehension at the nape of his neck. *She's lost some weight the last couple months; it'll slip off in the shower, or when she washes her hands. You always find it lying by the sink, so don't let your guilty conscience read anything into it this time.*

Richard tucked the ring into his pocket, intending to give it back to Lois later, and finished shaving. If only the nagging feeling of wrongness could be as quickly disposed of as stubble...

Lois was waiting outside the door when he opened it, leaning against the wall and seeming lost in thought - and wasn't *that* odd, her reluctance to come into the room while he shaved? She even startled slightly when he came out and said her name, her thoughts obviously a million miles away. And she looked ... in the nightgown that fell only to mid-thigh, with her wavy hair lying in ruffled waves over her shoulder, Lois looked utterly seductive. Why then was she so distant, so suddenly shy of his touch? Hadn't they maneuvered around each other's morning routines in smaller spaces than this, with the twins underfoot as well? Richard chose not to reflect on that as he watched her go to take her turn, either, telling himself they had more important things to worry about than Lois acting a little odd.

While Lois hurried into a quick shower, Richard started picking things up around the room. From the looks of things, she hadn't bothered to completely unpack last night. Getting ready to leave was fairly simple - all Richard had to do was put away her clothes from yesterday; gather up her hairbrush, keys, Tylenol PM, and put them next to her purse; and then find her boots. That was Lois' one annoying traveling habit; she tended to kick her shoes off and let them lie wherever they fell, which had been the cause of several near-falls and much cursing on Richard's part.

Richard knelt beside the bed, fishing one black boot out from underneath, and looking around for its mate. Glancing under the bedside table, he froze...

What the hell are Clark's glasses doing on the floor? At first the thought was just absurd, but then a suspicion began to form in Richard's mind, one that explained the strange feeling he'd had since he walked into the room. Rumpled sheets, tousled hair, engagement ring hidden ... and the twins' father's glasses on the floor beside Lois' bed.

Picking up the glasses slowly and slipping them into his pocket, Richard muttered aloud, "I'll give her one chance to explain this. One."

Downstairs, Clark was giving Lana a slightly confused look. Packing up his own room had only taken a few minutes, and he was on his way to check out when he met Lana in the lobby. She'd been oddly hesitant, distracted and uncomfortable talking to him. *What on earth happened to make Lana act this way?* Clark wondered.

The elevator dinged behind them, and Lana looked past him, wincing slightly. "Hmm. I think I'll meet you outside, okay?"

"Sure," Clark replied bemusedly, heading for the counter to check out. Now he could hear Lois' heartbeat behind him, and further speculation on the cause of Lana's distress was cut off by his own discomfort in Richard's presence.

He couldn't help seeing Richard walk up to the counter next to him, nor keep from noticing the way Lois avoided his gaze. The air around her seemed entirely too warm, and Clark tugged at his collar as he handed one clerk his credit card and room key.

Richard placed his MasterCard on the counter in front of the other clerk, giving the young woman a brief distracted smile as he asked Lois for the room key. His mind, like Clark's, was elsewhere until Lois caught both their attention by muttering a curse. "Dammit. I don't have it - did you see it in the room, Richard?"

"No," he replied, giving her a look. "Good Lord, Lois, did you lose *another* one?"

"I've only had to pay for about ten of those stupid things," Lois muttered under her breath, then directed a bright and slightly frazzled smile at the clerk. "I'm sorry, I guess you'll have to replace the key for room 306."

"306?" the other clerk said, puzzled. She held up the keycard Clark had handed to her, and continued, "But it's right ... here... Oh."

Lois glared at her; Richard stared at Clark; the two clerks looked at all three of them with raised eyebrows, and Clark slowly took his own keycard out of his *other* pocket. "Um..."

"That is the last goddamn straw," Richard growled. He hadn't confronted Lois in their room, wanting to wait until they were alone, but this was too much. "Somehow I'm not surprised by *her*, but I thought better of *you*, Kent."

"Shut your mouth, *White*," Lois spat. "You don't know the first thing about..."

Richard whirled back on her, his patience evaporated. "No, this is about the *fifth* thing. One, the bed was wrecked. Two, you're wearing the sexy nightgown, and you looked rumpled. Three, the ring I gave you was hidden in the bathroom. Four, *his* glasses on the floor! C'mon, Lois - entertain me. How're you gonna defend *that*? Try a new excuse - I'm tired of the ones you've been using for months now."

His vehemence had shocked everyone into silence; even Lois was open-mouthed at the conclusions he'd drawn. Only now did she remember pulling Clark's glasses off last night in the depths of her 'dream'. And in spite of how bad this all looked, in spite of how difficult explaining herself was going to be, she couldn't stop a traitorous thought from running through her mind. *If I'm going to be damned for it, I really wish I'd actually **done** it.*

"You stop entertaining the staff and *pay for the goddamn room*," Lois growled back

finally, her fury barely checked, and continued only in her mind, *You wanna paint me as a Scarlet Woman, we can do it **outside**.*

As if Clark had heard her thought, he finally shook himself free of his horrified surprise and spoke. "Lois, go wait in the car. Richard, we'll discuss this outside."

Richard turned back to him, ready with a scathing retort, and the words died on his lips. Clark had unconsciously drawn himself up to his full height, and some deep instinct spoke in Richard's mind. *He's bigger than you ... dunno why you never noticed that before, but he's taller, broader through the shoulders, and that's muscle under the secondhand suit. He could pound you like a tent stake, so maybe you ought to shut up and **think** for a second here...*

"No," Lois replied sharply. "I'm not gonna let him stand there and talk about me like that. Or *you*, for that matter."

Another uncomfortable realization for Richard. This wasn't the woman he'd known and loved, lain down beside and worked with, for the past several years. Sleeping Beauty was wide awake - and furious.

"Lois, wait for us in the car," Clark restated gently. For the first time that morning, his eyes met Lois', and in spite of the circumstances, a spark leapt between them. "I'll handle this - we don't need to waste time bickering. Just go wait in the car, honey."

Defiance in her eyes and the set of her jaw, but against his calm insistence she finally let out a sighing breath and rolled her eyes in defeat. Still growling under her breath, Lois turned and left, sending one more venomous glance Richard's way as she did so.

Outside the hotel, Lana had realized that she didn't know what type of car Lois and Clark had rented. So she waited just outside the doors, hoping to just sort of fall in with the trio when they walked out and follow them to the car, not meeting anyone's gaze. Even Clark suspected something now...

The automatic doors slid open, and Lois stormed out of them, radiating frustrated fury. *She knows* was the first thought on Lana's mind, but the reporter didn't even glance her way, heading out into the parking lot.

If it's not that, then what has her so angry? Lana followed, having to hurry to keep up. "Um, Lois?" she began tentatively.

Lois' head whipped around so fast her dark hair flew out as if it were in some kind of shampoo commercial. A faintly puzzled look crossed her face, and she said distractedly, "Oh. Lana. Hi." She slowed down a little as she spoke, but kept heading out toward the far end of the parking lot.

So she doesn't know, Lana thought, biting her lip. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

A blunt "No" was her only answer, and she was forced to quicken her stride again. Guilt gnawed at Lana; she hated to think about kissing Richard, hated to be jealous of his ring that Lois wore - though not at the moment - and before her conscience could tear her heart in half, she *had* to say something.

Lana reached for Lois' wrist and thought better of it at the last second. "Lois..." she began, and her courage faltered.

The reporter cocked her head, staring curiously at the redhead. "Yes?" Her voice was clipped and impatient, her mind clearly elsewhere.

"Listen, I don't feel right about this..." Lana trailed off again before taking a deep breath and forcing herself to meet Lois' sharp hazel stare. "I wanted to apologize to you... I didn't mean to, it was sort of an accident, but ... IkissedRichardlastnight. And I'm really sorry about

it." The actual words came out in a rush, and Lana winced, waiting for Lois' reaction.

Silence. Lois stared. After a moment she blinked. "You kissed Richard."

"Yes." Lana closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable explosion. Lois would probably slap her... No, this was Lois. She'd probably punch her.

"That's all? You just kissed him?"

"Of course that's all," Lana replied, affronted. "I'm not... Look, I didn't intend to do *that* when I brought him to my apartment, Lois - I just didn't trust him by himself. I didn't think... I didn't mean to, I just ... kissed him."

Fleeting emotions crossed Lois' face: disbelief, irritation, possessiveness, and then a cynical kind of acceptance. "Fine. Good for you." With that, the shorter woman turned on her heel and stalked over to a burgundy PT Cruiser.

Lana's green eyes widened. That was all? She'd expected a much more violent outburst, based on Lois' reaction to seeing her talking to Richard that day in the *Planet* offices. "Something else is going on," Lana muttered, and wondering what it was, she followed the other woman to the car.

After paying for the rooms in stony silence, Richard and Clark went outside. Richard, actually, would've continued their confrontation in the lobby, but Clark caught his elbow and gently but irresistibly propelled him out the door. Yet more confirmation of the fact that Clark was far stronger than he looked. That kept Richard silent in spite of his seething resentment and suspicion. *She let him call her honey? And she actually obeyed him?!*

Once outside - and neither of them saw Lois and Lana sitting in the car at the far side of the parking lot - Clark turned to face Richard and spoke in a low, serious tone. "Look, I know you and I have some ... issues to work out, but the priority now is the twins. Luthor would want us to be divided; we're less effective that way. Once Jason and Kala are safe, you and I can ... arm-wrestle in a bar or something, but 'til then we have to be on the same team."

No one else could've pulled that off, but Richard did sincerely like and respect Clark. It also helped to know that the man was honest as the day was long. And utterly incapable of lying... "Fine," Richard replied, banking the simmering fires of jealousy and guilt for now. "For me to be a team player, though, you have to answer one question."

Clark sighed. "Okay, go ahead."

"Have you been sleeping with Lois?"

Though he had been expecting something of the sort from the moment he realized he'd handed the clerk the wrong keycard, Clark was still shocked by the bluntness of Richard's tone. And by the implication that this was some sort of *affair*, not the accidental collision of dream and reality that last night had been. "What? *No!* Richard, I can't believe you'd think that of me *or* Lois!" His denial was made even more fervent by his longing for Lois, by the desire both physical and emotional that he had denied since his return.

The sincerity of Clark's reply, the vehemence of his moral outrage, made Richard feel even guiltier for having kissed Lana last night. And stung by that awareness of his own duplicity, he added vindictively, "Have you ever slept with her?"

Clark's eyes widened, and before he could consider his response he blurted out, "You said *one* question." *Oh, no. That was almost as good as saying yes ... sometimes I really wish I could lie...* "Um, Richard, I didn't mean... I mean, I wasn't trying to say..."

Richard held up one hand to block any further explanation. "I get it, Kent. Enough. That's all I needed to hear. Just ... enough. You're right, we can deal with all of this later. Let's just get

to the car."

"But I..."

"The car, Kent. I don't want to talk about this anymore. Let's just get on with it, okay? The kids need us. All of us."

Reluctantly, feeling the weight of everything left unsaid, Clark led him to the PT Cruiser.

Lana sat down gingerly behind Lois in the driver's seat, and the dark-haired woman could see her concerned gaze in the rearview mirror. "So, what did you guys find?" she asked, effectively forestalling any more discussion of Lana's transgressions. Lois found it hard to believe anyone could be so upset over a simple kiss.

Pausing to organize her thoughts, Lana delivered the bad news. "We didn't find a thing. There's some evidence Luthor has used one of the islands up there at some point, but not recently. Only a few buildings big enough to hide a person, and we checked those - the locks are rusted shut."

"What about underground?" Lois asked.

"Richard thought of that," Lana replied. "But the water table is so high, and the area so marshy, that it would be very hard to build anything below ground. Still, there are no signs of recent human activity on any of the islands we searched."

Lois swore under her breath. "He misled us *again*, the conniving bastard," she growled. "When I get my hands on Luthor, he's a dead man."

Lana opened her mouth to say something comforting, and then saw Lois' hazel eyes in the mirror. She was absolutely serious - this woman was utterly frank about her intention to commit cold-blooded murder. No one could say she wasn't provoked, but Lana still felt a chill down her back.

Just then, the two women noticed the men leaving the hotel. They stopped, and not for a friendly chat. Lana's brow furrowed, and she asked aloud, "What's that all about?"

Lois' eyes narrowed. "Richard's damn guilty conscience." She started rolling her window down, prepared to lean out and yell something to get their attention, but just then Richard held up his hand in a gesture that was undeniably *stop*. Clark seemed unsure of himself as he walked toward the car, glancing at Richard worriedly. Lois sighed then, shaking her head. "Oh, for the love of God. What have you gone and done now, Mr. Morality?" Lana heard her murmur to herself.

No answers were forthcoming as the two men got into the car, their silence awkward. Clark met Lana's surprised look with a guilty expression quite foreign to his features, and Richard didn't even look Lois in the eyes as he sat down in the passenger seat beside her. "All right, everyone," he said, his voice tightly controlled. "Priorities. Let's go get some breakfast, trade information, and figure out where to go from there. Sound good?"

"Um, sure," Clark replied.

"Fine by me," Lana added.

That left Lois. She didn't look at Richard, either. "There's an IHOP up the road. Let's go."

The drive, though short, was nearly unbearable. The front seat seethed with tension; the back was rife with guilt and questions. Once they actually arrived at the restaurant, a smiling waitress told the sullen group, "My name is April, and you all need to cheer up." She actually managed to startle a chuckle out of them before seating them in a booth.

Lois felt a little nauseous and excused herself before April could take their drink order. Clark spoke first. "Let's have an endless pot of coffee, and to balance that out, a glass of

orange juice apiece - sound good?"

Richard shook his head sharply, mouth twisting up in a wry grin. "No way. Lois *hates* orange juice. She can't even look at the stuff."

Perplexed, Clark said, "But she used to drink it freshly squeezed - even bought a juicer for her office."

"Not anymore," and now the smugness in Richard's tone was undeniable. "She drank so much orange juice when she was pregnant, she *loathes* it now."

Lana shot him a dirty look and kicked his ankle under the table. They chose the coffee instead and started browsing the menu. When Lois didn't show up to order, Richard sighed heavily. "I'm gonna go find her," he muttered. "Send the search dogs if I'm not back by the time the food gets here."

"Ah, Richard, don't you think *I'd* better go after her?" Lana asked too politely. "She *is* in the ladies' room."

He met her sea-green gaze for a moment, seeing the accusation there, and replied, "I'm just going to knock on the door, not invade the sanctity of the women's restroom. I got over wondering if you had fountains and carpet in there back in sixth grade." With that he left the table.

"Interesting," Lana said aloud, turning to look at Clark. "Well?"

"Well, what?" He tried to look innocent, suddenly nervous, staring intently at his coffee.

"Well, what happened last night?"

At that question, coming unexpectedly from Lana, Clark dropped the whole packet of sugar into the mug unopened. "Darn!"

"Clark..."

"What are you talking about, Lana?"

"*Something* happened," she replied. Lana couldn't keep the guilty, pained look off her face, but she also couldn't stop herself from inquiring further. "Something happened to all of us last night - we weren't this edgy yesterday. Lois is acting ... absolutely bizarre, and..."

"That's normal for Lois," Clark assured her. Then he realized what he'd said, and added, "Well, not bizarre, but you know she doesn't conform to expectations."

"You've got that right," Lana sighed, stirring cream into her coffee. "I'd expected her to sock me one when I told her I kissed her fiancé."

Clark turned to gape at her as Lana calmly sipped from the mug. "You *what*?"

"Kissed Richard. By accident."

"How do you *accidentally* kiss someone?" Clark was so caught up in indignation that he wasn't even aware of the double standard until Lana turned her sharp gaze on him.

"Why don't you tell me, Clark? And while you're at it, you can explain why she calls you Mr. Morality - and why you're more upset over me kissing Richard than she was. All she said was, 'Good for you'. *That's* why I'm asking you what happened last night."

Lois was not in the ladies' room. Richard had knocked, but gotten no answer, and started to panic. This couldn't have been Luthor's plan, could it? To kidnap Lois right out from under their noses? Had his goons been stalking them ever since they'd arrived, just waiting for a chance to catch Lois alone?

He'd opened the door long enough to look for her boots, seeing the room empty. And then, his heart beating painfully fast, he headed back to the table to alert the others. That was when he glimpsed Lois' dark hair and her long black coat through the window. But what was

she doing ... outside...?

A plume of smoke answered his question. The first threads of panic turned instead to anger, and the mystery of last night roared back into the forefront of his mind. Richard stormed out the front door and up to Lois just as she took the cigarette from her lips again and exhaled.

Richard snatched the cigarette out of Lois' hand and threw it as hard as he could. "What the hell are you doing?" he snapped, grabbing for Lois' elbow.

She yanked her arm out of his hand, snarling back as she glared holes in him, "Get your hands *off* me! Who the *hell* do you think you are?! Did it occur to you I might *need* a smoke with everything that's going on?"

"Your fiancé, last I checked," Richard replied hotly. "And you might very well *need* one after last night, for all I know. No one ever explained to me how his glasses wound up on the floor of your room!"

Her jaw dropped, hazel eyes suddenly bright with immediate wrath. "How *dare* you!" she snapped. "You're jumping at shadows because *you* feel guilty!"

"What the hell..."

"I know you kissed Lana!" Lois spat, leaning up to fire the words directly into his face. "You *always* do this when you screw up! You can't just admit to what you did, you have to make *me* seem just as fallen from grace!"

"This has *nothing* to do with that," Richard argued back. "Yeah, I kissed Lana - she must've told you. Damn Midwestern morals... But it sure looks like you did a whole helluva lot more than just *kiss* Clark, and not by accident, either! How *did* he get your room key, Lois?"

"I *gave* it to him, you moron!" Lois was now walking a fine line between the truth and a lie, and though she wasn't entirely innocent, she did have the fact of the Tylenol PM and thinking last night was a dream on her side. "If you really *must* know, he was checking out a couple more places. He insisted that I get some rest, and I agreed *only* if he came in and made a report!"

"And how does that explain his glasses on the floor?" This time Richard managed to grab her arm, and drag her bodily away from the window, out of line of sight of the restaurant patrons.

Richard, just drop this, damn you! I don't want to be having this fight with you! Not now. Why can't you see that? "He carries a spare pair - they probably fell out of his jacket pocket," Lois said stubbornly. She'd resisted him pulling her until she realized why, then took a few steps on her own and shook her arm free of his hand again.

"Why do I suddenly smell a lie?" Richard asked rhetorically. "There's no way his glasses could've gotten up underneath the table if they just fell out of his pocket, Lois."

"Fine," she blazed, angry enough to give him the truth - or most of it. "If you really *must* know, I took some Tylenol PM to help me sleep. When he came in, I wasn't even awake - I thought I was dreaming. I didn't even know who he *was*. So I kissed him. There you go." Lois had raised her hands to shoulder height in explaining last night, and now she let them fall to her sides abruptly in defeat. It was only after looking away briefly that she continued. "Happy now? You were right, I'm no better than you. You 'accidentally' smooched the cheerleader; I gave Kent the shock of his life. We're even."

"Nothing like the shock he's gonna get when he finally finds out those kids are *his*," Richard retorted.

"**What?!**" Lois' head whipped back toward him as she stared with absolute horror. How in

the *hell* had he figured that out, unless he knew that Clark and Superman were...

"Oh, come off it, Lois! That *wasn't* the first time you ever kissed him!" Richard couldn't seem to figure out what to do with his hands; afraid to touch her, and not wanting to ball them into fists, either. Either sign of aggression would likely be met by the infamous Lane elbow being introduced to his chin at speed. "Paris, six years and nine months ago. About a month after Niagara, just a few weeks after Superman disappeared without a word. You were in Paris searching for the hero; Clark was there starting his trip around the world."

"Wha... what? *Clark* was in Paris?" She didn't add *When?* Lois blinked as her mind momentarily switched gears; this was news to her until this moment. *No. Oh God, no... Tell me that I didn't miss him back then by just a day, a few hours...*

And she was unaware of how damning her suddenly stunned expression seemed as she came to this realization.

"Stop playing games," Richard demanded. "When the hero broke your heart, your best friend was there to help you mend it. It all makes sense - no one saw you with him in the city, so you couldn't have been together long. Just long enough for the twins. And then he was gone, too, and he'd left you worse off than Superman did. No wonder you were so furious at him when he showed back up here - no wonder he's so scared of you, when he could probably pick you up one-handed."

Lois couldn't decide whether to be relieved or horrified. *It just keeps spiraling out like a nightmare. He's so close to the truth, and so very far away. This is 98% fiction he's spinning, but the answer he got from it...*

"They have to be his - you're not the kind to get yourself knocked up by some one-weekend stand and then have the kids. You'd only go through with the pregnancy and raising the children if their father meant more to you than that. I *know* the story's a lie. There's never been a Garen at the *Quotidienne*, Lois. And as for the four guys who do work there who *say* they slept with you, they're all lying. I figured *that* out the year I met you."

Fear for Kal-El's secret and shock at Richard's conclusion had Lois reeling, the world seeming to spin crazily around her. She couldn't bear that nauseous, unbalanced feeling, and so locked on to the one thing that steadied her, the one emotion she could always cope with: anger and outrage at Richard's prying, the implications of his investigation. It didn't help that his remark reminded her of all the whispers at the *Quotidienne* when her pregnancy began to show, all the cold looks and snide comments about Superman's girlfriend getting pregnant the day he disappeared... It was little wonder she'd eventually gone back to the *Daily Planet*, unable in the end to escape the rumors.

Richard's face went numb, and his ears rang from the force of the slap. "How *dare* you meddle in my past, you sonofabitch! I've told you more than once it was *none of your business!*" Lois yelled, arm cocked back to strike him again, eyes wild. "I've heard enough whispers about being a whore enough in the last six years, I don't need to hear it aloud from you, Richard White! And I sure as hell don't need to be reminded of all that bullshit *now*, with the twins missing! You *bastard!*"

In spite of the hectic rage in her voice, in spite of the furious speed with which she'd lashed out, Richard didn't miss seeing the tears welling up in her eyes. There was no saving what he'd said so far, no way to take it back and apologize, try to state it in a way that didn't wound Lois to depth of her soul. Too late for that now, and Richard pushed on instead of backing down. "Lois, he *needs* to know," he insisted, as if she'd merely confirmed his suspicions by trying so vehemently to deny them. "He *deserves* to know they're his, especially

since he's helping us find them."

Lois was still too hurt, too scared, and too furious to hear reason, however. "They're *my* kids, it's *my* life, and *my* decision! Why can't you *ever* just stay the hell *out* of it?! Why can't *any* of you just stay out!"

"You're right!" Richard shot back. "You're absolutely right! There's never been a single goddamn thing between us that's *ours* - you never ever *pretended* to make it *our* family! It was *you* and *your kids* - and me, the stand-in for *both* men who left you! Hell, the worst part is, you probably never even realized you were doing it." His voice lost some steam, realizing dawning cold and bitter. "You were never gonna marry me - those kids were never gonna be Whites. I was never more than a walk-on in your life. I don't even *know* you, do I?"

"Richard, at some point I would've..." Lois faltered. She couldn't reply to his question, either; the answer was self-evident.

"You would've done it because it was comfortable," he said quietly. "You would've done it if your mother and Perry hinted at it long enough. You would've done it when the twins started asking why Mommy and Daddy weren't married. If it was just up to you, we would've gone on the way we were forever." Richard sighed. "Or until the man you really love walked back into your life. I've just been a placeholder..."

"Richard, you don't understand," Lois pleaded, her eyes full of agony. "I didn't want it to be like this..."

"Neither did I," he replied sadly. "I just ... maybe we shouldn't be together."

"Maybe we shouldn't," and Lois' voice was even softer than his.

For a long moment they merely looked at each other, a man and a woman who had shared life's trials and joys for three years; who had raised two children from toddlers to kindergarten; who had worked, loved, laughed, and argued their way along the journey together for so long that they were both, in spite of making their living with words, mute at this parting of ways.

Then Richard sighed and said, "Let's go find the twins." He lowered his gaze and turned to walk inside.

As he stepped into the doorway, Lois hung back for a moment and watched him thoughtfully. *And there's something different about **him** now, too. Something beyond me and the twins and this mess we've found ourselves in. But has he even acknowledged it?* Softly, she mused aloud seven words, making Richard spin around so fast that he never felt the door swing back and smack his shoulder.

"You're in love with Lana, aren't you?"

How Do You Love

*And the truth that you'll find
Will always be
The truth you hide.
So how do you love,
How do you love?
When your angels can't sing,
And your world is still
Lacking of me?*

~Collective Soul, *How Do You Love?*

Lois' hands clenched on the wheel as she drove back to the airport. She and Richard had wisely decided to part ways after their fantastic argument - he and Lana were taking a cab to the airport and would fly the seaplane back to Metropolis.

Clark and Lois were planning to drop the rented car off, then fly back to Metropolis themselves. During breakfast - *most uncomfortable meal ever*, Lois thought, remembering the pained silence that had made her stuffed French toast taste like ash - her phone had rung. Ms. Mackenzie had come through for them, in spite of having to dodge her boss repeatedly. And as it turned out, Luthor's threat had been sent from Metropolis. The docks, to be specific.

That bastard lead us all on a wild goose chase, Lois had snarled after thanking Ms. Mackenzie and hanging up. *The island was a false lead.*

Either that or he's talking about the yacht, Lana had replied. *It's big enough to be an island.* With that thought, the four had finished up the meal quickly and left the restaurant. Lois smiled a bit at the recollection of Richard's guilty glance at Lana; her question had rocked him, and though he couldn't reply coherently, she didn't need him to. The answer was obvious.

The four of them in a car together was a very bad idea at that point, so Lois had left first and let them wait for a cab. Now Richard and Lana were somewhere behind them, and Lois and Clark would soon be in the air - or more correctly, Lois and Superman. And the silence in the car was almost as tense as the silence at the table had been.

Lois felt her stomach churning, breakfast unsettled by her nerves. Seeking for something, anything, to say to the man beside her, the raven-haired reporter muttered, "Right about now I really wish you could home in on their heartbeats like you can mine."

Kal-El smiled sadly. "I wish I could, too. But Lois... I worked with you every day for a couple of years. I got to know the rhythm of your heart very well. The twins... I've only known them a few months. And I don't see them as often. I tried, that first day, but I just can't. I haven't even managed to lock on to their voices."

"Luthor probably has them in a sound-proofed room somewhere," Lois growled, adding a few choice phrases about Lex's ancestry.

"We'll find them," he replied, touching her wrist lightly. Lois glanced at him, and for a moment both of them remembered that he'd accidentally called her honey, remembered why she had allowed it and why she had done as he asked her. Then Lois resolutely turned her eyes back to the road.

Clark sighed. He still couldn't believe he'd slipped into pet names; it had been his delight, those few hours in the Fortress, to lavish all the endearments he could imagine upon this woman who was his darling, his beloved, his dearest heart. She tended to draw the line at anything resembling *sugar* or *sweetheart* - *honey* was as close as he could get, and he cherished that forbearance.

Jason and Kala weren't feeling too well. They both had headaches; in fact, *everything* ached, like that time they had the flu. Kala's ears were ringing, and Jason was seeing spots in front of his eyes. They both felt simply miserable, and had stayed in bed, not even wanting breakfast.

The door to their stateroom opened stealthily. In the control room, Stanford bit his already ragged cuticles as he watched Lex ease into the room. The bald man moved with exaggerated caution, one hand never leaving his right coat pocket.

Kala lifted her head to look toward the door, and then her bleary eyes suddenly cleared. "*Jason*," she hissed urgently, shaking her brother's shoulder. "Jason, wake up! It's *him*."

Jason's head felt like it weighed more than the piano - more than *ten* pianos. He blinked and raised his hand slowly to block out the brighter light from the hall, a low grinding pain suffusing every muscle and joint of his small body. "Go 'way," he muttered, but his voice was fretful, not defiant.

Kala's breath started to whistle in her throat as she realized that whatever illness was overtaking them had affected Jason worse than herself. As terrified as she was - as scared as she had been ever since Brutus covered her mouth with his big hand - she knew that it was her turn to protect her brother now. She wasn't as strong, but maybe the creepy bald bad guy didn't know that...

"Leave us alone!" the girl cried out defiantly, but Lex just smiled, trying to be as charming as possible as he sauntered closer.

"Hey, relax," he said quietly. "I'm not going to hurt you - what would be the point of that, hmm?"

Both twins sat up, watching him warily. "What d'you want?" Kala demanded, her gaze flickering around the room, seeking something to throw.

"I just want to ask you some questions," Lex replied. His unblinking stare was nearly mesmerizing, his low voice hypnotic. Oh, the little girl looked so much like Lois, that distrustful sullen look he knew so well... "Do you know who I am?"

"You're a *bad* man," Kala replied spitefully. Those hazel eyes watched him with an almost hawk-like intensity unusual for one so young. "And my Mommy doesn't like you at *all*."

Lex chuckled. "Oh, it's not like that at all. True, she wrote a lot of very mean things about me, back in the day. She made up for that by writing my favorite article ever, 'Why the World *Doesn't* Need Superman'. I really need to thank her for it - that editorial brightened many a dark day."

The twins looked at him skeptically. They both felt miserable, and this scary man was only making it worse. Even when he tried to be charming, he seemed dangerous. "Liar," Jason rasped.

"Oh, no," Lex replied. "Your Mom and I have more in common than she thinks. We just need to talk about some things, like your father. She's going to be here today, I hope. And then we can all set sail together, like good friends."

His cheerful tone was utterly wasted on the twins. Kala gave him her best Lane frosty glare, and said threateningly, "If you hurt us or Mommy, my daddy will kick your butt."

Lex came closer to the bed, and in spite of her bravado, Kala shrunk back as he leaned toward her. Now he chose to drop the act, and his eyes were cold and merciless on those hazel ones so like her mother's. "He'll try ... I'm counting on it. But I have a surprise for him if he does, little girl. Want to see the present I'm going to give Superman?"

She would've said *No*, if she could've spoken, but Kala's voice had dried up in horror. She shook her head sharply instead, curls flying.

Lex took his hand out of his pocket anyway. The kryptonite shiv glittered prettily as he reached toward Kala with it...

If the drive to the airport had been uncomfortable, the flight from there, his arm around her waist as they skimmed above the waves, was intolerable. They had never been so quiet for so long, at least not this tense and prickly silence. On other flights long ago their stillness had been filled with echoes of warm words of love and adoration. Unspoken for so long, but the weight of them filled those hours in the air nonetheless...

To be silent now seemed cold, especially since last night. The curve of her waist under his hand... Trying to draw her out again, and hoping to think of something other than what might have been, Kal-El said quietly, "I barely know Jason and Kala..."

"You know them well enough to order their dinner," Lois replied swiftly, eyes firmly on the skyline, knowing he could see her face clearly with her hair tied back.

"Well, Lois, that's the first thing anybody learns about the twins," he soothed. "The first thing anyone who meets them hears is what not to let them eat. Sure, I know that, and I know Kala likes to call that lizard Gazeera just to irritate Jason. I know a few things, but I don't know *them*." *And given the parts of your argument with Richard that I couldn't help overhearing, he thought painfully, I feel like I should know them better than I do.*

Lois sighed sharply, sliding back an errant curl that had slipped loose behind her ear. This was not easy... she'd meant last night to tell him the full truth today, but after that fight with Richard... God, he'd had to have heard that. She snuck a glance at him, wondering what he thought of everything they had said. Wondering and dreading.

But Kal-El was looking away, perhaps scanning the coast, perhaps too shy to catch her gaze, and Lois was left to wonder. Slowly, she began to speak, working her way backward through the twins' lives. "Jason loves science," Lois said softly, with more than a touch of motherly pride. "He's always asking 'Why?' Their teacher gives him extra projects sometimes... Kala could be doing better. They're only in kindergarten, and she gets bored easily. And when she's bored she acts up. Loves attention. They can both read already - not *War and Peace*, but you know, they read better than most kids their age."

Sighing, Lois closed her eyes. That made it easier to lose herself in memories. Kal-El kept quiet, his silence a well into which her recollections could pour. "When Jason's interested in something, he has to learn everything about it. He won't quit until he knows more than most adults. And you can't fob him off with 'because I said so' or 'that's the way it is'. He has to *know*. And with games - Jason won't stop until he figures out how to play them. Same thing with puzzles. Once he starts one, he'll finish it, even if it's one of Richard's thousand-piece brain-busters. One that was just a picture of a bunch of different beads, it took him three months to get that puzzle done. But he just doesn't know the meaning of 'quit'."

"He's your son," Kal-El whispered. His eyes meeting hers were as warm as his body beside her, and for a heartbeat she couldn't speak. What she wouldn't give to have had him beside her when these memories were made...

If she started thinking like that, she'd never get around to saying what she'd meant to tell him since last night. Lois bit her lip and glanced down, feeling the wind against her hair as much as she felt the long-harbored secret in her heart. "Yes, well, Kala's got a lot of me in her, too. Has to be the center of attention, has to stand out from the crowd. One time she climbed

an old oak tree behind the school during recess. The fire department had to get her down - she was fifty feet in the air. All because some dumb boy said girls weren't as good at climbing as boys." She couldn't help chuckling. "Scared the hell out of me. One of those 'Mommy moments' I never expected to have."

"You're an incredible mother," he told her. The sincerity in his voice made her look up again, and at her surprised expression, he tightened his arm around her slightly. "You *are*, Lois. Look at all the challenges you've had raising the twins. You've overcome every one. Not to mention you managed to keep up your career *and* raise two children."

"I never expected to be a mom, had never really even considered it at all," she replied, her voice growing softer as the past seemed to rise up around her. "I'd been in Paris for a while. I was having ... flashbacks, I don't know. Little bits of memories, of Non and Ursa trying to tear me in half. Luthor pointing me out to Zod. Seeing the Fortress collapse. That kind of stuff. I'd been treated in the 'states, diagnosed with amnesia due to posttraumatic stress disorder. I went to this specialist in France..."

Dr. Arnaud had seen her in his office, Lois sitting on an overstuffed chair while the doctor took her vital signs and asked about her symptoms. None of the sterile white treatment rooms she was used to in America, just shelves full of books and a discreet cabinet of medical instruments and supplies. This doctor - even in memory Lois loathed to call him a psychiatrist, thanks to Elliot - had wanted to start her on some medication, but first he wanted to do some bloodwork...

"I came back a week later, and the results were in. He told me he was putting me on a couple of things and some vitamin supplements, and I thought that was kind of odd, and then he says, 'But I cannot start with the major course of medication, Ms. Lane, until after your delivery.' And I was just nodding along, and then it hit me what he'd said, and like a moron I go, 'Delivery?' Of course he looks at me like he's thinking *Stupid American*, and he says, 'Yes, Ms. Lane, these drugs are not safe for the unborn child. We must wait until after you deliver.' So I stared at him like he'd grown another head."

In spite of the fear she'd felt then, she chuckled now, and got a smile from Kal-El as well. "So that's how I found out I was two months pregnant. I'd never guessed - I was always religious about the pill. And I was utterly shocked by the news. I think I used some creative language to express my feelings... Anyway, I figured out who the father was pretty quickly. Didn't help much, though. I was still alone, in what was pretty much a strange city, and though a part of me was terrified of having these kids - eventually I found out it was twins, which just made me all the more thrilled - anyway, I was scared of becoming a mom, but the biggest part of me wouldn't let me ... do anything ... about it. I had a strong feeling that the twins were precious, that I had to protect them and cherish them. It was really weird, because I also felt like I shouldn't talk about them to anyone..."

For a long moment she fell silent, and Kal-El picked up speed as they passed a busy port, wanting to remain unseen. He was still tuned to her, waiting patiently for her to resume the story, lightly squeezing her side again to let her know he was still listening intently. Lois' voice was too low for any ears but his when she continued, "I used to stand on the roof and wonder why all of this was happening to me, wonder what the fragments of memories I was getting back meant. Hate myself for ruining my career and my nicely-ordered life with this crazy decision to keep the twins, even though their father was out of my life. I lived across an alley from this club, and they'd play a lot of American music. 70's and 80's stuff, mostly, and one night when I was standing there staring up at the sky, they played this old Moody Blues song,

In Your Wildest Dreams. And it just seemed to sum up all the sentimental memories, and all the wild hopes I had, and the sadness too. Everything I felt about the whole situation, missing the twins' father, being alone in Paris, all of it."

"I started singing it, to myself, to the twins. They loved it; the fact of being pregnant just didn't feel real somehow, until I started singing it to them one night and they... I guess they were making an attempt at *dancing* in there, they kicked like I was going to have mules instead of a pair of babies. They still love it - it's their favorite lullaby. And every time I sing it to them I can't help remembering how I felt then, how badly I wished you were there, in spite of myself."

They slipped sideways in the air for a moment, then Kal-El corrected them back to level flight and turned to look at her, those amazing eyes so wide. "Lois?" he asked in a strengthless, pleading voice.

Oh, please, God, Lois thought, but she'd come too far to turn back. Hope flared brightly in her at the sound of his voice, almost as if he really... She'd been alternately hoping for and dreading this moment since he had torn the door off that 777 jet and looked right into her again. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes as she whispered with a small nod, "Yes, Kal-El. *You*. Jason and Kala are yours."

Lana wasn't even sure why they'd bothered putting headsets on if they weren't going to speak. All four of them had felt the strain of old ties breaking and new ones being made that morning, especially after the apocalyptic argument outside IHOP, which had fortunately broken up without her intervention. *And what would I have said, anyway? 'As the dubious occupant of the moral high ground, I demand that you two act your age!'*

The redhead shook her head slightly in bewilderment. How on earth had they gotten themselves mixed up like this? No matter what she did or said, it seemed wrong. If she tried to mediate between Lois and Richard, not only would she be highly unwelcome, but she'd also be prolonging what looked like an inevitable breakup and thus increasing their turmoil. On the other hand, it was never right to pursue someone else's fiancé. And it didn't help at all that she could still taste Richard's mouth on hers...

"Do you regret it?" Her own voice startled her; Lana hadn't meant to speak aloud.

Richard glanced at her thoughtfully. "No," his voice crackled in her earphones. "Do you?"

"No, I don't," Lana sighed. "I regret that I *don't* regret it, God help me."

He looked a little puzzled by that, or perhaps he was just focusing on flying the seaplane. After a few moments, though, Richard asked cautiously, "You wish you did regret it?"

"Yes," Lana replied. "Because then I could still tell myself I'm a good Midwestern girl, and not a potential home-wrecker."

His laugh was brief and mirthless. "Trust me, at this point our home couldn't be any more wrecked if a herd of wild horses stampeded through it. And *not* because of you - because of *us*. Lois and I were doomed from word one."

It had worked better than he'd dreamed, and Kal-El listened raptly as Lois' voice delved into the years he'd missed. He could almost see it: Jason methodically working the puzzle, Kala perched in the tree like a queen on her throne... The image that branded itself on his mind, however, was Lois turning her face to the sky and drowning in loneliness. How he wished he could have been there for her, in either guise ... or as his true self, if he had been a little wiser, a little less eager to spare her pain.

His heart aching from those thoughts, Kal-El wasn't prepared for Lois' next words. *And every time I sing it to them I can't help remembering how I felt then, how badly I wished you were there, in spite of myself.* The realization - she'd spoken of missing the twins' father only a moment before - struck sharply enough that he momentarily forgot to keep them aloft. Quickly correcting their flight, he turned to her, his voice choked. "Lois?" The sound of her name embodied everything he'd hoped and feared, prayed for and dreaded, since the moment he'd seen her again.

Lois smiled even though her eyes brimmed with tears, and nodded slightly as she whispered back, "Yes, Kal-El. *You.* Jason and Kala are *yours.*" And the look of absolute *relief* on her face surprised him as much as her words. As if she hadn't expected his reaction.

His heart seemed to swell in his chest. Suspicion, even being so nearly certain as he'd been for the past few days, was nothing compared to absolute confirmation. Kal-El found it hard to breathe, a shiver of finality running through him. *Mine. Lois' kids are mine ... ours. Our twins. My God. I'm not alone - and a part of her will always be mine.* Her words to him from so long ago, her voice full of wonder even as the gunshot echoed around the room - *I must have known that for the longest time.*

"Lois, I..." All of a sudden, Kal-El remembered the times he'd seen her before leaving this planet for good, or so he thought. *She was pregnant then. If I had just looked... The thought wouldn't have crossed my mind. But oh, if I had just glanced at her lungs and seen a bit more, I could've known then. I could've stopped all this...*

"Kal-El?" Lois' voice trembled, too, and he realized how distraught he must look, thinking on the past. It was clear that she was as shaken by the confession she had made as he was to hear it. *Please, please, God. Please let him say something, anything, good.*

Squeezing her hand gently, he sought for words that would explain. "I had hoped... Lois, I've wanted them to be mine so badly for so long. That was one of my first thoughts on seeing you with them. But I couldn't imagine, couldn't let myself hope... You don't ... well, I guess you do know how much this means to me."

Lois bit her lip, looking startled and unable to meet his eyes for a moment. For a moment, that beloved face worked with emotion before she stopped. Tentatively, she asked in a near-whisper, "Kal-El, you're not ... angry, are you? I ... I thought it was best ... if..."

She glanced back up in time to catch his puzzled look. "Angry? Because you kept them a secret? No - but I wish I knew why you did that."

"I was afraid," and her voice was tiny, those three words he'd never expected to her from the lips of Fearless Reporter Lois Lane. "I thought ... you'd see them as a mistake. The way you saw our time in the Fortress as a mistake."

"Lois, no," Kal-El said with quiet urgency. "Trying to give up my duty for my own desires: that was a mistake. I should've found a way to balance both ... a career and my life with you. But loving you never was anything but a blessing. And our children..." The simple little phrase stopped him in mid-sentence, and then Lois saw him grin broadly with delight. "**Our children.** It's not just that I'm a father, not just that I'm not the last son of Krypton any more. It's that I'm the father of *Lois Lane's* twins."

Thank God. The weight of the secret, the fear of his rejection, fell away, and Lois started to blush as she heard the reverent tone he gave her name. That and the slightly goofy smile echoed her own reactions to him so long ago; as silly and romantic as she had been over Superman, he felt the same about her.

The full realization of how very groundless her fears had been made her drop her head

against his shoulder, a sob caught in her throat. She'd been so frightened over this for so long, so alone with this knowledge. "I'm so sorry," Lois murmured brokenly. "I was scared ... I was scared you'd be so ashamed of them that ... after everything Jor-El said..."

"Lois ... as far as I'm concerned, it's a miracle," he told her gently. "I could never be ashamed of Jason and Kala. I'm too busy being amazed by them."

Lois had no immediate reply to that, other than to press her cheek against his shoulder. Now they were over Metropolis, Kal-El increasing his altitude slightly to avoid undue attention, and in a few moments he set her down gently a block from the Audi dealership. "I'll meet you in a minute," he said, letting the tenderness in his expression speak for all the things they'd left unsaid.

Nodding, still not trusting herself to speak, Lois headed for the dealership's service entrance. Clark arrived in time to open the door for her, and in a few moments Lois was back in the driver's seat of her beloved Audi. The mechanic had confirmed her suspicions: someone had deliberately tampered with the engine. But now the powerful little car ran smoothly again, and Lois rubbed her thumb over the leather-covered steering wheel with a smile. At last, she finally had control over *one* aspect of her life.

"So, we're headed to the docks?" Clark asked, buckling his seatbelt and casually bracing his arm on the windowsill.

"Precisely," Lois said, revving the engine slightly. Ah, she'd missed that purr. Being on her own turf again made her bold enough to look him in the eye and grin. "Let's go get our kids back."

The life raft was better designed than Stanford had ever dreamed. Even now, it still bobbed at the surface, though it was mostly deflated. The metal canister with the kryptonite inside rolled near the edge as a wave tossed the tiny craft around.

The outcome was inevitable. As more air leaked from the raft, water slipped in, splashing around the outside of the canister. Some of it gradually worked its way through the cracks in the metal.

At last, when Grant was docking the yacht just outside of Metropolis, the first drop of seawater touched the clear Kryptonian crystal within...

...and the silent pulse of electromagnetic energy swept outward in an invisible ring, growing ever larger. Heading toward Metropolis...

Richard banked the plane over Hob's Bay, most of his mind focused on the tasks ahead. When Lois got to the city, she would be picking up her Audi and heading for the docks on the eastern side of the river. He and Lana would be picking his Saab from the airport parking lot and checking in with Perry at the *Planet* first, then taking over the search of the western side. If they were very lucky, they'd find Luthor's yacht docked somewhere. Barring that, perhaps they'd find someone who'd seen it...

The cabin suddenly fell quiet, and Richard had a horrified moment of total recall. The jet's engines cutting out, coasting barely a hundred feet off the ground... But this was different. He hadn't just lost the engines, Richard realized with a cold cramp of fear. The instrument panel had gone haywire, too. Every light was off, and his compass currently claimed he was heading south by southeast, when he was actually flying northwest. "Oh, shit," he muttered, thankful

for one other difference: he had several thousand feet of altitude under him at the moment.

Lana took her headset off, able to hear better without them now. "Richard, what just happened?" she asked worriedly.

"Buckle up and pray," he replied shortly, working the ailerons gently to bring them back to level flight. Their altitude was dropping steadily, but for the moment they had more than enough forward thrust left.

The redhead had been buckled in the entire flight, but she checked anyway. Her voice took on a fretful sharpness as she asked, "What's going on?"

"Lost all the power," Richard retorted. "This is a glider, now." He looked out the window at the bay below; the water was choppy, but not too choppy. *I hope. God, I really hope it's just smooth enough. Not like I have much choice at the moment.*

Lana paused for a moment, just staring at him, and he honestly expected her to panic. But she said very levelly, "What are you going to do?"

"Land without power," Richard said, giving her a brief appreciative glance. Few people could be that calm in such unexpected circumstances. "I've done it before, and water landings in a seaplane are a little more forgiving, but it could get a bit bumpy."

She nodded, and touched the back of his hand briefly. "You handle the landing, I'll handle the praying."

It was enough to make Richard chuckle, when he desperately needed something positive.

Lois had nearly reached the docks, Clark flinching at the way she wove through traffic, when the engine suddenly sputtered and died. Fortunately they were the only ones on the road at the moment, so the car could coast to a stop. Lois slammed her palm against the steering wheel and swore comprehensively. "*Luthor!* I'll wring his goddamn neck when I get hold of him! Those bastards at the service center said she was frikkin' *fixed!* Sorry sons of..."

Clark caught her hand and squeezed gently until she stopped and looked at him. A chill swept through her at the expression on his face, and it was only intensified by his low voice. "It's not the car ... it's everything. The whole city... It's another blackout, Lois. Worse, this time."

"My God..." Thanks to Superman's miraculous reappearance, the aftereffects of the first blackout had not been too severe. But now... "Do you think it's Luthor?"

"Has to be," he replied grimly. "Lois, I have to go."

"Then go," she said, trying to keep the quaver out of her voice. With their current situation still unsettled, it was all she could do to say those words. To not plead, *Don't go*. Not being understanding of his mission was what doomed them the first time. "Be careful. And come back to me in one piece."

He smiled, stroking her cheek softly. "I will... Wait for me right here, Lois. And *you* be careful."

Lois put her hand atop his and leaned her cheek against his hand fondly. In spite of everything, a small mischievous smile started to curl her lips. "Aren't I always?"

Unbuckling his seatbelt, Kal-El laughed softly at her. "More like *never*. Don't do anything rash - I mean it. We have too much to talk about when I get back."

"Isn't talking what got us into trouble in the first place?"

That little self-deprecating chuckle she knew so well, that warm delighted smile she so loved to see... There was so much else to say, and no time in which to say it. Kal-El leaned in to kiss her once, gently, but a lovers' kiss nonetheless. Lois slipped her hand around the back

of his neck, holding him for one heartbeat longer. Then they both pulled back, the inside of the car thrumming with words unsaid. "Wait for me, Lois. Be safe," Kal-El murmured.

"I love you," Lois said simply, her voice low.

"I love you, too." And then he was gone, so fast that he was only a speck in the sky as Lois got out of the car and looked after him.

"You swoony romantic moron," Lois sighed, shaking her head at her own actions, but unable to stop smiling. Knowing that he still loved her, that he loved their children - *their children*, what a phrase - couldn't make everything better like the wave of a magic wand, but it came pretty damn close.

The car started beeping to let her know she'd opened the door with the keys in the ignition, and at the same moment her cell phone began to ring. Apparently the EMP had passed - Lois got back in the Audi and pulled her phone out of her purse. It was about time Richard or Perry called...

This electromagnetic pulse lasted longer than the previous one, but fortunately, most devices started working again as soon as the pulse passed. Superman flew around the city, rapidly taking care of those that didn't. A metro train's brakes failed, leaving it coasting toward the end of the track. He stopped it, and moved on to help another jumbo jet stay aloft until its engines powered back up. Faster than any human eye could follow, Superman found each problem, fixed it, and moved on to the next. The entire time, in the back of his mind lurked the thought of Lois.

*We really do have so much to talk about... First we have to get the twins back. **Our** twins. God, the mere thought is still too much to process.*

He rose above the city, taking a final glance around... Out on Hob's Bay, was that...? Superman felt his stomach lurch at the thought of Lana and Richard crashing, but he soon realized that the plane's engines had fired back up, and Richard was pulling it out of the glide even as he watched. *They're safe. I'd better get back to Lois.*

Lex hung up the phone, smiling lazily, and gazed with sleepy satisfaction at the sophisticated recording equipment in front of him. He didn't even notice Stanford taking another swig of warm Mylanta.

The bald man leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the desk. The monitors before him presently showed only stillness and silence in the stateroom where moments ago there had been screams.

"D'ya think she'll come?" Grant asked from the doorway.

Lex rolled his eyes toward the shorter man. "Of course she will. Lois Lane will come running - and so will *he*."

The warm, chalky liquid made Stanford cough, and he turned a tortured look on Lex. "Was that really necessary? We already knew it affected them. Did you have to expose them to the stuff until it knocked them out?"

Cold eyes narrowed, and Stanford knew he was treading awfully close to the fine line between useful and dead. At this point, he didn't care. Hearing Kala scream for her mother was like a knife between his ribs. Maybe Kitty was right, maybe all of this was just too wrong for words...

"Relax, Stanford," Lex said levelly. "Their powers of recuperation will astound you, I'm sure. Especially since we removed the sample from the air vent. But to answer your question,

yes, it was necessary. Every hunter knows the best lure is the distress call of the young."

Just when he thought the city was safe, for the time being, Superman heard a greedy roar. An abandoned warehouse - the very one that Lois had searched only two days ago - had gone up in sudden flames. He put it out with his freezing breath, using precious time, and discovering in the process the body of a man surrounded by ten remote ignition devices similar to those he'd found at other arson sites. So this was the arsonist, slain by his own works; evidently the timers had all reset unexpectedly when the electromagnetic pulse passed by. But his relief that there would be no more fires couldn't compete with his growing feeling of unease.

Hurrying, not sure why, Kal-El headed back toward the docks. His intuition proved correct. Lois wasn't where he'd left her, where she'd promised to stay. And he wasn't entirely surprised by that.

She also wasn't anywhere along the riverside where they were supposed to be checking the docks. *No. Oh, God, no. Lois, where the hell are you?* On the verge of panic, he forced himself to stop and listen for her heartbeat...

There. South of the city. He rocketed toward the sound, passing out of Metropolis proper and down the coast, along the waterfront industrial complexes... Lois' heartbeat cut off suddenly, but not as though something had happened to her. It sounded more like she'd been forced into a soundproof room... Kal-El's own heart raced in terror. *No. Lex can't have her, she wouldn't walk into a trap, it must be something else, it has to be...*

He checked his hasty flight. Her car was below, parked alongside an alley. This was barely a twenty-minute drive from where she'd been, though it hadn't been on their route. No one was nearby, and Kal-El landed beside it.

The driver's side door was unlocked. Looking within, frantic now, he saw her cell phone on the floorboards, her purse upended in the passenger's seat. Of its contents, only the gun was unaccounted for, so this was no mere robbery. The jacket she'd left in the back seat was also gone, and Kal-El had a sinking feeling he knew what had happened.

She took the gun and her shoulder holster, took the jacket to hide the gun, and she left. But where? Kal-El stood up, looking around, but this area was full of factories and shipyards, endless confusing tangles of metal and concrete to his x-ray vision. Perhaps he'd get a better idea from her cell phone...

He flipped it open, and after looking over the series of buttons, found the one marked Voicemail. Fortunately, Lois didn't keep a password on her voicemail, so playback started immediately.

A digitized voice said, "Good evening, Ms. Lane. Since you seem to be having some trouble, I'll tell you precisely how to locate me. But first, a little musical interlude..."

The voice faded, and Kal-El's keen hearing detected the faint crackle of static. He was playing something back on a hi-fi stereo system...

Kal-El's eyes went wide with horror, his facing paling. He heard Jason crying weakly, heard Kala whimpering, "Leave us alone!" A moment later, one of the kids retched, and then Kala's voice, breaking with terror, "No! No! Get away! **Mommmeeeee!**"

Before he could stop himself, his hand on the phone clenched reflexively, and the sounds mercifully cut off as plastic and silicon chips ground to dust.

In the Belly of the Beast

Lois breathed shallowly, keeping her back pressed to the wall and the gun aimed at the ceiling as she sidled along the corridor. Getting onto the *Gertrude* had been easier than she'd expected, but the reporter knew that was only the beginning. Finding the twins would be far more difficult; escaping with them would be nearly impossible. But ever since she'd gotten that message from Luthor, ever since she'd heard Kala and Jason crying and calling for her, escaping wasn't Lois' goal. Getting to her children was. If she was with them, she could protect them - with her life, if necessary.

She had known, from the moment she set foot on the yacht's deck, that this particular adventure might kill her. It was a risk Lois was willing to take. At least she might be able to take Luthor with her...

Another damned corner. Lois stopped, slid silently down onto one knee and peered cautiously around the edge of the wall. This hallway was short, ending in the open door to a stateroom. They would have to keep the kids locked up, but there were two other doors to check out. Lois crept forward to peer into the portholes, finding nothing of interest. Machinery in one, cleaning supplies in the other. And the open room was truly empty when she checked it as well.

Onward, to the next door, the next corridor, relentless in her search. Lois knew that Lex's goons had to be looking for her. After that message, she was expected. But she had gotten past the nervous, ratty-looking guy outside this enclosed repair bay, so perhaps they were still waiting for her to arrive, not realizing she was already on board.

Lois didn't allow hope to make her reckless, however. She eased up to the next open doorway, beyond which she could hear running water. Nothing prepared her for the sight that met her eyes when she peered around the doorframe: Lex Luthor, standing with his back to her, apparently brushing his teeth.

A wave of chilly fear swept over Lois; here was the monster himself, and she was only a few feet away from discovery in his very lair. But wrathful heat bloomed in its wake - he had done something to her children to make them scream for rescue. Lois leveled the Ladysmith at him, lining the sights up with the back of Luthor's bald head. Her hands didn't tremble as she slipped one finger inside the trigger guard, and her lips thinned to a grim line. *This will blow my cover - but that won't matter once you're dead. Your hired muscle cares only about money, not your twisted schemes. And even if they do try to stop me, I've got more ammo.*

With such cold thoughts in mind, Lois held her aim steady and began squeezing the trigger slowly. *Goodbye, Luthor. May you rot in Hell.*

For a moment, Kal-El stared at the phone. His mind was awash in horror and guilt; horror at the thought of the twins, crying, calling for their mother, and guilt at the realization that he had inadvertently destroyed the phone before hearing the most important part of the message: how to find Luthor.

Frantically, he scanned the area, trying to make sense of the jumble of steel parts and lead ballast all around. He also strained his hearing for one whisper of Lois' voice, for the beat of her heart, but could hear neither. Panic began to gnaw at him; where *was* she? Did Luthor have her already? Surely that maniac couldn't have captured and subdued Lois this quickly...

With his hearing at its most sensitive, he became aware of the sounds he least wanted to hear: alarms and sirens. Many of them. But what could be causing them, almost an hour after the EMP swept past? Kal-El hated to tear his attention away from Lois.

A low, greedy roar, one he'd thought he would never hear again after finding body of the arsonist. *Another fire? But how... delayed timers gone haywire after the EMP?* And then he realized he wasn't hearing *one* fire, but several. One of them was dangerously near the main propane lines serving the city...

Giving one last, tortured look around the shipyards, Kal-El whispered, "Hold on, Lois. Keep the kids safe for me, just for a little while longer." He took to the air swiftly, trying to discharge duty in time to return and save his beloved.

The Ladysmith's trigger had been lightened to require a mere two and a half pounds of pressure, and it glided back smoothly. Lois never slackened the pressure; she knew better than to pull the trigger sharply, as that might spoil her aim. Instead she squeezed it, and the front sight of the gun never wavered from the center of Luthor's head.

When the gun fired, the noise was nearly deafening in that small space, and it was quickly followed by a loud tinkling crash as Luthor vanished. Lois had an instant of bewilderment before she realized what happened and threw herself across the hall, cursing her luck. It wasn't Luthor she'd shot at, but his reflection in a mirror that took up most of the wall. And now, not only was the bastard still alive, but he knew she was here...

No time to waste. Abandoning stealth, Lois ran to put distance between herself and Luthor, whom she could hear yelling into a cell phone or a walkie-talkie behind her. She turned at random, bolting down a corridor and into a gym room. Lois rushed through a final door and came to a sudden halt by the pool. *Shit. I don't need to be outside.*

Behind her, the gym door slammed open. No time to turn back, now. Lois darted around the low wall, hoping it lead to a staircase, but found herself trapped. *Well, maybe I can lower myself off this edge - the engine room is probably down there on that lowest deck somewhere. It's a bit of a drop, but...*

"Ms. Lane?" Luthor's cultured voice held a hint of predatory mockery. "Ms. Lane, I think it would be to your advantage to put the gun down."

"And come out with my hands up?" she shot back nastily. "What is this, a low-budget Western?"

Lex chuckled cruelly. "No, Ms. Lane. This is more of a suspense. Namely, which of your bastard children am I holding hostage right this moment?"

Her spine turned to ice, and her stomach plummeted. He'd gone for them so damn fast... Or he was bluffing. "How the hell do I even know you *have* one of them with you? If I stick my head out, you could shoot me right here."

"Oh, no, Ms. Lane," Luthor replied. "I wouldn't shoot you. Not only am I not carrying a gun, but live bait is *far* more effective at luring the big ones." Giving that only a second to register in her mind, he continued, "The boys are waiting inside - I wouldn't want them to get overexcited, and do something regrettable. No, this is between you and me, Ms. Lane. You and me, and one other..."

His voice trailed off, and a moment later Lois heard what she'd been dreading most: Jason's shaky voice. "M-Mommy?"

Lois swore under her breath, helplessly. *How could I have done this? I **knew** it was a trap. I was just vain enough to think I could trade my life for theirs...* "Jason, honey?" she called softly, wanting him to know she was really there.

"Don' come out, Mommy," Jason said, in a stronger voice. "He's a bad man."

"Good and evil are merely different perspectives," Lex said absently. "Now, Ms. Lane,

put the gun down and push it around the corner. Don't even think about shooting me - I've got your boy in front of me. And twins are like salt-and-pepper shakers, aren't they? It's not quite the same if you only have one of the set."

"Lex, you don't need them," Lois reasoned, forcing herself to sound merely exasperated. The terror and rage she kept locked down very tightly. "You have *me*. We've done this before, and he came right along to rescue me. Let the twins go - they're just kids. You don't need them."

"They're just *his* kids," Lex replied silkily. "And I believe I'll keep them, all the same."

Lois swallowed the lump in her throat. She had to make this believable. "Where did you get an asinine idea like that? Can't you *count*?"

That cruel, mocking laugh again. "He's an *alien*, a fact you seemed to forget once upon a time. Who knows what their gestation is? As for where I got the idea, well, from *you*. Specifically, from the blank space you left on their birth certificates. Come now, Ms. Lane - your boy is getting a little nervous. Slide the gun out and come here."

"Oh, please," Lois said. *If you're gonna bluff, go for it all.* "You're assuming aliens can even breed with earthlings. Which is fairly absurd - been watching too many B-movies, have you?"

"So, you're saying you really *can't* remember who you slept with?" Lex asked lightly. Lois didn't need to see him to know he was grinning like a rabid fox. He continued, "Let me narrow the field for you, Ms. Lane. At least one of these kids has superpowers."

Shit. I really wish I could make myself believe he's dumb enough to let me have another shot at him... And I wish he didn't know how to wind me up so well. Sonofabitch. "So typical, Lex. Tell me, do you ever get tired of hiding behind someone else? Although you've reached a new low, using a six-year-old for a human shield."

Jason gasped and whimpered. "Well, his mother *is* a dangerous trigger-happy reporter who was willing to shoot me in the back - I think I'm perfectly justified to hold this kryptonite shard to his throat until you put the gun down."

Lana and Richard arrived at the *Planet* only to find Ella Lane in Perry's office. She raised a silver brow at them questioningly, and Lana felt very uneasy with those familiar hazel eyes trained on her.

Richard was taken aback, but covered it. "Ella! This is a surprise. Let me introduce you to Lana Lang, the designer - she's an old friend of Clark's, and she's graciously volunteered her time to help us search for the twins. Lana, this is Ella Lane, Lois' mother."

"Pleased to meet you," Ella said coolly, but her focus was on more important matters. "Richard, Peregrine's told me everything he knows, but it seems you've been too busy to update him this morning. What's the progress on finding my grandchildren, and where is my daughter?"

"Both the leads we had turned out to be false," Richard replied quickly. "But we got a call this morning that said the message Luthor sent Lois was placed from the docks here. She and Clark are on their way up now, and the three of us are going to search the docks for Luthor's yacht or any sign of him."

Ella nodded, casting another speculative glance at Lana. "Hmm. Well, then, let's get to work dividing the dock area up into a search grid."

"Richard, you get started," Lana said, sounding casual, but the look she gave him was full of purpose. "I'll get us some coffee. Mrs. Lane, how do you take yours?"

"Black, with sugar," Ella replied.

"Ella, Uncle Perry brews that coffee," Richard warned. "Newsroom coffee is ... an experience."

"It can't be any worse than barracks coffee," Ella replied. "Sam brewed it so strong you couldn't pour it in a metal thermos."

When Lana left, the other three adjourned to the conference room, which suddenly seemed a great deal cooler than the rest of the office. Ella sat down while Perry dragged out the maps of Metropolis they'd used the other day, and Richard found her sharp eyes on him. He sat across from her and returned the look exasperatedly. After everything he'd been through that morning, he wasn't in the mood to deal with Lois' mother being nosy.

To her credit, though, Ella came directly to the point, and spoke without rancor. "You do realize, Richard, that if you cheat on my daughter and she catches you - which she would - she's liable to destroy everything of value you own - and physically harm you in the process?"

"I'm not the one who's cheating," Richard said, the blunt assumption startled out of him by Ella's forthright question. He quickly tried to backtrack, saying, "Not that she is. But I know I'm not cheating on Lois, and I know I won't either."

Ella merely nodded. "So, your dinner out to patch up the relationship, how did that go?"

That night at the Kasbah seemed years ago, as if it had taken place in the era B.K. - Before the Kidnapping. Richard felt a little rueful smile playing about his lips, and replied, "Pretty well. Not as well as I had expected, but ... it's no secret Lois and I are having problems right now."

"Mm-hmm. And your solution is spend as much time as possible away from her and with Ms. Lang?"

Perry was deliberately ignoring them; he'd made his feelings on the matter clear days ago. Richard was starting to get just a little annoyed with Ella's tone, and he replied a trifle sharply, "Mrs. Lane, *our* solution is to try and find the twins. If we're not getting along with each other, then we won't try to be on a search party together. That's just not going to be productive."

Those hazel eyes were all too familiar to him; he'd seen that speculative look from three generations of Lane women. Fortunately, Lana arrived with their coffee before Ella could ask another probing question. Richard sipped his to cover a sigh of relief, glad he wouldn't have to discuss the apocalyptic argument this morning.

Ella, on the other hand, bit her lip. She would've much preferred to continue dissecting Richard's motives - he was a good man, if not the perfect match for her daughter, but at the moment he seemed to be hiding something. And right now, dragging that secret out of him was far preferable to the worry that nagged at her mind.

Not only was Ella absolutely terrified for the twins, in spite of hiding it as well as only a general's wife could. She also had a terrible suspicion that she simply could not shake; her mother's intuition kept telling her that Lois was in danger, too. That her hot-headed child had done something impulsive, irrational ... and possibly fatal.

Lois felt as though her blood had frozen in her veins, leaving her momentarily incapable of action or thought. She could hear only her own breath, rapid and shallow, as Lex's cruel words wormed their way into her mind. *Kryptonite - he's threatening Jason with kryptonite...*

She had no choice left. "All right," Lois said, and hating the weakness she heard in her voice, she steadied herself forcibly. "I'm coming out. Don't hurt Jason."

"The gun first," Lex said quickly. "Put it down, and slide it toward the door as far as you can."

On the smooth deck, the Ladysmith glided several feet. Lois waited just out of sight, her heart thumping madly, as Lex spoke to one of his men. Footsteps, the faint clink of metal as the gun was lifted, and then Lex spoke again. "All right, Ms. Lane, very good. I'm sure your boy appreciates it. Now, hands on your head, come out *slowly*."

She, who had rebelled against virtually all authority from the time she could walk, complied absolutely. Stepping out from behind the wall, Lois' pained hazel eyes sought her son's clear blue ones. There was fear in them, yes, but also determination, and a mad kind of courage that he must've gotten from her... Lois shook her head slightly, warning him to be cautious. The shard of crystal that Lex held against his throat looked sharp enough to kill him. "Here I am, Lex. Let him go."

Lex's answer was to step back inside. "Not so quickly, Ms. Lane. That may not be your only weapon. Come inside." Turning to the tall blond man behind him, whom Lois recognized from the fire scene, he added, "Riley, search her. Thoroughly. I wouldn't put it past her to have a knife in her hair."

Inside the gym room, Lois stood absolutely still and watched Jason, reassuring him with her eyes as the other man approached her. And Riley was thorough, beginning at her boots and checking for a knife tucked into them, continuing upward searching for a pistol strapped to her ankle or perhaps another knife. He found no backup weapons by the time he reached her knees, and... *Getting a little personal there, mister*, Lois thought coldly, transferring her narrowed gaze to Lex, who was smiling at her with every evidence of good cheer.

Riley emptied Lois' pockets and checked around the waistband of her jeans, sliding his hands up her sides. She hadn't flinched, but when he obviously began to enjoy his task, Lois said sharply, "Those are real, and they don't have weapons hidden in them."

"Riley," Lex said, and the man moved his hands. He checked her arms and ran his fingers through her hair, making Lois wish she *had* hidden a knife in there. Maybe he'd cut himself... Riley stepped back with a nod to his boss, and Lex finally moved the shard away from Jason's neck. Just slightly, but enough to make Lois breathe easier.

"Lovely," Lex commented. "Thank you very much for being cooperative, Ms. Lane." Lois glared at him, not trusting herself to answer, and saw the woman standing in the doorway behind him. That face looked familiar ... Lois' eyes narrowed even further as she recognized the woman Superman had rescued from a runaway car, missing the museum robbery in the process. Her suspicions had been correct all along - Lex was behind everything, the robbery, the fires - any moment now he'd reveal his Grand Evil Scheme...

"Mommy?" Jason whispered. He hadn't tried to get away from Lex, not yet, but tears were beginning to shine in his eyes.

"Honey, it's okay," Lois tried to soothe. The glare hadn't worked, so she tried giving Lex a defeated look. "You got what you wanted - let my son go, Luthor." And though it cost her to do so, her throat closing on the word, she added in a whisper, "Please."

An art collector, at last standing before the *Mona Lisa* the day it was returned to the Louvre after being stolen and missing for years, might have had an expression of fulfilled delight on his face similar to the one Lex now wore. He released Jason, and the boy ran to his mother, stifling sobs.

Lois dropped to her knees, Luthor and his cronies and the rest of the world vanishing for an instant as she swept her son into her arms. Even Superman was forgotten as the reporter

hugged Jason tightly, choking back a sob of her own. While he was in the circle of her arms, no power on earth could harm him - and God help any that tried. Unable to put her relief into words, Lois kissed him on the forehead, temple, and cheek, all of her fierce love fraught in that gesture.

In a moment, Lois realized that Jason's breath was hitching from more than tears, and his skin was unhealthily warm under her touch. Her heart sank; so the kids *were* susceptible to kryptonite after all. She had always hoped that they would get immunity to that deadly substance from her... "Jason, honey, are you okay? Is your sister okay?"

He looked up at her, still trying to be brave, and those amazingly blue eyes went through her like blades. "Mommy, I'm sorry... I shoulda been watchin' out for us..."

Jason would never know how much it pained her to hear the shame in his voice, for not being able to stop something beyond his control. *Dear God, he's only six. Is this his father's legacy, this need to take responsibility for things that aren't his fault?* Lois had no time to examine the thought, too busy stroking Jason's hair and trying to soothe him. "No, honey, no - this wasn't your fault. You did the best you could, better than anybody else could've. *It wasn't your fault.*" She gently caught his chin to emphasize her words, willing him to understand.

"You sure?" Jason sniffled, his lip quivering, but never took those wounded eyes from hers.

"Of course, baby," Lois whispered, kissing his forehead again. The strength of her hug had pulled him to one side of her, and with the kiss she nudged him a little further over.

"You're so brave." Her heart just bled to have placed either of them in this kind of situation, regardless of not knowing what Luthor had been planning.

"The bad man was gonna hurt Kala, an' I stopped 'im," Jason told her, cuddling close.

"Very good," Lois replied, noticing that Lex chuckled but not knowing why. "You've kept the both of you safe, right?"

"Uh-huh." It seemed to be working; Jason was calmer, rubbing his eyes with his sleeve. "Nobody's gonna hurt my sister."

"That's my boy," Lois said warmly, and kissed his cheek.

"This is all very touching," Lex said, sounding bored, "but I'm afraid we don't have time for an extended reunion. Come here, boy."

The look of fear, mistrust, and blossoming hate that Jason shot at Lex was pure Lois; even as she continued trying to angle herself in front of him, she knew she'd never seen a look like that on Kal-El's face. Before Lois could say anything to stop Lex, Jason whispered, "They're saying Superman's our daddy."

That dark hair flew as Lois whipped around, hazel eyes startled. *So Lex told them? Why not? Just another twist of the knife. But I know my twins. It might just have the opposite effect. Their Daddy always saves the day.* Even as Lex started toward them, Lois smiled conspiratorially at Jason. "He is," she confirmed, a little surprised to feel her own courage rise at the words.

The sparkle of wonder in Jason's eyes was enough to sustain her, to make giving up that long-held secret in the presence of her nemesis a thing of delight for a moment. Just that admission seemed to bond mother and son even tighter...

And then Lex was beside them, the shiv in his hand, reached for Jason with the other. The boy yelped and hid behind Lois, and she stood up, glaring defiantly at Lex as she put her arms behind her to hold her son. "You have us, you have the gun, you're hiding Kala away, *leave him alone,*" she growled.

"I'm not leaving him with you," Lex replied warily. "No telling what you'd talk him into doing - you must know about his strength."

Lois' eyes glittered with hatred, and for a moment she looked as though she might lunge for Lex's throat like a rabid wolf. Riley sidled closer, but Lex didn't step back. The reporter muttered through clenched teeth, "You bastard. My mind doesn't work like yours, Luthor. I'd never willingly endanger my child."

He smiled at her, a terrible light gleaming in his eyes like the death of stars. "Doesn't it, Ms. Lane? You've already endangered your children - you endangered them the moment you lay down with their father."

Metropolis was in chaos. It seemed that the EMP had triggered an unheard-of number of fires. Most were small, not having been set with the intricate types of accelerants that made the larger fires so deadly. Still, even a burning wastebasket can become a raging inferno - especially if there are two dozen of them at once, taxing the resources of the fire department and a superhero with a great deal to worry about.

Lex is getting away, part of his mind insisted. You know perfectly well that this is just a distraction while he escapes to God-knows-where with your children - and with Lois, most likely. She'd never resist a summons like that.

No more than I can shirk my duty, the rest of him replied. Distraction or not, lives are at stake here. I can't let all these innocent people be endangered by my personal conflict with Lex, and my involvement with Lois.

Jason and Kala have been Lex's captives for two days now. And the last thing you heard was them screaming for help. The people of Metropolis can cope while you rescue your kids. It's what any father would do.

But I'm not just any father. All of a sudden, I think I understand why Lois wouldn't tell me they were mine. No one should ever have to make a choice like this...

In the end, duty won, though the choice itself was bitter. Lois is with them. Lex couldn't really hurt them - he needs them to lure me in. With Lois there, he won't be able to do them any harm, and she's perfectly capable of taking care of herself. Their danger is very real, but not immediate. These people will die, right now, and die badly if I don't help fight the fires.

*Damn you, Luthor. I **will** find them - you can't hide them from me forever. And when I do, there'll be hell to pay...*

For a moment, it had looked like a standoff, Lois glaring at Lex, Lex holding the shiv and not backing down. Jason peered out from behind his mother worriedly, still trying to be brave, and it was his expression that finally moved Kitty to act.

She came into the room with an exasperated sigh and a clatter of high heels, elbowing past Lex and hoping he'd be too startled to lash out. Her eyes met Lois' for an instant, and then she was reaching out to Jason. "C'mon, Jason. Let's let the grown-ups talk about boring grownup stuff, okay honey?"

He started to take a step toward her, then hesitated, looking up at his mother. Kitty gave Lois a pleading look, hoping the reporter would realize she meant the boy no harm, and added, "Don't you want to go tell Kala that Mommy's here?"

That thawed him enough to sidle toward her, but he still looked up at Lois. "Are you gonna be okay?" Jason asked.

Lois' heart almost broke for him then. As scared as he was, Jason was still wanted to

protect her. "Sure, sweetheart," Lois said, forcing herself to smile. "You go tell Kala I'm coming, okay?"

He nodded, and with a last belligerent glance at Luthor, he followed Kitty from the room.

"Riley, leave us," Lex said softly.

"Boss..."

"Go," the older man reiterated firmly. "You searched her quite thoroughly, Riley, I'm sure to be safe. Go outside, tell Grant to get moving."

Now they were alone, and Lois was looking down the barrel of her own gun, seeing the dark amusement on Lex's face. Hatred, fear, and shame twisted within her, coalescing into furious bravado. Though it was probably unwise, Lois couldn't stop herself from provoking her old enemy. "Thoroughly indeed. If he'd been any more thorough, he'd have strip-searched me - which you no doubt would have enjoyed. Why didn't you order it, Lex? You could've videotaped the whole thing and watched it when the Viagra's not working."

Lex had stepped back slightly when Kitty and Jason left, keeping himself out of easy range. He knew all too well that Lois could handle herself in a fight, and if he gave her the slightest opportunity, she would try to wrestle the gun from him. So he merely chuckled at her taunts. "Ms. Lane...or shall I call you Lois? We do know each other, after all. Anyway, I wouldn't dream of ordering the men to strip-search you. They've been sequestered without feminine company for months."

Again, that cold gleam in his eyes shone as he added, "And I don't share."

A Dangerous Mind

*You belong to me,
My Snow White Queen.
There's nowhere to run,
So let's just get it over.
Soon I know you'll see
You're just like me.
Don't scream anymore,
My love,
'Cause all I want is you...*

~Evanescence, 'Snow White Queen'

Every rescue worker in the city knew Superman's mind was on something else. He flew through the last of the fires, blowing it out with freezing super-breath as he passed, and paused only long enough to see that no one at the scene was severely injured. Then the hero was gone, leaving without a word to the firefighters or the gathering press.

This last scene was near the *Daily Planet* building, and he headed there. A thought had been brewing in Superman's mind as he worked. *The logical assumption, finding Lois' car near the shipyards, would be that he's taken her on the ship. Then again, the logical assumption on seeing the message about the island would be that he took the kids to an actual island, and while we followed it up, he was on the ship all along. Luthor is smart enough to deceive us again; he might have them somewhere else entirely, expecting me to look for the ship.*

Not to mention, he's done something fairly large-scale with the crystals he stole from me. I'm not sure exactly what would happen to most of them if you just dropped them in the water - they build various structures, including the chamber that stripped my powers away. And Luthor has kryptonite. If I go looking for the ship, I might just find a trap instead. He has the twins and Lois - I can't let him catch me, too.

He had seen Lois check her cell phone messages from her office phone, but doing so required a PIN number that checking them from the phone itself didn't. Unfortunately, though he'd watched her punch numbers into the keypad, Kal-El had never tried to figure out exactly what the code was. It was one of the invasions of privacy that he spent a great deal of time avoiding, precisely because it would be so easy to do.

Now I wish I was a little less moral... Maybe Perry will know what her PIN is. The man who spent so much time flying around the city had learned long ago to fold his Clark clothes up and stash them in his cape pocket. He looked a little ruffled after changing in the airshaft, but not enough to cause comment. When he walked into the conference room, no one noticed his clothing at all.

"Where's Lois?" Perry asked, Lana and Richard seconding the question. Clark was caught out, his double life once again causing havoc. *How did I forget? Damn, a cover story, quick...*

At his dumbfounded look, though, Ella spoke, her voice rising slightly. *"Where is my daughter?"* she demanded, feeling her fearful hunch proved.

"We split up," Clark said, and quickly continued, "Lois was with Superman. I figured she'd be safe. But when all the fires started, I guess he had to leave her and take care of the city. Lois didn't show up where we were supposed to meet, and I found her car by the shipyards. Everything was in it except her and the gun, and her phone was broken."

"The shipyards," Richard muttered. "Luthor has her and the twins now, you can bet on it."

And we have no idea where the ship is headed - wish we could get Superman to look for it."

"They might not be on it," Jimmy said, and Clark was relieved to hear someone else voice his own thought. "Luthor's pretty devious. It'd be just like him to send Superman after the yacht when Lois and twins aren't even there."

"You're right," Perry said gruffly. "And knowing that evil sonofa..." He glanced at Ella, and continued, "...gun, he'd have a trap laid for Superman."

"But if not the ship, where?" Richard said in frustration.

"I wish we had a way to get Lois' phone messages," Clark said. "It looked like she was listening to it and then dropped it. Maybe there's a message from Luthor on it."

"Mrs. Mackenzie..." Lana started to say, but Richard leapt to his feet.

"We don't have to go through all that," the International editor said. "Lois can get her messages from any phone. All we have to do is dial her number and hit the pound key when her message starts."

"Don't you need a password or something for that?" Clark asked.

Richard looked crestfallen only for a moment. "Yeah, but she has all her PIN codes and things stored in a file on her computer. Perry, you can access her files, right?"

The editor-in-chief shook his head. "She's a department head, Richard. Her files are password protected, even from me. I.T. might be able to get it for you..."

Richard shook his head. "They take forever to do anything. Call them, but I'll try to guess her password."

"Good luck," Perry told him.

Ten minutes later, Richard was still sitting in front of Lois' computer glaring at her password protect screen, and only Ella Lane standing behind him kept him from cursing. Knowing that Lois' password was usually whatever was on her mind the most, he'd tried everything he could think of connected to the blackout. Then he started trying names, but none of the family's names worked.

He seemed stumped, and despair made Lois' office stifling, which was already crowded with Lana, Ella, and Clark watching Richard. Then Richard gave an annoyed sigh and typed in *Clark*.

That didn't work; however, it did make Ella raise an eyebrow. Richard then tried *Superman* and *Krypton*, but neither worked. After a moment, he asked through gritted teeth, "Clark, what's your middle name?"

"Huh?" He'd been watching, but seeing Richard try his name had made him nervous all over again. When all of this was over, he and Lois would have to figure out what they would tell Richard ... and everyone else. "Um, it's Joseph."

Richard froze, his hands tightening into fists for a second. Ella whipped her head around, eyes wide. Clark found it easy to look confused; he had no idea that Kala's middle name was Josephine, and that his daughter was named for him twice over. The password wasn't *Joseph* either. Not even *Elroy*, the name of Lois' childhood cat, worked.

"Maybe it's a place," Ella said. "Try *Wiesbaden*."

"Wiesbaden?" Clark asked. "What's the significance of that?"

"It's the city in Germany where Lois was born. Sam was stationed at the base there at the time," her mother replied.

"No luck," Richard said. "But she does tend to use a place - when I met her, her debit card PIN was the building and apartment number she lived at. I just wish I knew what location was on her mind the most lately..."

Clark didn't want to say it - didn't want to *think* it - but he had an idea. "Did you try *Fortress*?"

"As in Solitude? Good thought." Richard tried both words, but the image of Lois on the screen kept shaking her finger scoldingly. "Damn!"

"Try *Arctic*," Clark said.

"Arctic?"

"That's where the Fortress is... Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because Lois said she couldn't tell us where it is," Richard replied, looking at him narrowly.

In spite of the icy chill running down his spine, Clark gave him a helpless grin and pushed up his glasses. "Well, she swore me to secrecy with everything about, you know, *him*." Which wasn't a lie - Lois had talked a lot about Superman before she figured out the secret, and she'd always said that if anyone else heard her going on about him, she'd have to kill them.

Richard typed in the phrase, but it didn't work either. "I could've sworn that would be it..." he muttered.

A sudden flash of inspiration hit Clark then. "Wait. How'd you spell it?"

"A-R-C-T-I-C," Richard said, looking confused.

"How does Lois spell it?" Clark said.

Lana felt very left out, as everyone else in the room knew about that particular quirk. "Try it A-R-T-I-C," Ella said, crossing her fingers. All four of them cheered when the password was finally accepted.

However, the moment was rather spoiled for Clark by the speculative way that Ella and Richard were looking at him.

I don't share. Lois felt her stomach lurch at the implication. But she would never show that to Lex. Instead she sneered at him. "Oh, please, Lex. I'm not your type - I have ethics."

"I'm not your type either, Lois, being *human*, but we could work something out," he said cheerfully.

"Oh, yeah, 'cause the first thing I ever slept with was an alien," Lois muttered, rolling her eyes and guarding her heart.

"I'm aware he wasn't your first," Lex purred. "Women like you never wait. For you, the first time was probably in the backseat of his daddy's car. How old were you, Lois? Fourteen? Fifteen?"

"You know *nothing* about me, Lex," Lois growled. "You're just displacing your hatred of women on me. What happened to you as a kid to make you such a misogynist? Did the biggest tramp in school refuse to go out with you or something?"

He smiled thinly. "Women are devious, treacherous creatures, Lois, ruled by fickle emotions instead of cold logic. And I know enough about you to know you're a prime example of the type."

"You think so?" She couldn't let him see that anything got to her, couldn't act hurt or frightened by anything he said. Her only chance was to keep him talking long enough to turn the tables on him. Long enough for Kal-El to find them.

"Oh, of course," Lex replied. "You fell in love with this hero and let your lust for him blind you to everything about him - including the fact that he's an alien. You do realize you're lucky to be alive? Giving birth to his spawn might've killed you, if they'd had their powers from the start. And what a legacy *that* would be, hmm?"

"So he's not from around here," Lois spat, edging closer to him. "He's still more human than *you* are. You don't even have his excuse; you're just a monster, a sick, warped, sad old man whose Mommy didn't hug him enough or something."

It wasn't working. Lex only smiled, circling to keep the distance between them the same. "Such spirit, such utter ruthlessness. You'd say anything to get the upper hand here, wouldn't you? You're just like me, Lois, only you have limits."

"I am *nothing* like you," Lois replied hotly, unable to keep the vehemence out of her voice then.

"You aren't?" Lex asked. "May I remind you that you were perfectly willing to shoot an unarmed man in the back? That's cold-blooded murder, Lois."

"That was justifiable homicide," she hissed. "Difference is, it was *you* I tried to kill. Anyone who knew you would do the same."

"No, no, no," Lex corrected her. "They'd say they would, of course. They'd even mean it. But when the moment came, most people couldn't pull the trigger. Most people aren't killers, Lois. You are - so am I."

"I'm not a killer except when it comes to you," Lois replied. "And the city of Metropolis would give me a parade if I did."

"You're still just waiting for a chance to murder me," Lex said, and knowing it didn't seem to bother him very much. "I find it amusing that your boyfriend is such a moralist, and you're so very ... practical. Maybe that's why he left you high and dry after he got what he wanted?"

Lois couldn't keep up the illusion of being unaffected, and she knew Lex had seen the flash of hurt in her eyes. But she tried valiantly to seem as though it didn't matter. "Oh, please. Lex, you're grasping at straws - you don't know the first thing..."

"Don't I?" he replied softly. "The two of you were very cozy at his little Arctic getaway. Had he taken you already, or were those hybrid brats conceived in the triumphant afterglow of having beaten me?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Not everything is about *you*, Lex," Lois snapped, disgusted by his insinuation. After fighting him and the Kryptonian villains, she and Kal-El had had a lot more on their minds than celebrating their 'victory'. Namely, their traumatic breakup...

"Oh, Lois," Lex chuckled. "Did you even realize how obvious the two of you were? The way you ran to him, that overly-long hug, and then the way you looked at each other. He touched your cheek, and his voice was infatuated when he asked if you were all right. If you two had been any more obviously sweet, I would've gone into a diabetic coma on the spot." Lex grinned wolfishly, seeing that he'd struck close to home. "You must've been so disappointed to see what he was really like. Barely a month later, he's not just failing to return your calls, he's left the entire *planet*. Even I have a hard time believing you were *that* bad in bed. Maybe he just wasn't ready for the pressures of fatherhood."

"He didn't know," Lois growled softly. "He wouldn't have left if he knew."

"They all say that, darling," Lex told her, making a mockery of the gentle sympathetic tone. "Lois, you're a smart woman - how on earth did you get yourself into a situation like this? All he had to do was take one x-ray-aided look in your belly. And you honestly believe he didn't know?"

Lois clenched her teeth, refusing to rise to the bait. *That isn't true*, she reminded herself. *He wouldn't lie to me - he wouldn't have left me if he'd known. Kal-El's a better man than that. This bastard thinks everyone's as cold-bloodedly self-interested as he is.*

Since she didn't react, Lex twisted the knife a little further. "What a terrible stain that would be on his heroic reputation. But then, you *did* get your revenge by writing my all-time favorite article, *Why the World Doesn't Need Superman*. I loved it."

"I love your boat," Lois retorted, his sarcastic comment rallying her. She *hated* it when people misinterpreted that editorial - it had been a wake-up call, not a kiss-off. "This yacht's a little rich for your blood, though. What'd you do, Lex, swindle some old widow out of her estate?"

His smile looked friendly, but so does a crocodile's. "On the grand scale of things, it wasn't much," he admitted coolly, "but I needed the practice after prison."

Lois nodded. "Nice. It's kinda big, though, you know? Almost looks as if you're compensating for something. I mean, we all know you're phalli- oops, I meant *follicly*-challenged."

A glint of anger in his eyes, and Lex took a step nearer. "Very amusing, Lois. Very amusing indeed. But you haven't exactly had a chance to judge, now have you? Though it can be arranged, I assure you."

Lois saw an opportunity there. Not a very pleasant one, but given the drift of his taunting, it might even work. *So this is what he wants. If it saves Jason and Kala...* "Fine, Lex. Let my kids off this boat, and you can do anything you want with me," Lois said, though her stomach churned with nausea. "You only need one hostage to guarantee Superman will come here. Let the twins go." And though it pained her like dragging a barbed fishhook out of her flesh, she added softly, "Please."

Lex moved even a little nearer, the gun slightly lowered. "Anything?" he asked, an evil gleam in his eyes.

Squaring her jaw, Lois looked at him directly. "I said anything, didn't I? Just let Jason and Kala go, and I'll stay."

Smiling like a shark, Lex murmured, "Tempting offer, Lois. Very tempting. However, I don't think bedding you would be very good for my health - you might try to strangle me in my sleep. No, much to my sorrow, I'll have to decline. Besides, you probably weren't aware of it, but the engines started some time ago. While our caped friend is distracted, we're heading out to sea."

Lois was still reeling from that knowledge when Lex added casually, "It's nice to know you'd do *anything* for your children, though. I suppose your protectiveness makes up for your lack of certain other parenting skills."

She tried not to flinch, but he must've seen it in her eyes and bored in on that topic. "You know, for someone who *is* so overprotective, you really should've taught them not to talk to strangers. Kala and Jason actually made friends with one of my employees, Brutus. Of course, there were problems." He was circling her again, his eyes greedy on her face, searching for signs of distress. "The security team was chosen simply for their muscle; I paid no attention to their record. No one knew that Brutus preferred his women young - very young. Apparently, he attempted something with little Kala."

Lois gasped. She couldn't help it. *Kala... Oh, baby, I should have been there. I should have been there to protect you...* And even as terror and heartbreak swept over her, rage began to well up. If this Brutus had walked into the room, she would've leapt at him with only her bare hands.

Lex wasn't done. "Fortunately, your son intervened. He threw a piano at Brutus - a grand piano. Completely crushed him. I don't think the boy even realizes that what he's done."

For one moment, Lois literally swayed with the shock of what she'd heard. That the twins had been left alone with a child molester - and that Jason had been forced to kill the man to protect his sister - horrified her almost beyond bearing. *A piano? He had the strength to push a piano at speed? No wonder he was so upset when he said he had saved Kala. Oh my God... You monster... How did I ever let this happen?* But Lex's next words brought her back to reality like a well-timed slap.

"Such a wonderful mother you are, Lois," Lex said softly, his eyes bright with the knowledge that he was finally getting deep under her skin. "Not even seven, already your daughter's a cocktease, and your son's a killer. I guess we know where they both got it from, don't we?"

He had one instant to see the sudden fire in her eyes, and to realize that he'd stepped too close. Then Lois leaped at him with a furious cry, grabbing the gun in her left hand with amazing speed. He caught her right hand as she went for his throat, and they held each other pinned like that, fraught with violence.

Lex laughed softly, luxuriating in her rage and pain. "Seems I hit a nerve there, Lois. A little too close to the truth for you?"

Her hazel eyes narrowed. In that blinding instant of unmitigated rage, nothing else in the world mattered except retaliation. In that instant, it was Lex versus Lois, and she was determined to win. Dropping his gun hand, she cocked her fist as far back as she could, popped one knuckle up, and punched Lex in the side with all the force she could muster. *You hit a nerve all right, you bastard,* Lois thought as she felt bone snap, *but I hit a rib.*

Richard quickly found the file that held all of Lois' personal information. He'd told her it was a bad idea to keep it all in one place, but she'd retorted that she needed all those endless codes and passwords accessible *somewhere*, and it was quite secure enough. *Guess she was right about that ... we'd have never gotten her password if not for Clark.*

It took him only a moment to dial Lois' cell phone number, hit the pound key, and punch in her code. He'd put her office phone on speaker so the others could hear it, but at the first syllable of Luthor's voice rasping across his nerves, he regretted it.

Everyone listened in silence, up until the moment when Luthor's 'musical interlude' began. Clark was standing by the window, looking out, and Richard saw his shoulders tense just before the twins started crying. Then Richard's own vision was too clouded by anger and fear to see anything else.

Lana's hand went to her mouth, and in those lovely green eyes the first glimmer of steely anger began to show. How dare Luthor... Lana could empathize now with Lois' desire to kill the man.

Ella stared at the phone, horrified. Her grandchildren ... that monster Luthor was in for a surprise when her daughter got hold of him. Her whole expression spoke of caged fury, and anyone who looked at her face would know where Lois got her iron will and fierce maternal drive.

And then, the kids' voices faded, and Luthor returned to the phone. "It will be in your best interest to come quickly, Ms. Lane. Come to bay 19 - the *Gertrude* is docked and waiting for you. I won't wait here very long. Our mutual friend in tights will only be kept busy for a while."

The end of the message occasioned a flurry of activity in Lois' office. Richard bolted to his feet, heading for the door. "C'mon, he's on the ship. I can call the port authority from my

cell phone and find out if it's still in the repair bay. If not, we'll track it through the air."

Lana was at his side immediately, as determined as he was to track down Lois and the twins. Any potential rivalry was forgotten - living in the city hadn't knocked the Smallville out of her yet, and she couldn't do anything but try her utmost to rescue them from Luthor.

For a moment, Ella considered going with them. But then she held back - this was a task for the young and the strong. "Go on," she said in a low voice. "Find them and bring them back."

Clark had hesitated as well, and Richard looked back at him. Based on what he knew, he expected Clark to be right beside them on the search. Instead, the taller man was hanging back. "Have you got her spare keys, Richard?" he asked incongruously.

"Yeah ... why?"

"Give them to me. I'll move Lois' car and try to get in touch with Superman. Hopefully if he sees her car being driven, he'll drop by, and I can pass the information on to him. You might need his help dealing with Luthor."

"Good idea," Richard said, pulling the car key off his key ring and tossing it to Clark. "We might be in the air, so tell him to look for my plane."

"Will do," Clark said, catching the keys easily. He was only a few steps behind Richard and Lana as they left, and waited for them to get in the elevator before he ducked down the maintenance corridor.

Most men, even strong men, would've faltered. Lex did so only for a second, but prison had sharpened his reflexes and his resistance to pain. The hand holding the Ladysmith was now free, and he swung it sharply against the side of Lois' head.

The barrel of her own gun smacked against her temple, and Lois felt her legs weaken, her vision graying out. Lex pistol-whipped her again, but because she was falling to her knees the blow only glanced off her shoulder. It still hurt, and against her will she cried out. Then she was trying to break her fall, and Lex's weight came down on her, the gun spinning away from both of them.

Lois fought, but Lex had his knee in the middle of her back and was holding one elbow. The harder she struggled, the farther up he twisted her arm. With strength born of desperation, Lois managed to get her other arm under her and push both of them off the floor.

Lex gave her arm another savage yank, and socked her in the jaw. He pulled the punch, but it was enough to let her know she was beaten - for now. Lois lay still, panting.

"Bitch," Lex muttered, his voice slipping into the dialect of Suicide Slum, where he'd been born. "You broke my fucking rib! Lucky for you I like your face the way it is, or I'd break your goddamn jaw."

Lois concentrated on breathing, her shoulder afire, all of his weight pressing down against her spine. Lex had to fight to regain control, and when he spoke again, his voice was once more the unaccented tones of an educated man. "Riley! Come here."

He'd called out loudly enough for the other man to hear even several rooms away, and Lois heard him approach warily. "Boss?"

"Give me a couple of those cable ties," Lex said coolly, his breathing shallow because of the cracked rib.

"I don't know what you're..."

"The cable ties you always carry with you, Riley," Lex elaborated, his low tone indicating that he'd almost run out of patience. "Just in case you meet a future movie star. Give me two

of them. Now."

Lois ground her teeth as Lex wrenched her arms behind her back and slipped the cable ties over her wrists. Looped into each other and zipped tight against her skin, the tough plastic was more secure than handcuffs, which at least had a lock she could pick.

Lex finally got off of her, hissing in pain as he stood up. "You okay, boss?" Riley asked.

"Fine," Lex said shortly, pressing his hand against his side. "Cracked rib, that's all. Get me that gun." Without warning, Lex leaned down and grabbed a handful of Lois' hair at the nape of her neck, hauling her to her feet.

Biting her lip to stifle a whimper, Lois scrambled up with difficulty, her scalp burning. Lex tightened his grip on Lois' hair and forced her to face him. "Not very smart, Lois. Brave, but not bright."

Hatred glittered in hazel eyes, but Lois refused to answer. Riley handed Lex the gun silently, and the reporter glared even more savagely at the easy way he gripped *her* revolver.

Lex tapped the barrel of the Ladysmith against Lois' cheek. "Behave, or I'll have to hit you again. And I don't want you unconscious for what comes next."

Lois didn't trust herself to reply. She kept telling herself to stay calm, to wait for an opportunity to get her hands free. That anything she said at this point might be taken out on the twins, who had been through so much already. Lex had apparently had enough of taunting her for the moment, and he kept the gun pressed against her side as well a tight grip on her hair as he forced her out of the room and down the corridor.

Going up the stairs wasn't easy with her hands behind her, and Lois nearly stumbled once. Lex kept pushing her onward until they arrived at a narrow door with one of the ubiquitous portholes in it. It had a view straight out onto the helipad, and Lois' keen eyes landed on the helicopter. If she could get loose, she'd be able to call for help on its radio...

Lex nodded to Riley, and he opened the door, revealing a small pantry with steel cabinets. "Like your new accommodations, Lois?" Lex asked, pulling her head back sharply so that she felt his breath on her neck. "I picked this room for you because it happens to be the exact dimensions of the solitary confinement cells on Stryker's Island. Quite cozy, don't you think? Don't bother calling for help. It's completely lead-lined and soundproofed." A soft laugh that raised the fine hairs on the back of her neck in revulsion, and Lex added, "I've thought of everything. Enjoy your stay, Lois."

With that he shoved her forward roughly, and though Lois caught her balance in seconds, she wasn't quick enough to stop Lex from slamming the door on her. Kicking the door and demanding release was futile, so she cursed Lex and his ancestry until she felt a little more in control of herself.

And then, left alone at last, Lois set about trying to find a way out of her predicament.

...

Clark moved Lois' car as he'd promised ... as Superman, he picked it up and flew it to a nearby parking area, leaving the doors locked. Then he flew high into the clouds, noting in the distance Richard's plane taking off. *Good*, he thought absently as he scanned the bay for the yacht.

There, already powering away from land, was the *Gertrude*. Superman scowled as he caught sight of it, and flew toward it well below his swiftest pace. To the growing anger that demanded he catch Luthor, *now*, he thought resolutely, *I can't fly right into a trap - Luthor has to know I'm coming. I won't be able to save Lois and the twins if I just go bursting in. I have to be wary...*

A low rumbling noise caught his attention, and he slowed still further to listen. That sounded suspiciously familiar, but he'd never heard it on the East Coast...

The rumbling grew louder, and he halted, peering down through the water. What he saw there chilled him: a widening crack in the sea floor, gradually heading toward Metropolis...

*Damn! The city is **not** prepared for an earthquake.* He looked once more at the yacht, and saw that although it was moving quickly by the standards of a large ship, he would be able to catch up with it easily. Of greater concern was the speck on the horizon. Kal-El had a bad feeling that he knew what that was - some outgrowth of the crystals, pressing outward on a crack in the sea floor and causing the seismic waves.

Cursing fate and duty, he reversed his direction and sped back toward Metropolis.

Lex went to lie down briefly after binding his chest. Unbelievable that Lois had broken a rib ... he'd known she was dangerous, but he hadn't realized she had the skill in hand-to-hand fighting to do something like that. He lay looking up at the ceiling and wondered, *Maybe I need to rethink my plans for her?*

After a few moments of deep thought, Lex closed his eyes. *No. A few particulars may need to be revised - a little more emphasis on the hypnotics, perhaps the use of stronger sedatives in the beginning - but the plan as a whole should still be workable. There is a certain amount of risk, but that has always existed. No one could hope to keep Lois Lane captive for any length of time without considering the consequences...*

With those pleasant thoughts, he began to drift into sleep. The caped hero should be busier than ever soon, and he would have ample time to set up both distractions. Lex relaxed as much as he ever did...

The door to his stateroom eased open, and a silhouette appeared in the doorway. After watching him carefully, the dark-haired woman slipped inside and closed the door softly behind her. She was shivering in fear and loathing, but her cheeks bloomed with bright roses of anger.

Creeping closer to Lex's bed, she kept her right hand close to her side. Only when she was right beside him did she raise it, wrapping both hands around the hilt of the large chef's knife she'd stolen from the galley. Taking a deep breath, Kitty rose up on her toes in order to give herself more distance to swing the blade down and build speed for the impact with Lex's chest...

Lois bit her lip at the searing pain in her shoulders. Just a little bit more... She strained to stretch her arms as far as she could, the cable ties biting into her wrists cruelly. *This will only work because most of my height is leg,* Lois thought as she struggled to get her bound hands underneath her rump. This particular escape skill was one she'd practiced before, just in case she was taken hostage while investigating a story. It required flexibility, and it hurt like mad at the moment, but if it worked... *I have to get us out of here, most especially Kala and Jason. If I can just keep us all in one piece until Kal-El gets here... Come **on**, dammit! Stupid ties...*

There! Lois sighed with relief, blowing a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. She was now sitting on her bound hands, which were quickly going numb from the pressure of the cable ties. All she had to do now was work them forward to her knees and then get her feet out of the loop formed by her arms. *Piece of cake, really. Now all I have to do is find out what's in those cabinets and MacGyver my way out that door.*

Just as she managed to stand up, however, a monstrous wave lifted the ship, and Lois

slipped to the floor again as the yacht crested the wave and rode down its trough. *What the hell?!*

*I'm searching for answers
Not questioned before.
The curse of awareness,
There's no peace of mind.
As your true colors show
A dangerous sign...
It's in your eyes,
What's on your mind.
I fear your smile
and the promise inside.
It's in your eyes,
What's on your mind.
I fear your presence,
I'm frozen inside...
~Within Temptation, 'A Dangerous Mind'*

Ties That Bind

*I'll find you
Somewhere,
I'll keep on trying.
Until my dying day.
I just need to know
Whatever has happened,
The Truth will free my soul.
Wherever that you are, I won't stop searching.
Whatever it takes, I need to know...*

~ Within Temptation, *Somewhere*

Ella and Jimmy were both in Perry's office, and Ella used his phone to call several of Sam's old friends in the military. While anyone else might've had to wade through a chain of command, General Lane's widow was immediately handed off to someone who could actually help her.

"This is concerning my daughter, Lois Lane," the two men heard her say. "She and my two grandchildren have been kidnapped by Lex Luthor. Yes, *him*. The one who caused havoc with long-range military weapons almost eight years ago... Why thank you, General Maggin. We know they're on a yacht called the *Gertrude*. They left Metropolis harbor this afternoon. Is there any way...? ... Thank you very much, sir. Yes, I'll be at this number, but you'd do better to contact Richard White, Lois' fiancé. He's a pilot - he's in the air right now, searching for her. Here's his number.... Thank you."

Perry was chuckling as she hung up the phone. "And what exactly do you find amusing about this, Peregrine?" Ella asked.

"Elinore Lane calls in the Army," he replied. "You've got more contacts than some of my best reporters. I have no trouble believing that three-star generals still salute the phone when you call."

"Why, thank you, Peregrine," Ella told him coolly, but a hint of a smile curved her lips. "It's nice to know you're capable of something other than sarcasm..."

She trailed off in mid-sentence, those hazel eyes narrowing as she stared out the window over Perry's shoulder. He and Jimmy both turned to look, seeing a glittering haze around the buildings further up the street. "What the heck is that?" Jimmy wondered aloud.

The haze was moving toward them ... fast. A chattering noise distracted Perry, and he glanced down, scowling at the pens seeming to dance across his desk. He and Jimmy were both perplexed by the phenomenon.

Ella, however, had lived in Japan. She felt the tremor and knew what it was. "Earthquake," she said quickly. "Perry, we have to get everyone out right now."

"This building's stood since 1938," he scoffed. "No little shake is gonna..."

As if it had heard his challenge, the seismic wave struck with its full force at that moment. All the glass - the huge windows as well as the office doors and interior walls - seemed to explode. The expensive new flat-screen televisions fell from their brackets, and stacked papers slid to the floor everywhere. Perry, Ella, and Jimmy instinctively shielded their eyes, hearing panicked yells from the bullpen as the floor bucked under the reporters' feet.

Once the noise of falling glass fragments stopped, Perry barked, "Everybody, outside, *now!* Take the stairs, let's have an orderly exit. C'mon people, *move!*" They were all so accustomed to obeying that demanding bellow that his voice reassured them, and everyone

started moving toward the stairwells. Lowering his voice, he asked of Jimmy and Ella, "You guys all right?"

"Fine," Ella said, taking hold of the bottom of her blouse and giving it a quick shake to dislodge any fragments of glass. "James?"

"Y-yeah," Jimmy replied, and then got hold of himself. "We'd better get moving."

"Just what I was saying," Perry grumbled, and they joined the press of people around the stairwells.

Kitty took a deep breath, and the knife came down. Her breath rushed back out with the force behind the blow, making a slight noise in the still air, and Lex's eyes snapped open. His mind jerked from sweet dreams of Lois' voice, pleading softly, into the reality of his death, inches away.

In prison he'd dealt with attempts on his life; he was a much lighter sleeper now, and he woke far quicker than he had six years ago. Lex reacted to the threat with reptilian speed, catching Kitty's hands in his own and stopping the knife just above his chest.

Kitty looked down at him, trembling, rabbit-eyed with terror, her breath coming in a shaky gasp. Lex smiled up at her, and for one long terrible moment they froze like that, their eyes locked. And then the giant wave struck, the cabin seeming to rise and pitch, unbalancing Kitty. Lex yanked her hands forward across his body, plunging the knife harmlessly into the mattress beside him. She fell atop him, and Lex rolled them both over, keeping his grip on her hands tight as he pinned her under him.

"Lex ... please ... don't..." Kitty whimpered, and the fear in her eyes was ambrosia to him. Even his cracked rib didn't hurt, his veins singing with exhilaration, feeling more alive than ever. He chuckled softly as he transferred his grip, holding both her slender wrists in one hand while he reached for the knife. "Lex! No!!"

"Shh," Lex purred, tickling the cold blade along Kitty's cheek, down to where her pulse fluttered in her throat. "Hush now, and I won't have to hurt you." The tip of the knife slipped under her blouse, her breasts rising and falling with her rapid breath, and the blade caught at the top button. It popped off when he flicked the knife, and Kitty shuddered to see the gleam in Lex's eyes as he added softly, "Much."

Richard banked the plane, peering out the windows at the horizon. There was definitely something there...

The radio crackled to life; he was still listening to Metropolis tower, and he heard the warning go out to all the planes in the area. "Attention all flights, abort landing procedures immediately! Metropolis International appears to be experiencing an earthquake. Resume holding patterns... Divert if possible."

Richard stared at the radio. "An *earthquake*? You've got to be kidding!"

"That wave we saw," Lana said. "Something's going on out to sea."

"Luthor," Richard muttered, and his voice had begun to take on some of the deep loathing that colored Lois' when she spoke the name. "Whatever he's done, it's huge."

Lana just kept silent, staring out the window as she tried to imagine how one man - no matter how brilliant or evil - could have caused an earthquake. Her attention only snapped back to Richard when she heard him say, "...take you home."

"What?" Lana asked, looking at him incredulously. "Please tell me you're not seriously talking about turning around and dropping me off someplace 'safe'."

He looked honestly perplexed. "Well, this is probably gonna be a little dicey..."

"As if I didn't know that," Lana scolded. She had to turn sideways in her seat to see his face, and the headphones brought every nuance of her voice to his ears clearly. "You listen here, Richard White. I may not be as good at this kind of thing as Lois - I'm not the type to carry a gun everywhere, I can't out-curse a merchant marine, and I try to drive within shouting distance of the speed limit. But you are not going to pack me off home as soon as things get dangerous like I'm some kind of ... of fluff-brained little *cheerleader* who doesn't know enough to keep herself out of trouble! I knew what I was getting into when I volunteered for this, and I'm not backing out now."

As much as he admired her spirit, Richard couldn't help being a little skeptical. "So you're telling me you've been in situations like this before and you know exactly how you'll react?"

Lana crossed her arms and scowled. "No, Richard, I've never been in a situation like this before. Have *you*? Because I very much doubt you spend every weekend rescuing your fiancée and her children from the clutches of some megalomaniac. Sounds like a very strange hobby to me."

"Okay, okay," he said, chuckling at last. "Point taken."

"Not to mention, it's an *earthquake*," Lana added. "I'm probably safer up here with you - I think."

"Lana, I'm glad you're here, all right? I just don't want you in danger, too," Richard said. "I'm not going to try to send you home."

"Good," Lana retorted, "because I'm not leaving you."

Silence reigned for a long moment, and they looked at each other askance.

"I'm not leaving you to do this alone," Lana elaborated. "Because you might screw it up." Richard started laughing at her choice of words, and she added a trifle sharply, "Your gender can't be trusted to go to the hardware store for a box of finishing nails and not spend \$150 - and forget the nails!"

"Excuse me?" Richard actually looked away from the controls for a moment; he was already piloting the plan toward the anomaly on the horizon. He just couldn't believe they were fighting the battle of the sexes at the moment. "Lana, *your* gender can't be trusted alone in a department store. *Lois* can't even leave Macy's without some makeup or a new pair of heels."

"At least we *use* what we buy," Lana shot back. "My ex-husband has enough darned spackle to last him until Judgment Day."

Both of them stared out the window in huffy silence, watching the peculiar bump in the distance grow larger. And then, replaying the conversation in their minds and considering it in light of the anxiety that had only become more pronounced when Lois went missing, Richard and Lana both started cracking up.

Lois had gotten her hands in front of herself, and managed to stand up again in spite of the suddenly choppy seas. She started rifling through the cabinets and drawers, hoping, praying.

And coming up empty. Lex was *thorough*. He hadn't left much in here, just a silicone spatula and a box of cereal forgotten in the back of one cabinet... But wait. In the bottom of the last drawer Lois tried, she found a heavy marble rolling pin.

Lois hefted it and eyed the porthole. Just maybe... She didn't let herself think too much about it, just ran at the door and smashed the rolling pin against the porthole with every ounce of force she could muster. The shock of the blow ran up her forearms and jarred every bone in

her body, making her stagger back to see the damage she'd caused...

Nothing. Lois swore softly as she looked the glass over; it wasn't glass at all, but thick Plexiglas. *Anything with 'Lex' in it is bad friggin' news*, she thought savagely, slapping her palm against the door angrily.

There was nothing to do but try again, and this time her efforts were rewarded by a tiny chip flying off the surface. Encouraged by this small sign of the porthole's vulnerability, Lois struck at it again ... and again ... and again. Into every blow, she put all of her fear for the twins and all of her rage at Luthor, persevering even though her arms started to shake and her shoulders burned from the effort.

Ultimately, she had to take a break, leaning against the door and looking out at the helipad across the way. Lois was panting with exertion, and the porthole in front of her now had many tiny chips missing. Hopefully she was weakening the structural integrity of the damned thing.

She saw Stanford first, walking to the helicopter and looking over his shoulder nervously. Behind him came Kitty, clutching the Pomeranian like a security blanket and acting skittish as a stray cat. For a moment her eyes met Lois' through the porthole. A bleak terror had taken up residence in them, and Lois could only surmise that the swollen lip and bruised cheek had something to do with it.

Circumstances didn't give her much chance to pity, however. Right behind Kitty, Grant was holding Jason's shoulders lightly and directing him along the walkway to the helicopter... Lois' breath caught in her throat, eyes widening, as she saw Riley doing the same with Kala. And at the rear of this little parade was Lex, his hand in his pocket presumably keeping a grip on that damned kryptonite shiv. He saw Lois and waved to her, smiling cheerfully.

"No," Lois whispered, but her voice didn't stay soft for long. "Oh, no, you sonofabitch. No, you're not... How dare you! Leave them alone! *Where the hell are you taking my children, you bastard?!*" She reared back for one penultimate blow, feeling something break as she slammed the rolling pin against the porthole and not knowing if it was her wrist or the pin or the Plexiglas.

Jason was already inside the chopper, Grant getting back out, and Riley pushing his sister up to it. Kala's head whipped around at the thudding impact from the pantry, and two sets of hazel eyes met for just an instant. Lois couldn't hear her daughter's voice, but she saw the sudden light of mingled relief and terror in Kala's countenance, saw her mouth moving to form a scream for *Mommy*. She almost broke free of Riley's hands, darting so suddenly when she'd been quiescent for so long.

But Lex was there, and the shard was in his hand, and Kala backpedaled in terror of that green crystal. Lois screamed at him, knowing the room was soundproofed but not caring, screamed at him to leave Kala alone until she felt something in her throat give and her voice descended into a harsh croak.

Coughing, her throat on fire, Lois collapsed against the door as the men loaded Kala onto the helicopter. She looked out again in time to see the chopper lift off, trying to memorize which direction they were going.

I won't let him win, she silently promised them. *I'll get out of here, and as soon as your father can hear my heartbeat, he'll come after me. Then we'll both come and get you. Hang on, Jason and Kala. Hang on, sweethearts, Mommy's on her way.*

With that thought in mind, she found the rolling pin and grimly set to work on the porthole again.

Metropolis had never been built to withstand an earthquake. As the wave of seismic energy passed through the city, windows shattered, signs fell, streets buckled, and citizens panicked. Superman found himself pushed to his absolute limit dealing with multiple crises, and all the while in the back of his mind he prayed that Lois and the twins were still all right.

Even as he dealt with all of it, he worried about those he loved the most. Out at sea, the yacht would feel little effect from the earthquake - its size would protect it, if it met the waves head-on. And Richard and Lana were in the air, safe from the chaos on the ground. Perry, Ella, and Jimmy were at the *Planet* ... in the center of town...

He caught a falling construction worker while barely pausing in his flight, setting the man down and rocketing toward the building he knew so well. His x-ray vision quickly revealed that everyone had gotten out of the building safely in the first tremors, and Superman slowed, taking a deep breath. But the rain pattering down around them perplexed him; why was it raining in front of the *Planet*, and nowhere else? Superman looked up, and saw the gigantic globe balanced atop the cistern on the roof. His mind froze as the metal structure began tipping forward ever so slightly...

Fortunately, his body reacted to the threat instantly. No time to fly around the buildings blocking his path; the *Planet* globe came tumbling down incredibly fast once gravity caught hold of it. Superman went *through* the office building next door, punching through steel and plaster, no more than a red and blue blur past the empty desks.

Not even the quickest camera could've captured him as he ducked under the globe. Catching it was easy; holding it balanced was not. Superman had to lower the massive structure very gently, though it pleased him to hear Jimmy's camera whirring down below. *This ought to win him a Pulitzer of his own*, he thought distractedly as he landed, looking for some place to set the globe down.

A wrecked car would have to do, and Superman let the weight of the globe crush it. *I'll have to come back for that later*, he thought, glancing at the crowd. Jimmy was staring at his camera as if it had suddenly turned to gold - which it might as well have. Perry, who had been standing right where the globe would've landed, was mouthing *Great Caesar's ghost*.

And Ella Lane hurried down the steps into the street, while everyone else hung back. "Superman!" she called as she came right up to him. "Superman, Lois Lane is missing. She's ... we think Luthor has her."

"I know, Mrs. Lane," he replied. "Clark Kent told me. I'm on my way there as soon as the city's secure." He didn't have time to say more than that, and flew off to the next crisis.

Which left Ella staring after him, looking troubled. "You all right, Elinore?" Perry asked gruffly. "Never thought I'd see one man drive *two* Lane women speechless."

"He knows who I am," she mused aloud.

Lex hummed to himself as he watched the screen on the little black device he held. It looked like a PDA, but had no brand markings. It presently showed a map of Metropolis, streets in glowing green against a black background. One red dot moved rapidly around the screen, leaving faint afterimages behind it.

Kitty was sitting across from him, the twins on either side of her. None of them would've sat beside Lex if their lives depended on it, and they were perfectly willing to cram into one seat together to avoid him. Even Tala growled softly at him.

"Twenty minutes to location, boss," Stanford said loudly, and Lex nodded.

"Good. He's still busy," Lex replied absently. The alpha-wave tracker had gotten a lot sleeker since the prototype that had led him to the Arctic years ago, and it was an even more efficient means of keeping tabs on his nemesis.

Kala and Jason glared at him. Lex had placed the shiv in his pocket, but that was no real insulation, so they both felt weak and feverish in its presence. At least he hadn't actually touched them with it. Both twins were beginning to hate Lex Luthor ... but of course Kala would have to be the one to say something about it.

"My mommy's gonna kick your butt," she announced.

"Your mommy will have a hard time finding me where we're going," Lex replied easily.

"Our daddy'll get you. Both of our daddies will," Jason muttered sulkily. "Superman never lets the bad guys win."

Lex chuckled. "Oh, I have plans for your daddy, too."

"Lex, leave them alone," Kitty said, but a hard look silenced her again.

Kala was seething. The bad bald man hadn't let her see her mother - he'd let *Jason* see her, and of course her brother had told her about it, but the reality of Mommy-on-the-boat didn't really strike her until she actually saw her mother through the porthole. And then she'd been livid, trying to get to Mommy, but Lex had threatened her with the green rock again.

"You're gonna wish you were nice to us," Kala grumbled. "You're gonna say sorry-I-didn't-mean-it, and nobody's gonna believe you. 'Cause you're a bad, bad man."

Lex only smiled at her, and the rest of the helicopter ride was spent in tense silence. Gradually the shadow on the horizon drew nearer, and revealed itself to be a modestly-sized island.

"Not quite as big as we hoped," Stanford fretted.

His visions of a kryptonite continent fading, Lex appraised the landmass. It was still big enough to make a nice base of operations - not to mention the kryptonite that could be mined from it. "Size isn't everything," he mused as they circled the island.

"You'd know," Kitty whispered poisonously. Lex turned to her, a cold look in his eyes, and Tala's lips peeled back in a savage snarl.

Ignoring the dog - it was high time he chucked the little furball overboard - Lex warned, "Katherine, you're in danger of becoming superfluous."

"I hope she kills you," Kitty said. "*He* might be too good a man, but Lois Lane will rip your heart out with her bare hands if you ever give her the chance."

"Such charming sentiment, my dear," Lex replied. "Are you still angry with me for earlier?"

He'd spoken in tones of such tender solicitation that Kitty was sickened, and turned to look out the window, hugging Tala tighter.

Stanford didn't like the conversation going on behind him, so he ignored it and landed the chopper on a flat patch of crystal. It looked like dark stone, its color and translucence suggesting Metropolis' worst smog coalesced into solid form.

Lex practically bounded out of the helicopter while the blades were still spinning, saying to Stanford as he did so, "Fire up the ultrasonic signaler. By the time he gets here, I'll be ready for guests."

Aftershocks were still trembling the foundations of the city. A suspension bridge had become twisted, its roadway hanging by only a few cables. He knotted the broken cables back together as a temporary fix, and flew stranded motorists across the river to firm ground.

Subway trains had jumped their tracks - he flew down the tunnels to right them and carry injured passengers to safety. Tenement buildings in Suicide Slum had collapsed entirely, and Superman located the survivors and moved tons of rubble to rescue them.

Some of this work simply couldn't be hurried, no matter how keenly aware he was of the danger to Lois and the twins. This was a taste of his future: the rest of his life, he'd be balancing his duty against his obligation to his son and daughter, and if he was lucky, to their mother.

Just a little faster... Please, Lois, be all right. Keep the kids safe just a little longer for me, please... I'm on my way.

At that moment, a sharp noise cut across his delicate hearing, making him freeze in midair. The voice he least wanted to hear resounded in his ears, carried on ultrasonic waves.

"Greetings, flyboy. This is your old friend Lex. I'd like to request your attendance at my little housewarming party. I'm sure you're very interested to see the other guests of honor. Come find me eighty miles offshore, and come quickly - I might get impatient and start the festivities without you."

That was very close to a blatant threat. Superman paused, listening; the city was still crying out for his help, but Metropolis did have emergency workers. He had to make a choice ... and with the worst of the disaster averted, he chose to take on Luthor.

Turning in midair, he rocketed toward the anomaly on the horizon.

Lois had to rest again, and she was leaning against the opposite wall when the door opened from the outside. At first, seeing on the tall, broad-shouldered silhouette, hope leaped up in her chest. But then Riley stepped into the room, grinning broadly, and Lois' smile of joyful welcome fell. "You," she growled.

"Hello, beautiful," Riley said. He was carrying a collapsible police baton in one hand, and kept flipping it like he was in a parade or something. The expression of long-awaited happiness on his face nauseated Lois. "I'm going to make you famous."

"I'm already famous, you moron," Lois retorted.

"Oh, feisty," Riley said happily. "I like the spirited ones - they last longer."

"Really?" Lois said, sounding bored. *Keep him talking*, she thought to herself, surreptitiously eyeing the doorway. She backed away, hoping to draw Riley far enough into the small room that she could dart past him. "Seems to me like anything more than thirty seconds would be wasted on you."

"Witty banter, I like that, too," Riley said. "Most of my films don't exactly have much dialogue. You'd make an interesting change of pace."

"Oh, please," Lois groaned. "Spare me, all right? Do you even know how much you sound like every pathetic loser in junior high who wanted me to go to the spring dance?"

"And you were too busy running around with the boys who smoked outside the gym, right?" Riley asked, teasing. He stayed close by the door, but now he was smacking the baton against his palm. Maybe she'd rattled him - maybe he was just psychotic.

"No, actually," Lois spat, sidling along the wall. "I was the *leader* of the kids who smoked behind the gym. And before you imply something disgusting, most of them treated me like I was just one of the guys."

"How charming. Don't try getting past me - if I have to hit you, I'd like it to be on camera."

Lois didn't know what was creepier - the casual way he tossed off that line, or the

cheerful little smile when he did. "And I thought Luthor was nuts," she growled.

"Oh, you're right about him," Riley said. "He's not keeping-three-hundred-cats crazy, but that man isn't right. He let *you* break a rib, remember?" Even worse than the smile was Riley's amused chuckle.

Definitely psychotic. Lois glared at him, getting nothing but the grin and the rhythmic tapping of the baton. *How the hell am I gonna get myself out of **this**? Okay, Lane, this is the part where you come up with a terrifically brilliant plan. The audience cheers, and you beat the crap out of the bad guy.*

Any minute now...

Kal-El circled the island at a safe distance, thinking, *I know this is a trap. I **know** it is. Luthor has access to kryptonite, he's had the crystals, he has Lois and the kids - he might even have all three of them here as bait. I have to be careful...*

And even while he thought that, a part of him was screaming to hurry, to get it in high gear; there was no telling what Luthor was doing to Jason or Kala right now, no telling what he might've done already. Dark possibilities lurked beneath his conscious thoughts, but he wouldn't let them be voiced even in his mind. Some things were too terrible to contemplate.

Kal-El moved in a little closer as he continued around the island. It was crystalline in structure, he'd expected that; the stone was strangely dark, though. For the moment he was looking for signs of movement, of a trap, and left analyzing the exact molecular structure for later. If there was a later.

Which, given the fact that he was facing Luthor, and Lex had had this all his own way from the beginning, there might not be a later. *He's driven me back and forth like Shelby running the chickens*, Kal-El thought ruefully. *The worst thing is, I **know** I've been herded, but what else could I do? How could I choose between Lois and the twins - **our** twins - and the fate of hundreds of innocent bystanders in Metropolis?*

This is just what Jor-El warned me about. Lois and Jason and Kala are in peril because of me. Everyone in Metropolis was in danger today because of me...

*No. Lois would smack me for that. They're endangered because Lex Luthor needed a little distraction while he was setting up his master plan. **He's** the one to blame here, he's the one...*

*He didn't. He wouldn't **dare**...*

Kal-El had almost finished his circuit around the island when he saw it, and stopped abruptly in his flight. At this point, the island's surface dipped down abruptly, like a small canyon. The open end of the canyon sloped to the waterline, leaving a broad avenue up to a very familiar structure of interlocked crystals.

He did. Luthor, you utter bastard.

Fury at this latest insult coupled with his fear for those he loved, and his guilt for having gotten them all involved. Abandoning caution, Kal-El blasted to the open space in the middle of the canyon, landing with a resounding boom that cracked the crystal floor for many yards around him.

Seething with anger, he raised his eyes to the ugly, dark mockery of his Fortress, a blasphemy against that place and all the memories it held for him.

"See anything familiar?" Lex called sardonically, his voice echoing.

Kal-El turned, loathing in his eyes as he saw Luthor coming out of the anti-Fortress. That expression - equal parts wrath, outrage, and disgust - said everything that he needed to say.

Paying Penance

The open door beckoned, and Riley was watching her carefully. Lois knew if she screamed now, Kal-El would hear her ... but if he saw the helicopter, maybe he'd go there first. She'd left her phone at the car, he would find it soon enough and come after them. Rescuing the twins was more important than saving her from this jerk, so she kept quiet for the moment.

"Weren't you the one videotaping the fires?" Lois said, trying to needle him again. "You know what they say about kids who start fires, right?"

"I'm not the guy who started them," Riley replied. "I just film them. I'm like the other guys Lex hired - I'm being paid to do a job. Although I don't object to the perks, either." Again he smiled at her, that asinine little *we-have-a-secret* smile.

"The perks? You mean like annoying me with your half-assed little threaten-and-flirt routine? If you're gonna do something besides stand there and stare at me, come on and do it already. I'm getting bored." If that didn't goad him into action, nothing would.

Lois' effort was rewarded. Riley snapped the collapsible baton to its full length - flicking it in her direction, too. "Fine, Miss Lane. Let's go start your cinematic career, shall we? Come here."

"You think I'm gonna make it that easy for you? Come and get me," Lois challenged.

Grinning, Riley feinted toward her, then moved to cut off her escape. Lois had been expecting something like that, and dodged him. But she had spent half an hour hammering at the stupid Plexiglas porthole, and she wasn't as fast as she needed to be. Riley grabbed her upper arm from behind, squeezing it painfully and jerking her backwards, almost off her feet. *Shit. Why the hell do prisons let guys like this lift weights? Even as tall as he is, my life would be a lot easier if the sonofabitch wasn't **strong**, too!*

Even while she thought that, Lois kicked backwards, hard. He pushed her off balance, and her boot only struck his shin a glancing blow. In the next instant, Riley yanked her back against him, too close for a kick to have any real force, and brought the baton down sharply on her leg.

Lois clenched her teeth and didn't cry out - that would only excite him. "Bastard," she hissed softly.

Riley chuckled richly and hit her again, right atop the bruise forming from the last blow. This time she yelped, and he said in a low, persuasive voice, "C'mon, Miss Lane. I'm bigger than you. I'm stronger than you. Your hands are tied, and I'm armed. Plus, I've done this before - more times than the district attorney had any idea about. Did you really think that was going to work?"

She kept silent, waiting. Riley was still holding her arm, and he began to push her ahead of him, out of the pantry and down the stairwell. Lois held her tongue; he kept her moving, but not so fast that she was in danger of stumbling. At last they arrived at their destination.

"The specs of this yacht call this the Aquatic Gallery," Riley said as Lois surveyed the huge room. Her swift glance took in all of its particulars while Riley kept talking. "Most of us just call it the ballroom. It's big enough to waltz in, don't you think? Do you dance, Miss Lane?"

"Not with you," she shot back, and he only laughed.

"You will by the time we're through," Riley promised, and gave her a hard shove. Lois stumbled away, made a few steps toward recovering her balance, and then fell to the floor. She smothered a cry of pain as her arm scraped against one of the broken bolts that had secured the piano.

Riley closed and locked the door behind him, using the same high-set bolt that had foiled Kala and Jason. "I happen to think this is one of most lavish rooms on board," Riley continued, as Lois lay where she fell. "And it's got more space, though I had to set up four cameras to cover it all. A nice change from my other films. The lighting's good enough to show detail, too."

Lois rolled onto her side, watching him warily, but she didn't try to get up yet. Riley was moving around the large ballroom, adjusting a detail here or there - moving one of the couches, taking a duffel bag from near the door and opening it atop the table. Inside Lois saw coils of rope and, disturbingly, the gleam of steel.

Riley's back was to her as he laid out the tools of his trade; apparently he had no fear that she would creep up behind him. It was probably justified, given that she was wearing boots and the floor was hardwood and glass. He would hear her if she moved from this spot, so Lois forced herself to watch and wait.

Lex sauntered out of the dark Fortress, hands in his pockets and beaming with self-satisfaction. "Hmm, I think I'll turn a couple of those caves over there into apartments. One for the boys, one for Kitty - but I'm living here. I happen to be partial to this place - memories, you know." His insolent smile reminded his opponent of all the memories connected to the Fortress, the bitter and the sweet.

It only increased his determination. Kal-El glared and stalked toward him, his voice almost a growl as he said, "You have something that belongs to me." The hero had never been this furious, never known he could feel such wrath. Anger was making him light-headed.

That only made Lex grin more broadly. "Really? I thought I had *everything* that belonged to you." He stood at the top of the steps and looked around coolly, ignoring the deliberate way Superman approached him.

Kal-El's eyes narrowed. How dare he... "Luthor, you've gone too far this time."

"What are you going to do, Superman?" Lex mocked. "Kill me? You should've done that last time. Would've saved you a lot of trouble, and the lives of a lot of people only you care about."

"I don't have to kill you, Luthor," he said. "You won't get out of prison on a technicality this time."

"Yes, well, I don't intend to go into prison this time," Lex said casually. "I'm far too busy. For instance, I've been keeping better track of Lois Lane than you have. Such a pity she wasn't faithful to you ... but what can you expect from a woman like that?"

That stopped him in his tracks, a wave of almost feverish heat sweeping through Kal-El. His pulse was beating in his temples now, his vision hazy as the combination of anxiety and outrage threatened to overwhelm him. Deliberately he advanced toward Lex.

Seeing dark rage burning in those sapphire blue eyes, Lex took one step back. Insulting Lois had been perhaps a mistake ... but he couldn't resist taunting his enemy further. "Careful there, Superman. You don't want to hurt me - I know where Lois is, and you don't. I can call her the Whore of Babylon if I want; you still need *me* to find her."

It was true, Lex held all the cards in this situation. Too true, and both men knew it. Gritting his teeth with frustrated wrath, Kal-El ground out, "Where is she, Luthor?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Lex chuckled. "But I know something you don't, *hero*. I know who the father of her children is."

Kal-El felt his knees go weak. All of a sudden he felt sick. If Luthor knew that ... he

barely suppressed a shiver, forcing himself to continue up the steps as if he wasn't affected. "Luthor, you know *nothing* about Lois' children," he said, trying to sound disdainful.

Luthor gave him a catlike smile full of cruelty. "My, my, my. How disappointed your father would be in you. Jor-El sent you here to guide us weak mortals, to be the light to show us the way. Superman, savior of the earth, fighter for truth, justice ... all that stuff. Rescuer of kittens." Lex couldn't help snickering as he remembered that early article. "Oh yes. All that, and a deadbeat father. Really, Superman, how *could* you? Honestly, not even *I* pictured you as the love-them-and-leave-them-pregnant type. No wonder Lois wrote that article about you - hell hath no fury like a woman who gave birth to aliens."

The revelations came too fast. Luthor knew about the twins. He'd managed to listen to the recorded crystals. He knew everything, and he even had ... kryptonite...

Some part of Kal-El's mind had wondered why Luthor didn't simply spring the meteorite on him as soon as he landed. Now he realized that what he'd thought were manifestations of his emotional upheaval - the fever, the sweat beginning to dot his skin, the weakness - were actually responses to kryptonite nearby. *How could I be so stupid?* he scolded himself. *He's keeping me talking just to weaken me with it! But where the heck is it? Feels close ... too close.*

"Sorry, Luthor," Kal-El said abruptly. "I'm not playing your game."

Lex's eyes brightened. "Oh, you're not? Then I suppose you'll forfeit the stake." With that he stepped aside, and Kal-El saw into the false Fortress behind him. A man and a woman stood there - *Katherine*, the woman he'd saved! Even her runaway car was part of this!

But there was no time to be outraged. Behind them, sitting on the floor with their hands bound in front of them, were Jason and Kala. "I told you I had everything of yours, *Kal-El*," Lex purred. "Even your bastard children."

Riley hummed to himself as he arranged his tools. Of course, he'd found it rather difficult to replace his entire collection, most of which was still in police evidence lockers. But he was reasonably satisfied with what he'd managed to come up with on short notice. *I love the internet. You can order practically anything. Thankfully Luthor let us receive packages in Nevada.*

He glanced over his shoulder at Lois and gave her his most charming grin. She met it with a look of flat disgust, which was new to him. Usually by now they were starting to get a little scared. He'd set the tools of his trade neatly on the table before him. Some women got nervous just seeing rope and handcuffs. Others kept a brave face until he laid out the frayed electrical cord or the pruning shears, and then they abruptly broke down and begged for their lives. But Lois was something else.

"You're an odd one," Riley said, turning back to his work. "How come you're not afraid?"

She actually laughed, and that was a very difficult reaction to fake. Riley was impressed; she was either a superb actress, or brimming with bravado. "Why on earth would I be scared of you?"

"Oh, maybe because you're my first celebrity," Riley replied jauntily, placing the lighter and pack of cigarettes just so. He didn't often smoke, but the fear of fire tended to produce extreme reactions. "You do realize I'm going to have to take my time to be sure everything is just right, don't you? This is a historic event."

"Please," Lois snorted derisively. "I just can't get scared by someone who's essentially just a little boy who never grew out of the pulling-wings-off-butterflies stage."

That made Riley whirl around, and Lois flinched slightly. He smiled, relaxing; so she wasn't made of stone after all. She just hid her fear very well - that would make this much more interesting. With a low chuckle, he turned back to his tools. What to start with? The baton hadn't impressed her...

Ah yes. Riley turned to Lois with a slender filet knife in his right hand. "You know, they had a big chef's knife in the galley that I was hoping to use, but someone took it. That's all right - this little knife is sharper and easier to control. I wouldn't want to slip and hit a major vein, you know."

He prowled toward her, eyes avidly searching her face for the first glimmer of terror. Of course he wouldn't use the knife so soon; one cut made just a little too deep would ruin all his careful preparations. But Riley hoped that the gleam of light on the blade would capture his victim's attention, keeping Lois compliant for the moment. A knife was so much more fear-inspiring than the roll of quarters in his pocket, which he would use to subdue her if necessary.

And Lois seemed to be going along with his plans, her gaze fixed on the blade. "So tell me, Miss Lane, what are you most afraid of losing, hmm? Your looks? Plastic surgery's good, but it'll never give back what I can take. Or maybe it's your career? If I sever the nerves in your hands you'll never type another story."

Her eyes went from the knife to his face, and to Riley's surprise their hazel depths still held more scorn than fear. "Did you miss the part where Lex said he'd liked the way I look? Assuming you succeed - which I doubt, you're more talk than action - Lex is going to feed you to the sharks one small piece at a time for touching me."

Riley laughed, but now he was the one whose voice sounded forced as he bent over her, knife poised. "Luthor is going to get himself killed. He's out there 'tugging on Superman's cape', just like that Jim Croce song. Once ol' Supes figures out those kids are his, he's gonna cream Luthor, island-made-of-kryptonite or not."

Lois' eyes suddenly blazed with terror, but not fear of Riley. Only then did he realize just what kind of woman she was; Lois' booted heel lashed out and caught him in the wrist, the knife flying. Then she was up, her hands free somehow, and darted across the room too quick for him to capture.

How had things gone so wrong so quickly? Riley chased her, jumping the short set of steps up to the area where Steven Vanderworth had had his office. He was already reaching into his pocket for the roll of quarters he carried, a sure pacifier if ever one existed, but first he had to get hold of this troublesome reporter.

Lois yanked savagely on the desk drawers as she raced past, but they were securely locked. She managed to kick the chair into Riley's path, and he cursed her as he stumbled. "Don't you run from me," he snarled, eyes wild now, but she didn't listen. They never listened, really...

She dodged around the table, grabbing the large brass trophy there for support as she made the corner. It bent on its bolts, and Lois nearly stumbled, giving Riley time to catch up. He grabbed the back of her blouse, his other hand pistoning forward with the quarters tucked into his fist.

Lois yelped in pained surprise when his fist connected, and Riley grinned savagely as he spun her to face him and cocked his fist for another blow. But he *still* didn't see the rampant fear in her eyes that he expected, still had no sense of Lois' capitulation. Confusion made him pause for one second too long, searching her face for some acknowledgment of her defeat and

his superiority. It had to be there...

He was concentrating so closely on her expression that he never saw her hand grip the heavy geode on the table behind her. Stunning pain lashed through him, and Riley's bewilderment deepened as he sank into unconsciousness.

Kal-El felt his heart stutter, locking eyes with the twins. It was too late now ... even though he knew the kryptonite was weakening him, he didn't dare leave Jason and Kala. *Please let me be strong enough*, he thought as he mounted the final step and came face to face with Luthor.

"This isn't a game, Luthor," he said warningly. The sound of the twins sobbing quietly tore at him.

Lex grinned up at him, tense and bright-eyed. "Oh, but it is. A wonderful little game I like to call, *Winner Takes All*." The two men stood very close, and Kal-El was trying to watch Lex's eyes as well as keep track of Stanford and Katherine.

Glancing away from Luthor was a mistake. Moving like a striking snake, Lex brought his hand out of his pocket and darted it forward. Kal-El gasped as burning agony stabbed into his ribs, flinching back automatically. He heard something snap and clasped his hand to his side, feeling wet warmth.

Another couple of steps back away from Luthor, seeing him run his thumb over a green shard in his hand. "Or perhaps we'll call it *Pin the Kryptonite on the Alien*," Lex chuckled, pocketing the shiv.

Kal-El took his hand away, dumbfounded to see it sheathed in red. "Blood?" he whispered. Fiery pain still gnawed at him, and he realized with dull horror that part of the kryptonite shard was still embedded in his flesh.

"Seems even a hero can bleed," Lex hissed, far too close. Kal-El looked up just in time to catch Luthor's fist on his chin, the force of the blow knocking him off balance. Shocked by it - he hadn't felt pain like this since he'd given up his powers - he couldn't recover in time, and fell down the steps, snapping off protruding spikes of crystal as he tumbled. The surface sloped toward the water, and he rolled across the rough surface.

His mind seemed to be in vapor-lock. The weakness - the pain - those unfamiliar sensations ruled him, bringing back memories of that humiliating beating in the diner. Kal-El felt frozen, unable to do more than try to breathe and deal with the blazing pain.

Luthor laughed, and the sound had a chilly edge. Stanford, sickened, kept his gaze glued to the ground at his feet. Kitty turned away from the scene unfolding outside, petting Tala's fur nervously. She looked at the twins, bit her lip, and whispered, "Don't look, okay? Just ... don't look." Kitty knelt beside them both.

Lex bounded down the steps, unable to stop chuckling gleefully. "Crystals! They're amazing, aren't they? They inherit the traits of the minerals around them. Sort of like a son..." His gaze darted to Jason, still watching in helpless horror in spite of Kitty's attempt to shield them. "...inheriting the traits of his *father*," Lex snarled, kicking Superman in the side as he tried to stand up. Both twins screamed, and Kala turned her face against Kitty's shoulder, crying.

Kal-El's breath blew out, and he coughed, tasting something metallic. If only he could get a handle on the whirl of sensation and emotion - it was too much. Pain, fear, anger, malaise, weakness, outrage, shock, burning ... all of it tore through him relentlessly.

Lex hadn't quit, giving him another savage kick in the ribs. "You know, with a pound of

kryptonite and one of those wonderful crystals from your Arctic hideaway, I've created an entire *island* that happens to be lethal to you." Kal-El coughed blood, trying to get his hands under him, dizzy with recognition. No wonder he couldn't tell where the kryptonite was ... it was *everywhere*. Tons of it...

"The brats seem to be holding up a little better," Lex said nastily. He stepped back and snapped his Italian loafer into Kal-El's face for emphasis as he continued, "Thank their mother, I guess. The same *human* frailty that kept them out of Little League is keeping them alive now. Although they did inherit something of *yours* as well."

Blue eyes, hazy with shock and pain, looked up as Lex bent over him. No question now of what Luthor was - madness danced in his eyes. "Your son there - d'ya think old Jor-El would be proud of him? The little *murderer*. He killed one of my men. Threw a piano at him."

The haze cleared slightly, anger burning it away. Kal-El glanced at the children, seeing the way that they held onto each other, and knew that if it *was* true, it was in defense of himself. Or his sister. *He's my son*, he thought. *Lois' son. He'd protect Kala with his last breath or the last ounce of his strength...*

No time to think further on that. Lex saw the return of awareness, and aimed another kick to coincide with end of his next vicious line. "What a perfect *legacy*," Lex spat, and his foot lashed out.

But this time it didn't land. Kal-El caught his ankle and held it. Still disoriented, he was surprised to find that he had the strength to hold Luthor off balance. For a moment they struggled awkwardly, Lex hopping on one foot, Kal-El trying to knock him to the ground.

"Dammit!" Lex yelled, but neither Stanford nor Kitty was moving to help him. Muttering curses at them, he reached into his pocket for the shiv.

Kal-El couldn't let him reach it. He couldn't be stabbed again. He found an extra notch of strength, and *tossed* Lex over him, the megalomaniac yelling in surprise as he crashed to the ground. Luthor landed even closer to the edge, the crystal damp with salt water, but he didn't fall off the island.

Superman began the laborious process of getting to his feet again, still coughing blood, green spots swimming before his eyes. He heard the faint chime of crystal on crystal as Lex struggled to get up, heard the man panting and cursing. He had to get up, had to defend himself against the next blow, had to...

He didn't even see Luthor heft a chunk of kryptonite ore the size of a toaster, getting ready to throw it at his prone body. All he heard was Lex's harsh voice hissing, "You stole six years of my life. I'm just returning the *favor*."

"Luthor lied," Lana said over the headset. "This is more than eighty miles."

Richard looked at the island on the horizon, getting nearer now. He could make out just a few details - the dark surface seemed fractured and craggy, but no signs of life were visible at the moment.

A gravelly voice came over the radio then. "Flight November 7241 Hotel, this is General Maggin, do you copy?"

Startled Richard flicked a switch and responded, "I copy, sir, this is Richard White aboard November 7241 Hotel, go ahead."

"Mr. White, the Coast Guard informs me they have a yacht offshore that might be the *Gertrude*. Radar contact only at this point, but it's not in a registered lane of travel. Now, you have your cell phone on you, son? Over."

Lana scrambled for it before Richard could even ask. "Yes, sir. Over."

"Good. Coordinates are being sent to you via text message directly from the Coast Guard ship that's on route. You'll be updated continuously. Over."

"Thank you, sir," Richard said, then asked, slightly puzzled, "General Maggin, sir, how did you know to contact me?"

"Ella Lane called me," he chuckled. "You just bring Little Laney home safe, you hear? Over and out."

"Little Laney?" Richard said softly, his nose wrinkling.

Lana was staring at the phone. "Richard, you've got a message."

"I know, give me the coordinates."

"No, it's from Clark," she said, and he turned to look at her, seeing the concern in her face. "He must've sent it right after we left - Clark is trapped by the earthquake debris. He says he's fine, Superman found him, but he's safer where he is. And he gave his phone to Superman before he left. Superman's on his way."

For a moment they stared at each other. "You mean we have a way to contact Superman?" Richard said, hope rising.

Riley started to groan, and Lois cursed him under her breath as she tightened the cable ties around his ankles. His hands were already secured behind his back.

"Whuh... Wha' happen'd?" he muttered thickly, trying to turn his head to look at her.

Lois slipped two of the cable ties through the loops around his wrists, fed them through the ties on his ankles, and cinched them tight, leaving Riley hog-tied with his own restraints. The reporter stood up and glared at him, a hard bright smile flickering across her face as she said, "What happened? You underestimated the power of an angry woman, just because I'm pretty. Don't worry, I'm sure you won't make that mistake again... It's going to be a long time before you even see another woman."

Resisting the temptation to kick him a few times - her leg still hurt from the damned baton - Lois walked away from him. Her subconscious was screaming at her to get moving, but at least one other man remained on board. There might have been more, but she doubted it. Either way, she'd need some kind of weapon, and here was Riley's little bag of goodies...

Lois wrinkled her nose at the assortment of supplies. She didn't even want to know why Riley needed a dozen clothespins and a can opener. Suppressing a shudder, Lois picked up the police baton, looked it over, and with a sharp flick of her wrist extended it to its full length. "Nice," she said with a small smile.

Riley made a strangled groan when he saw her, trying to roll over and get to his feet. Bound as he was, all he managed to do was thrash around like a broken-backed snake. Lois walked over to him, tapping the baton against her palm thoughtfully.

He tried to laugh, but his voice was shaky. "Hey, c'mon now," Riley said, and his voice was a pathetic attempt at jocular. "Don't ... you don't have to do that. I mean, I was just kidding with you... I wouldn't have hurt you. You know that, right? Right?"

The smile on Lois' face was not friendly. "Oh, so you *weren't* going to torture and rape and kill me, after all? This was all just a joke?"

"Yeah, yeah, a joke," Riley said desperately. "I mean, you said it yourself. Luthor'd never let me live if I did something like that. He ... he kinda admires you, he wouldn't want you hurt."

"Where did he take my kids?" Lois asked sharply, and the man flinched. "Where are they, Riley? And keep in mind, if I don't like the answer, it's *my* turn to play."

Nothing on earth was more pathetic than a grown man sniveling in terror of a woman almost a foot shorter and a hundred pounds lighter than himself. And still he tried to brazen his way out of it. "Nah, you're not like that," Riley said, grinning sickly. His shirt was damp with sweat. "I mean, you're a nice lady - you're a class act, investigative reporter. Hell, you're *famous*. You ... you wouldn't do anything like that to me. You're Superman's girlfriend - you're the mother to his kids. You're a good person."

Lois grinned, her eyes gleaming fierce and predatory. It was everything she had not to kick him in the teeth right now. "You forget, Riley. *I'm not him*. Superman wouldn't hurt you - he can't conscience hurting anyone. *I can*. If you don't start talking..."

Looking at her face, he believed her. Before Lois could even finish the threat, Riley was babbling. "I don't know exactly! Really, I don't! Grant's the one who steers this thing, he's got the coordinates... Listen, you gotta believe me, I don't know anything! Go get Grant, he'll tell you. Hell, I think he's got it written down in the bridge..."

"Shut up," Lois snapped before he could drown her in words, and Riley did, his eyes unnaturally bright as he watched the baton in her hands. Her knuckles had gone absolutely white. "Now tell me what Luthor's been up to with those crystals. And why did he take my kids with him?"

It quickly became clear to Lois that Riley was a pure coward under all of his swagger. She wouldn't even need to hit him once - he started spilling everything he knew just seeing the weapon in her hands. *Too bad*, she thought coldly as she glared at him. *I'm not gonna have an excuse to hit him again. Sometimes it really sucks to be one of the good guys.*

"No!" Jason yelled, seeing Lex about to throw the heavy chunk of crystal at Superman. He tried to struggle to his feet, but he'd used much of his strength in throwing the piano, and the kryptonite was making every bone in his body ache. Jason just couldn't get up; his coordination was gone, his body didn't seem to be listening to the orders his brain gave.

Kala had looked up at her brother's cry, her face tear-stained. What she saw horrified her. The bad bald man was about to hit Daddy with a rock! Unlike Jason, whose very strength made him more vulnerable to the green crystals, Kala had been held in place by despair, not weakness.

One glance at Stanford and Kitty told Kala that the grown-ups weren't going to help. If only Mommy was here, Mommy would kick the bad man's butt...

But Mommy's not here, Kala thought, and it galvanized her to act. Bolting to her feet, she tore away from Kitty and ran down the steps, momentum helping her keep her balance in spite of the savage ringing in her ears. Her sneakers gave her a good grip on the crystalline surface, and she wasn't even aware that she was running faster than any six-year-old should be able to.

Lex had paused to say something, the rock - which was heavier than it looked - held at the level of his shoulder. Kala hadn't actually thought about what she would do, so she simply yelled, "Leave my Daddy alone!"

"Kala! No! Don't!" Jason's small voice reverberated throughout the structure, his blue eyes locked on her.

Luthor turned slightly, and that was the moment when Kala cannoned into him, knocking him off balance. He dropped the chunk of kryptonite - it narrowly missed both Kala's head and Lex's own foot - and grabbed for Kala's shoulder, his eyes alight with fury. "You little bitch!" he snarled, ready to shake the child.

But Kala was Lois' daughter. And she was both terrified and furious. She whipped her

head around and bit Lex's hand, sinking her teeth into his flesh and thinking, *That's for beatin' up Daddy an' making Jason sick an' takin' us away from Mommy!*

Lex yelled, snatching his hand back, and saw the blood. He reacted without thinking, slapping Kala. Hard.

She'd been feeling like the island was spinning ever since she started running, and the blow destroyed what was left of her equilibrium. Kala staggered, seeing the edge of the dark crystal, hearing the water just below, trying to keep it together.

For one moment it seemed as though she'd make it, teetering on the very edge. Jason screamed for her, but it was Kal-El who met her gaze. Father and daughter shared one look full of desperation, and then the fragile edge crumbled under Kala's feet, spilling her off out of their sight with a despairing cry.

A Glimmer of Light and Hope

Grant kept one hand on the wheel, watching the waves outside. He didn't like being alone on the yacht with Riley and that Lane woman. But then, he liked this job less and less every minute.

I signed on for the money. This was supposed to be an easy job, if not my usual line of work. Grant was a hitman by trade, a killer for hire. He'd had to turn informant to escape the death penalty, and knew that any of his old contacts would kill him if they found him. No, now that he was free, he was going to have to start at the bottom of his trade and work up again, with a new name and in a new city. Running security for Luthor was supposed to be something simple and profitable until he could get back into the swing of things.

This is way more complicated than Luthor led us all to believe. "I'll break you out of prison if you come work for me. You don't have to do much - just look intimidating at the right times, and keep other people out of my business." Grant gave a skittery glance out the window at the stormy seas, trying to wrap his mind around this mess he had found himself in. *He never mentioned we'd be kidnapping kids or famous reporters. Or messing around with Superman - **that's just stupid.***

Grant checked the GPS and glanced meaningfully at the radio. He wished Luthor would get back here... The longer the boss was gone, the more worried he became. If anything happened to Luthor and Stanford and Kitty, he'd be stuck here looking like whatever happened to the reporter was *his* fault.

No way. Soon as we hit land, I'm gonna disappear. I didn't sign on for all of this crazy bullshit. This is too damned much...

That particular train of thought was well-traveled, and Grant let it preoccupy him. He didn't realize his error until he felt something hard and cylindrical poking him in the middle of the back, and heard what could only be the Lane woman growl in his ear, "Start telling me everything you know about Luthor's plans, or so help me God I'll use this." She jabbed the muzzle of the gun against his spine. "And I really would *love* to use it."

Dammit. I shoulda known...

When Kala hit the water with a splash and a high-pitched shriek of terror, even Kitty cried out. Lex glowered at her for her disloyalty, and then stood glaring at the hero. Even now Superman was trying to get up - obviously the kryptonite was affecting him, but he wasn't quite dead yet. Like a cockroach sprayed with Raid, he was still twitching. *Doesn't he know he's **dead**? This is all very noble, but he's **lost**.*

Lex wanted to stay, wanted to watch the light in Superman's eyes die away. He wanted to see all of his plans and hopes come to fruition - this alien menace at last destroyed, along with his spawn. But Lex's troops were getting restless ... Stanford was halfway down the steps, hesitating only because Lex was watching him, and Kitty was crying brokenly. If he gave them time to think about it, they just might turn on him out of some misguided vestige of morality. "Stanford, Kitty, get back to the helicopter," Lex said forcefully. "We're done here."

The scientist obeyed, reluctantly. Stanford wasn't happy about any of this, and Luthor knew it. But he took orders well - the sooner all of this was finished, the sooner he could return to his quiet lab and the endlessly fascinating crystals.

Lex wasn't quite finished yet. He got as close as he dared to the fallen hero, leaned down, and whispered, "Sorry I can't stay. Lois is back on the yacht, and I don't want to leave her alone too long. She's going to be terribly lonely without you or the twins around. Although, I'll

try to ... comfort her ... as best I can."

Superman was gasping for air, seemingly out of touch with events. At those words, however, sudden horror and outrage lit his eyes, and Lex savored it. A momentary victory, and only a tenth part of the vengeance he'd hoped to mete out, but sweet nonetheless. He sauntered away, leaving his enemy utterly broken and soon to die...

But wait. Kitty wasn't moving. She was still standing by the steps, Stanford already at the chopper. Lex gave her a hard, cold stare. "Kitty, go *on*."

"I'm not going with you," she said, her voice trembling. At that moment she suddenly reminded him of Eve Teschmacher. Something about the spoiled-little-girl pout masquerading as stubborn defiance.

"Yes, you are," Lex replied flatly. He could see now what Kitty planned - to stay behind, and somehow aid Superman. The resemblance was accurate to the last detail. *Why the hell do all my women turn on me as soon as they get a good look at his blue eyes? Traitorous bitch. She'll be lucky if she lives as long as Eve did. Oh well, I have her replacement already.* "To the helicopter, Kitty. Now."

Luthor stalked toward her, and Kitty took a few skittery steps back, clutching Tala like a security blanket. The little dog snarled at him, struggling in her arms as she tried to get at the man she hated. Her owner's voice gained strength as she retorted, "No, Lex. I'm done with you. You can't make me."

"You're right, I can't," Lex said, pausing, then suddenly lunged forward. But it wasn't Kitty he was after; Tala's snarl rose to a high pitch as he grabbed hold of her fur and yanked her from Kitty's hands.

"No!" Kitty yelped, but Lex stepped back quickly, holding the dog high in the air while she writhed and snarled. Luckily for him, he had hold of the back of her neck and she couldn't bite him. Tala tried valiantly, however, shrieking in mad fury as she strove to sink her teeth into his hand.

"Get moving," Lex said threateningly. "Have your ass strapped in the seat before I count to twenty, Kitty, or I drop-kick the furball over the side. At least the little girl will have some company while she drowns. *Move!*"

As Kitty hurried away, she glanced over her shoulder at the stricken hero, still valiantly trying to lever himself up. *I'm sorry*, she mouthed, tears spilling down her cheeks. *I'm so sorry.*

Whistling softly, and shaking the dog slightly to keep her from twisting around and biting him, Lex followed her.

Seeing his daughter slip out of sight, Superman had lunged to his feet ... almost. The sudden movement made the shard in his side cut deeper, and he cried out in agony as he fell back to the ground. Jason screamed, but he could barely feel his legs, much less move them.

The boy wheezed, his entire body one huge ache. His head throbbed savagely in time with his pulse. The bad guys were going away ... And the Bald Man was making Miss Katherine leaving them too. She might've helped more, he knew she had tried, but now it was just him and Superman.

It was still hard for him to wrap his mind around the man lying on the ground below him, his breath as tortured as Jason's. Superman - Clark Kent - his father. His *father*, beaten and stabbed and trying so hard to get up. Trying and failing, the sound of the helicopter loud in Jason's ears, the little boy sobbing to see the hero so helpless.

"C'mon," he whimpered, dragging himself forward with his hands, his legs useless and

numb. "C'mon, we gotta save her." Tears streaked Jason's face, but he wouldn't stop, wouldn't give up, crawling to his father with his thready voice echoing faintly around the canyon.

It didn't matter to Jason that he would have to drag himself down the steps, over the snapped-off bits of crystal, and across the cracked floor to Superman. The distance looked like forever, but that meant nothing. Jason had his father's strength and his mother's determination. He'd saved Kala before, he would save her now - with a little help. *I won't leave Kala*, he told himself stubbornly, *me an' Superman are gonna save her, and save Mommy, and beat up that bad ol' Luthor! I'm ... not ... gonna ... give...*

Grant had nothing left to lose; if Lois Lane was running loose and carrying a gun, Riley was dead or hurt. "Damn fool shoulda left you alone," the hitman muttered after he'd finished giving her the details of Luthor's plan, such as he knew it. He was still standing in front of the wheel, his hands on his head, and the barrel of the gun was still pressed tightly against his back.

"Yeah, he should've," Lois agreed. "Now do me a favor and don't struggle while I slip these cable ties on. I wouldn't mind hurting you, but it'd piss off my police contact, not to mention Superman."

"Luthor's been gone too long," Grant fretted, letting her bind his wrists. Maybe she'd forget to search him and he could get his pocketknife out and cut himself free... "Something's wrong... I get the feeling your kids' dad kicked Luthor's ass."

"I hope so." Lois marched him over to the wall, keeping her doubt and panic walled up tightly inside. For the moment she also ignored the indignant little voice inside yelling, *Does everyone know who their father is now? Was that little bit of gossip just too good for Luthor to keep to himself? God!* Aloud, she controlled her tone and only said, "See that bar there by the door? Grab hold of it."

Grant's hopes fell. The bar was for keeping one's balance in rough seas; it was securely anchored, and he wouldn't be able to get to his knife once she strapped his bound hands to it. "Lady, are you sure you wanna do that? Do you even know how to drive this thing?"

She jabbed the gun against him roughly to prompt his obedience, and put three cable ties around the bar and his wrists. "No, I don't. But you're gonna tell me what I need to do to keep it afloat. Because if you don't, I'm sure I can find a life boat, but I'm leaving you here." Her voice was low and deadly serious; no bluff there.

"Then get to that wheel and keep her headed into the waves," Grant said quickly. He watched the swift, competent way the reporter took over the controls, and had a moment to wish she was on his side of the law. And then he saw what was really in her hands, and both admired her guts and hated his own gullibility. No gun after all, just the handle of Riley's stupid police baton. He had been tricked.

"Hey," Grant said after a moment, seeing her eye the radio and trying to distract her. Those sharp hazel eyes turned to him again, and he knew better than to smile and charm her. Instead he spoke plainly. "You know this's just a job, right? I ain't got nothing against you personally, your man neither. Nobody told me we was gonna mess with kids. I just needed the money. You understand?"

"No," Lois told him coldly. "I don't understand you and I never will. But you should understand this much - the only reason you're conscious and unhurt right now is because you cooperated with me. Got it?"

"Got it," Grant said. "Didja kill Riley or just hurt 'im?"

"He's alive," Lois said shortly, picking up the radio handset with fierce determination. "Now shut up, I'm making a call."

Kal-El gritted his teeth, the pain like a spear in his side, burning and tearing... He could hear Jason sobbing, hear the helicopter fading away, hear Kala splashing below. But the pain consumed his world...

No. No, the twins are depending on me. I'm the only one who can save them - my twins, my son and daughter. Jason and Kala need me. Lois still needs me... With those thoughts to spur him on, he took a deep, ragged breath, reaching around to feel the crystal in his side. It burned his fingertips to touch it...

Kala's voice, so small, cried out several times only to be cut off an instant later by the seawater. Being only a little girl, she could only fight the tug of the waves and gravity and the cold of the water for so long... Another cry for help rang out and was suddenly cut off, then no more. Jason yelled her name, and Kal-El heard a rolling crash as the boy fell down the steps.

No more time for this, he thought grimly, and clenched his teeth as he forced himself to grip the ugly little shard. Pulling it out was worse than Lex stabbing it in - a low scream tore from him as he ripped the crystal out of his flesh, feeling blood spill from the wound.

But his head cleared the instant he flung the thing away from him. He was still sitting on top of an island made of the one substance that could kill him, but the relief of no longer having it *inside* his body was palpable. He could *breathe* again.

Still weak, he struggled to his feet. Jason was sitting up, wheezing heavily, but Kala ... he couldn't hear her calling anymore. The choice was agonizing. "Jason, wait," he said, trying for his old firmness and certainty. "I'll be right back with your sister." After all, Jason was safe for a few minutes; Kala might drown right now.

"No," Jason whispered with a wide-eyed shake of his head, reaching up. "Take me ... with you ... I can help..."

Kal-El couldn't resist those tiny arms held up so trustingly. And when he picked Jason up, he was surprised to find his son - *his son* - clinging to his arm with much more strength than that small body had seemed to possess.

Now all he had to do was fly down, pick up Kala, and get all three of them as far from this damned island as possible. *Sure. Easy*, he thought, and dove off the edge.

It was no use calling Superman over the roar of the engines. Lana sent him a text message instead, feeling weirdly presumptuous. Not even telling herself that this was Clark's phone helped her; she still couldn't quite believe she was texting a superhero. *What next, I email a chain letter to the President?*

At least he now had the latest information on the yacht, and knew that she and Richard were going after it. She closed the phone reverently, and Richard glanced over, chuckling at her. "What, you never sent a text message before?" he teased, trying to distract himself from their dire situation as well as genuinely amused.

"Oh, and I suppose you call up superheroes every day, *Mr. White?*" Lana said archly. "When and if he responds, I should ask *him* for your number, then, right? I mean, you *are* on Superman's speed dial, from the way you talk. C'mon, Richard, drop the blasé act. You sounded pretty impressed by him the night he stopped by to check on Lois."

"I wasn't *that* much of a gibbering fan," Richard said defensively. "I mean, I like him, he *is* a hero. But I wasn't asking for his autograph."

"No, because you'd just drugged his ex," Lana retorted swiftly.

That was the wrong comeback, and Richard's various anxieties boiled over. "Did *everyone* but me know that? Hell, you were in *Kansas* and you knew it! How come I was the last person on the planet to find out about Lois and Superman?!"

"Because you didn't *want* to know," Lana shot back. "You told me she kept refusing to talk about him - obviously that means there was more to them than press agent and hero."

Richard shot her an exasperated glance. "Not talking about him means she was in love with him - you know, there's a *reason* men don't understand women. You don't make any damn sense!"

Lana fumed, "Lois would slap the daylights out of you for a sexist comment like that! As it is, *I'm* seriously considering it!"

For some reason, that amused Richard slightly. "Lana, you're just not the aggravated-assault type."

The designer crossed her arms and spat, "Okay, so I'm *not* your fiancée, but you'd better quit comparing me to her if you want this relationship to..." Green eyes widened as she heard her own words, and Lana slapped a hand across her mouth.

Utter silence, but for the engines. Richard felt his heart beating in his throat, and over the headphones came Lana's muffled murmur, "What the heck am I *saying*?"

Another long pause, both of them looking out the window and not at each other. "Why are we arguing?" Richard finally said in conciliatory tones. *Geez, I'm totally screwing this up with Lana ... and I shouldn't even be **thinking** about it!*

"Stress," Lana sighed. "We're both worried about her and the kids."

"Yeah," Richard said slowly. "After all of this is over, though ... we need to figure some things out."

Lana had no reply for that, other than a wordless murmur of agreement. She turned her attention to the radio, adjusting the volume slightly. Static crackled in their ears.

And then Richard's face went white as he heard a very familiar voice on the channel. "Mayday, mayday, this is Lois Lane aboard the *Gertrude*, presently located latitude 40 north, longitude 73 west."

For one heart-pounding moment it seemed as though he wouldn't be able to fly, would plunge to his death carrying the fates of both his children. But then Kal-El found another notch of resilience beyond what he'd ever known he possessed, and his fall became a swoop that captured a now nearly-unconscious Kala just as her head ducked under the cold waves. Holding her with one arm, he strove for height. *If I can break the cloud cover, I can neutralize some of the worst effects...* Such desperate thoughts were all the hope he had. All three of them were weak from kryptonite radiation.

Jason clung tightly to him, and reached across to grab Kala's hand. She was still weakly coughing up seawater and shivering, but managed to return his grip, her other arm looping around her father's neck. Both twins were feverish and breathing raggedly, barely lucid - yet holding on tightly, to him and to each other.

Deep into the cloud layer, rumbling thunder somewhere in the distance, cool moisture closing around them. This wasn't good, cut off from the sun, and Kal-El reached for more height. At last, just as he thought he'd reached the limit of his strength and would fall back to the sea, they soared upward and out of the clinging mist. The difference was immediately noticeable: Kal-El took his first full breath since being stabbed, golden sunlight bathing him

and the two children.

The warm rays suffused him, baking away the tension and pain. Eyes closed, head tilted back, Kal-El hovered and soaked up the life-giving rays of the yellow sun. In his arms, Jason and Kala began to breathe easier, both up them turning their faces up to the golden disk above. Their eyes closed before the fierceness of its light, but their fevers cooled in spite of the heat washing through them. And then something curious happened.

Jason's numbness vanished, replaced by soothing sense of warmth and power. Far from hurting and weakness, he felt as refreshed as if he'd just awakened, ready to bound down out of the sky and take on the world. The ringing that had plagued Kala's ears disappeared into a strange kind of clarity, full of rustling voices each separate and distinct from each other, yet all of them easy to ignore when she focused on the sunlight pouring into her and her father's steady heartbeat.

Something was *very* different to Jason and Kala as they were held bathed in sunlight. The utter amazement of what was happening, of just how instantly *well* they felt, the relief that they were finally safe from the bad man, and the absolute fascination of just *where* they - not to mention *who* was holding them - were all conspired to keep the twins stunned into silence.

Relief was not so swift for their father. The wound in his side still pained him, although blood stopped flowing from it. And he still felt generally debilitated, much the same way he had after returning home. It had taken two days in the Kansas sun to cure him then, and he wished wryly for the luxury of time to spend basking here.

His pure Kryptonian lineage left him far more sensitive to kryptonite radiation than the twins, apparently, though they seemed to draw their strength from the same source as himself. "Are you two okay?" he asked gently. "Is the sun making it better?"

Kal-El thought he already knew the answer - they both looked much better already - but couldn't help wanting to hear it from them. His feelings about the twins were still a muddle of surprise and caution and delight, but the strongest of all was a fierce protectiveness that went beyond even what Lois inspired in him.

Two sets of now-bright eyes gazed up at him seriously, one pair as blue as his own, the other hazel like their mother's. "Yes, sir," Jason replied in a very respectful tone. This was his idol, his rescuer, his favorite adult pal around the office - and his father. "We ... we didn't tell them you were Mr. Clark." The quiet addition rocked Kal-El to the very foundations of his soul - his long-held secret, which of course the children must eventually know, was something he'd been wondering in the back of his mind how to tell them. Lois hadn't said anything; they were so young, no one would have expected children this small to keep such an important secret.

And while Kal-El was still staring at him in wide-eyed shock at that newest revelation, his daughter spoke up. "Thank you for saving us," she whispered, looking at him with wonder so reminiscent of Lois that it broke his heart. And then Kala added something in a voice only she and he could hear, surprising him breathless with one word. "Daddy."

Lex sat beside Stanford, keeping a wary eye on Kitty behind him. She'd been cooing over Tala since he'd given the mutt back to her; plenty of time to destroy the vicious little puffball later. For now he wanted Kitty's compliance, and got it simply by letting the dog go unharmed.

Still, she wasn't entirely trustworthy anymore. *I only need her for a while, if all goes well*, Lex thought. *Just until I can break Lois to my will*. He sighed at the thought; while Lois' spirit would never be *completely* broken, and he knew that trying to keep her for too long

would result in death for one or both of them. Still, just the idea of having her in his possession brought a wistful smile to his face.

The crackling radio intruded on Lex's glowing self-satisfaction, and he eyed it unhappily. Stanford was scanning channels, listening for the Coast Guard or anyone else they didn't want to run into. Suddenly, the last voice Lex expected to hear at that moment spoke clearly in his headphones.

"-hell did you get here so fast?" Lois Lane said, her voice shocked.

Lex sat bolt upright, eyes bulging. *How did she get loose?* he wondered. "Get us there *now*," he snarled to Stanford, ignoring the small triumphant smile on Kitty's face. She'd pay for her indiscretions later.

Another voice came over the airwaves, and Lex belatedly remembered Lois' fiancé, the pilot. "We managed to trace the boat," Richard was saying. "Your mother called in a favor..."

Lex leaned forward, cupping his hands around the headphones as he listened to Lois cut him off. "Dammit, the military was supposed to stay *out* of this!"

"He already had *you*, Lois," Richard argued. His concern for her was plain in his voice, but so was a certain harried aggravation. "We couldn't waste any more time. They're not *involved*, they're just sending me the coordinates for the yacht. Lois, *where are the twins?*"

Luthor smiled at the choked-off sob that sounded in his ears. *Delicious*. "Luthor has them - Richard, he took them to an island made of kryptonite. He's using them as bait." Her voice firmed, and she continued, "I'm fine here for a while - the two guys Lex left are both under control, and I can steer this thing for now. You go find the kids and keep Superman away from the island."

"No, Lois, we're closer to you," Richard was saying. "We sent Superman your coordinates - if he's not there, then he's either still busy in Metropolis or already on the island. We'll text him to let him know to stay away..." His voice faded for a moment, and Lex looked out the window at the right moment to see the seaplane below them. Stanford was keeping to the clouds, so it was unlikely that the pilot saw them...

Which was confirmed in the next radio transmission. "We're only about ten minutes away, Lois. We'll get you first and then go for the twins - there's no telling when Luthor could come back. He has a helicopter on the ship..."

They commenced arguing, and Stanford kept the chopper flying at top speed toward the yacht. It amused Lex to hear both of them being so noble. Of course, neither of them knew he could reach the yacht far more quickly than the plane. He'd only have a few minutes on board, but as long as Lois kept talking, he knew exactly where she was.

It was painfully obvious now what must have happened. *Riley. That pea-brained idiot must've tried to cast her in one of his documentaries. Damn him - I hope she killed him. No, wait - I hope she left him alive. I'll kill him for this stupidity!*

"I guess things aren't working out quite you planned," Kitty said poisonously.

Lex smiled slowly at her, held that wickedly amused expression until she became appropriately fearful again. "Oh, no, Katherine. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. Just wait and see - I've saved the best for last."

To Dance With the Devil

"Perry, are you sure you're all right?" Loueen's voice bordered on frantic. "I saw the *Planet* globe come down on the news..."

"Honey, I'm fine," he soothed. A few feet away, Ella's cell phone rang, and she scowled at the number as she answered it. "We're all safe, everyone in the building got out. Superman showed up and caught the globe - the Olsen boy got some pictures of it. Great ones, I'm even in 'em."

"As long as you're okay," Loueen fretted.

"It'll take more than an earthquake to retire this editor," Perry promised her. Just as he was about to offer yet more assurances, he saw Ella's eyes grow wide, heard her gasp.

"Elinore, what's wrong?" Perry barked, thinking, *If that's Luthor, I'll strangle him myself.*

Hazel eyes, blank with shock, snapped back to focus. "It's Jason," she said, and Perry realized it wasn't horror that paled her skin - it was wonder. "He's ... he's with Superman. The twins are okay. He wants us to meet them at Centennial Park. Perry, the twins are all right!"

That news, so unexpected and so desperately wished for, surprised Perry so much that he closed his phone without even hearing Loueen's frustrated sigh. "I *knew* you were with Ella Lane!"

Richard pushed the throttle forward as far as it would go. "Lois, we're almost there. Luthor could be anywhere - I wouldn't see him in these clouds. It doesn't make sense to turn back now..."

"Dammit, Richard, I don't care what happens to me!" Lois' voice exploded into the headphones, Lana wincing slightly at her vehemence. "Go get the twins. If Luthor wants to kill me, fine, I don't care as long as Jason and Kala are safe!"

"Some of us have some slight objections to you being murdered!" Richard roared back at her.

"And the twins are probably first in that line," Lana cut in hurriedly. She'd finished sending an update and a warning to Superman via Clark's cell phone, and she didn't want to hear this particular argument played out over the radio waves. "Lois, Superman's after them - Luthor might not even have made it to the island with them. We didn't see the helicopter there."

"I am so not in the mood to have sense talked into me," Lois growled. "Fine, you just get here quick..."

They heard a man's voice say something in the background; it sounded strangely like a warning. Then a crash, and Lois' voice again, "Oh fu-" before the radio cut off.

"*Lois?!!*" Richard said sharply. He turned up the volume and adjusted the radio dial slightly. "Lois? If you can hear this, Lois, come in. Lois, please, answer me..."

Lois was in the act of growling at Richard for being so sensible when she heard Grant call out, "Boss!"

The door smashed open almost in the same instant, and Lois muttered a curse at the very *last* person she wanted to see. Luthor slammed the door back and charged her, not even giving her a second's pause in which to raise the baton. If not for the wall beside her, Lois would've been tackled to the ground.

That didn't mean she was defenseless. The infamous Lane elbow swung up and into Luthor's chest, aiming for that cracked rib. Lois snarled at him furiously, "Bastard! How dare

you hurt my kids!" She cocked the other arm back, ready to sock him one.

Lex was trying to pin her arms against her sides, and he used all of his weight to slam her against the wall before she could hit him again. He didn't waste his breath talking; Grant was tied up, Riley was out of commission, and he'd sent Kitty and Stanford off on other errands. Lex knew perfectly well that the woman he was scuffling with was more than a good-looking reporter; her father had been a general, and had trained her in combat skills.

Living in Metropolis had further honed Lois' proficiency in self-defense. Lex was trying to stay close, minimizing her chances to get momentum behind any of her blows. So instead of swinging at him, Lois stomped down, the heel of her boot striking his instep.

"Bitch," Lex hissed, and grabbed her hair again. That freed her to punch him, but he used the hold to swing her head against the wall. Lois turned her head slightly, seeing stars for a moment but not losing consciousness as he'd hoped. Writhing in his grip, Lois kicked his shin and clawed for his face. *How many more times can I get hit in the head before I have an aneurysm or something?* The thought floating across Lois' mind eerily echoed her rough flight on the inaugural Genesis launch.

She broke away slightly, trying to get around him and get at the baton. Lex, panting with exertion, grabbed for her again, snaking an arm around her neck. Lois was brought up short, struggling to break his grip. *Chokehold ... the sonofabitch is going to strangle me*, Lois thought desperately, her nails raking Lex's forearm as he started applying pressure. She tried the stomping trick again, but he was wise to it now, avoiding the heels of her boots.

The edges of Lois' vision started to darken. Lex kept tightening his hold on her neck, the pressure cutting off circulation and air. Lois gasped, trying with every ounce of her strength to pry his arm away from her throat. *My God, he's really going to kill me ... I'm really going to die like this. I don't know where the twins are, I don't know where Kal-El is, I don't even know if they're alive... After all this time, I'm going to die without even knowing...*

Tortured breath, her lungs on fire, sight dimming, and still Lex held on like a bulldog, his harsh breathing loud in her ears. Other than to curse her once, he had not said a word to her from the moment the attack began, and that was perhaps most terrifying of all. To die without even knowing precisely why she was being murdered - without some kind of justification, no matter how warped, for Luthor's sudden violence.

Lois began to fade, her oxygen-starved muscles going limp. *Thank God I told Kal-El about the twins ... thank God I told him I love him. If I have to die, he'll keep them safe if he's still alive...* That thought seemed to be her final one, wavering on the edge of consciousness, her vision completely dark now except for a narrow point of light.

Feeling her struggles grow weaker, Lex murmured against her ear, "Hush now, Lois. When you wake up all of this will be over with ... for good."

Those ominous words pierced through the core of her soul, but then Luthor did the unforgivable. Gently, almost affectionately, he kissed the back of her neck.

Rage fueled a last burst of adrenaline, and Lois arched her whole body into one last clawing strike at Luthor's face. She had the satisfaction of feeling his skin tear under her nails before darkness finally claimed her.

The streets of Metropolis were crowded, people milling about frantically. Perry, Jimmy, and Ella managed to make their way to the edge of Centennial Park, only a few blocks from the *Daily Planet* building. There they waited, letting the crowds flow around them, until a familiar blue and red shape in the sky above occasioned cheers from everyone who could see

him.

"Superman!" "It's Superman!" "Hey, Superman, over here!" The mass of people surged toward him as he descended, almost knocking Ella off her feet.

"Be careful," Superman said sternly. "Give me some room to land, please." The crowd backed off enough for him to set Jason and Kala down, and both of them charged their Nana, hugging Ella until she thought she'd see stars. "They're going to be fine," Superman said.

"Thank you," Perry told him, Jimmy hanging back to snap a picture of the Chief and the hero.

"You're welcome," came the cordial response, along with a friendly nod to the photographer. Those amazing blue eyes turned serious again as he spoke to Ella. "Take care of them, Mrs. Lane. I'm going back for your daughter."

"Wait," Ella said. Something about his tone bothered her. The kids didn't like it either, both turning to look at him. Kala even scowled.

"You're gonna come back, right?" Jason asked worriedly.

Superman looked at his children with a sigh. He'd meant to sidestep Ella's questioning voice, but the looks on the twins' faces halted him. *They know. They know I might not come back this time.* "Jason, Kala, I'll be right back with your mom, okay?" *If there's any way on earth I can survive this, I'll come back. They were dear to me even before I knew they were mine.*

He looked up, meeting Ella's hazel eyes, the sharply interrogative look in them so very familiar. "Bring her home to me," she said softly.

"I will, ma'am," he replied. *If it kills me to do it, I'm not leaving Lois in Luthor's clutches.* With that thought, he rocketed upward.

Kitty hurried alongside Stanford, holding her purse by her side. Tala was twisting around angrily inside the oversized bag, but at least she was close by and out of Lex's sight. No telling what he'd do to her... or to Kitty herself.

Both were bound for Lex's study, rushing to complete the tasks he'd assigned them in the few minutes before Lois' fiancé caught up to the yacht. Stanford made it through the door first - running in heels slowed Kitty down - and he went directly to the large steel locked case. Only he and Lex had the combination, and he spun it open before Kitty could even see what the numbers were.

Stanford took out a small plastic package, then closed the case quickly and handed it to Kitty. She glimpsed an instant of pity in his eyes, but the scientist wouldn't help her. He was too frightened of Lex - not quite as scared as Kitty herself, who had tasted Luthor's violence more fully than the men. His eyes... She shivered as she took the case, and turned to hurry out again.

The latch clicked slightly as she turned just outside the door, and Kitty had to stop suddenly to keep the case from falling open. Stanford didn't see her; he was busy with his own errand. An idea, terrible and wondrous, began to take shape in Kitty's mind. Unlike Lex, who loved his elaborate, multistage plans, Kitty tended to think on her feet. It took her only seconds to decide what to do, and begin doing it.

Holding the case very carefully, to keep it from coming open or latching fully, Kitty rushed to her own room. No time to close the door, even - if Lex caught her at this, she'd be dead whether he had to break it down first or not. Kitty set the case on her bed and opened it. She quickly plucked the Kryptonian crystals out of the foam that cradled them, hiding them

under her pillow. Forcing her alarm clock inside, she hefted the case to make sure the weight was about right, then latched it firmly shut.

No going back now. It's done. Katherine, for once in your life, you're being heroic. So why the hell are you scared out of your mind? That was an easy answer - when Lex figured out what she'd done, he would probably kill her. *Forget 'probably'!* But he'd have to catch her first, and if she could get herself and Tala away from him, so much the better. The life she'd been raised to - a con woman, a grifter like her mother - was no peach, but it was better than this. *I can forgive a lot, but what he did today... never.*

At the last second before she bolted out the door, inspiration struck. Kitty grabbed a handful of her jewelry and carried it with her as she raced back to the main deck.

Stanford had been almost as quick in his work as she was, and he didn't even look at her askance as they rushed up the stairs. He'd been keeping his head down lately, refusing to make eye contact with anyone, and some distant part of Kitty's mind pitied him for making the same mistake she had - getting in way over his head. Most of her was shivering in terror of discovery, trying not to let any indication of her treachery show.

The sight that greeted her and Stanford silenced those thoughts. Lex had carried the unconscious reporter to the helicopter, and through the open door they could see her head lolling back as he buckled her in. Her hands were cuffed in front of her, and from the rumpled look of her hair and clothes - not to mention the blood dripping down the side of Lex's face - subduing her had been particularly difficult.

What made Kitty's flesh creep was the way Lex looked at Lois. His expression had frightened her months ago, when she'd seen him watching Lois on television. Now that he had her helpless, though, the avid gleam in his eyes renewed Kitty's determination to get away from him at any cost.

Stanford, beside her, shuddered a little. He had seen such looks before, in the eyes of fellow geologists who had found their first vein of gold, or plucked their first diamond from the earth. A kind of fever that mere possession could never satisfy - such men would level a mountain and leave a barren wasteland behind them in pursuit of riches.

Things were not looking good for Lois, and neither Kitty nor Stanford made a sound, not wanting to disturb Luthor when he was so absorbed. After a moment in which he stared silently at his prize, Lex stepped forward and bent over her. The top two buttons of her blouse had come undone in the scuffle, and he was almost tender as he re-buttoned them.

"Mr. Luthor," Stanford said quietly, and the boss' head snapped up. "Here you are, sir." He held out the speed-loader that Riley had taken from Lois when she boarded the yacht. The simple plastic and aluminum device held six .357 cartridges in exactly the same spacing as the Ladysmith's cylinder, which made reloading the revolver much faster.

Lex took it and inspected the rounds Stanford had doctored. "Excellent. Thank you, Stanford. Kitty?"

She held out the locked case, trying not to shiver. "Here's your rocks. Can you put my jewelry in with them, Lex? I don't have any more room in my purse."

Luthor had touched the latch as soon as he took the case from her, but at her wheedling question he left it locked. Snatching the fistful of gold and gemstones from her hand, Lex flung the jewelry over the railing. "I said *bring nothing*, Kitty! We don't have time - you'll have plenty of trinkets later. Get belted in."

He ignored her completely as she scurried past, handing the case to Stanford. "Secure this and start the helicopter. I have a little unfinished business before we leave."

"Yes, sir," Stanford said, then hesitated minutely. "He'll be after us."

"I know that," Lex snapped. "I saw him moving on the alpha-wave tracker. Somehow he survived the island - but we're not beaten yet. Be ready to take off in five minutes."

The scientist hurried to obey, and Lex rushed down the stairs in search of Riley. He'd actually had the audacity to take over the aquatic gallery, and Lex found him trussed like a turkey on the floor. The three cameras set strategically around the room confirmed Lex's suspicions, and he set about destroying them first.

Then it was time to deal with his employee's unsatisfactory job performance. "Riley, you disappoint me," Lex said silkily as he approached the prone man.

"Boss, be careful," Riley urged. "Ms. Lane got loose..."

"You mean you set her free," Lex replied, standing over him.

"No, boss, she-Ow!" Riley yelped as Lex kicked him in the side.

"You were trying to play with her, weren't you?" Lex questioned, and the very softness of his voice bespoke danger. "She was going to star in one of your pathetic little films. Only this time, instead of a frightened college girl or an unlucky housewife, you picked General Lane's daughter. Your mistake, Riley, and it cost me."

Riley looked up at him, finally seeing the blood on his cheek. "Boss, I'm sorry..."

"You are," Lex mused. "Riley, Riley, Riley. You poor little lust-crazed fool. I suppose I brought this on myself, didn't I, by not allowing you to satisfy your... creative urges... in Nevada, hmm? How could I expect you to resist a woman as delightfully tempting as Ms. Lane? After all, she hardly looks dangerous - she's petite and pretty, not the sort you'd expect to fight back."

Riley was nodding frantically. "Yeah, yeah - it's been rough, you know, Nevada, nothing much to do there, no women in the place... I hadta have something, some kind of entertainment... It'd been so long..."

"So it was all my fault, then?" Lex asked.

In spite of his mounting terror, Riley recognized the danger. "No, no, boss, no, it was me - I shoulda left her alone, I shoulda listened to y-Ow! Ow, *that hurts!*"

"Yes, you should have listened to me," he snarled, kicking Riley repeatedly just below the ribs. "You should have followed orders - all I asked was that you do as you're told, and you couldn't even accomplish that! Six years I planned this, and you almost ruin it in a few minutes just to sate your pitiful lust!"

He suddenly stopped, breathing heavily, and forced himself to calm down as Riley whimpered in terror and pain. "Be glad you didn't succeed, Riley," Lex finally said, his tone almost casual. Riley's eyes rolled up to meet his gaze. "If you'd actually touched my prize, I'd have to spend weeks planning an appropriately painful death. Lucky for you, Lois was more than capable of defending herself against an incompetent buffoon like yourself."

Riley coughed blood and rolled onto his side, panting. "So you're ... you're not gonna kill me?"

Lex smiled cruelly. "I won't waste time plotting a torturous end for you. A pity, really - if I was creative enough, do you think the fans of your little movies would buy the film of your demise?"

High in the air, Kal-El took out his cell phone. Surprising that it had remained intact this long - lucky, too, since it had enabled him to get in touch with Mrs. Lane. *Got to write the manufacturer a letter of recommendation. But sign it Clark Kent, not Superman. A hero can't*

do product placements...

Jason had said that it beeped while he was talking to Ella, and sure enough, the screen was showing text messages. Kal-El quickly scrolled through them, chuckling wryly at the most recent. 'Island made of kryptonite - be careful.' *I wish I'd known that half an hour ago*, he thought resignedly. The rest of the message was more hopeful - Lois was still on the *Gertrude*, and Richard had sent him the coordinates.

Kal-El took off in that direction, his far-seeing eyes scanning for the yacht. The wound in his side still burned painfully when he exerted himself, but there was nothing he could do for it now. *Hold on, Lois*, he thought, the fervency of his hope making it almost a prayer. *Just hold on, I'm coming. No matter what happens to me, I won't leave you to him.*

Lex hopped into the helicopter just as Stanford finished the preflight. "Move it," he snarled, and Stanford rushed into the air. He headed straight up at first, disappearing into the heavy cloud cover. Then the geologist forced the throttle all the way forward, and sent the helicopter scything away southward.

Stanford asked, "South out of range, and then inland? We'll wind up refueling somewhere like Charleston."

"Fine," Lex said. The rear of the helicopter had two bench seats across from each other, and he sat down across from Lois. Kitty squeezed herself as far to one side as she could, wanting nothing to do with the avid gleam in Lex's eyes.

Lois' head still lolled back, and she slumped bonelessly against the seat belt. Lex grinned cruelly as he flicked open the cylinder of her *Ladysmith*, shook out the cartridges, and replaced them with the altered rounds from the speed loader. Clicking it shut, he leaned forward and took hold of the short chain that linked her cuffed wrists. "I don't think you're sleeping, Lois," he purred.

No response from Lois, and he considered that she might actually be unconscious still. But her pulse beat steadily in her throat - ah, such a lovely neck. Lex watched her carefully as he crossed his feet at the ankles and slid them between Lois' feet - no chance for her to kick him in the groin now, which she would surely try at some point.

Lex glanced at the alpha wave tracker beside him. Superman had just left the Metropolis area and was moving quickly toward them. Not good - hopefully his improvised plan would halt the caped wonder once and for all. Until then...

Tapping the cold barrel of the revolver against Lois' cheek, Lex said, "Playing possum won't help you now, Lois. You're mine - once and for all."

"Fat fucking chance," Lois snarled. Hazel eyes shot open, and Lois tried to kick, catching him painfully on the shin.

Lex smiled broadly even as he winced, and yanked on her handcuffs, pulling her closer and pressing the revolver hard against her throat. "None of that, now. I don't want to have to hurt you too much yet - have patience, my dear. We'll have plenty of time later."

Lois sneered in disgust and outrage. "God, you're worse than that twit Riley," she spat. "I'd sooner slit my throat with my own *fangernail* than touch you."

"I'll do the touching, thank you," Lex chuckled. "I don't trust you with your hands free. One scar is enough to remember you by."

Growling in frustrated fury, Lois reared back away from the pressure on her throat. "In your dreams, Lex," she muttered. "You just want me because I'm a trophy. Well, fine. Go ahead, rape me. But you'll *never* have what *he* had from me. That's one thing you can never

possess, much less taint."

Lex pulled steadily on the handcuffs, forcing Lois closer to him. He casually kicked her feet further apart and leaned toward her, his knee now brushing hers. Lois couldn't fight the belt that held her in the seat, nor the constant pressure on her arms, but she could tip her head back. Lex merely chuckled and slid the gun up behind her ear, pressing the muzzle hard against that sensitive point until Lois was forced to tilt her face toward him. Thus violating her personal space, his breath mingled with hers as he spoke. "Oh, we'll see about that, Lois my dear," Lex purred, so close that she could feel the air disturbed by his words. "You haven't made the extensive study of pharmacology and hypnosis that I have. Let me assure you, there *are* ways." His voice lowered, and Lois' lips curled back like an angry dog's as he added, "Though I'd *love* to have your compliance *and* your hatred, for my safety I may have to settle for less."

He could almost have kissed her with those words, and for a moment it seemed as if he would. Stanford was ignoring them, concentrating on flying the helicopter, and Kitty was trying to block out what she was hearing, curled protectively around her purse and Tala within.

Lois was not yet beaten, swallowing back bile, she darted her head forward, teeth snapping. If Lex wanted to kiss her, fine - he'd lose a healthy chunk of flesh for the privilege. He jerked back, narrowly missing the bite, and laughed delightedly. "I'll see one of us dead first," Lois promised with a snarl.

"Such spirit," Lex said genially, a mad possessive gleam in his eyes. "Oh, Lois, it would almost be worth dying to finally break you."

"Good," Kitty hissed. "Too bad she didn't tear your throat out just then."

The laughter died in Lex's throat, and he cut Kitty a venomous glare. She didn't turn away like she had before; something new and fierce had come into her eyes, and Lex distrusted it. *She's outlived her usefulness*, he thought, then turned back to Lois with an apologetic smile. "You'll have to forgive Katherine," he said gently. "She's a little upset with me at the moment. I'm afraid I committed one of those unpardonable relationship sins earlier; I said the wrong name at a... delicate moment."

Richard was leaning forward, peering through the windshield for the yacht. They were very close to the last set of coordinates...

His phone chirped in Lana's hand, and she looked at the little screen. A perplexed frown stole over her pretty face at the message, which was simply *Look left*. She did so, and quickly tapped Richard's shoulder, pointing.

The pilot turned, and his startled expression matched Lana's. Superman was right outside the window, keeping pace with the plane, and gave them both a little wave. He was carrying Clark's cell phone, and quickly typed out a message one-handed, his fingers blurring with super-speed.

Lana read over the headphones, "Twins are safe with Mrs. Lane & Mr. White. Yacht ahead; no heartbeats on board. Am checking it. Will meet you there."

A lot of information to process quickly. "Thank God the twins are okay - thank God *he's* okay," Richard sighed, shooting him a thumb's-up. He impulsively snapped off a salute, and Superman grinned and saluted back. Then the hero took off in a blur of speed that left Richard's flight-loving soul aching in envy.

As the seaplane corrected course slightly behind him, Kal-El heard Lana's voice saying, "Wow... That was really him..."

And Richard's reply, a little exasperated, "Oh, so now you're a fangirl too? What *is* it with every woman in my life falling all over him?"

"Who said I was *in* your life, Mr. White?"

"Who said you weren't?"

Kal-El just shook his head, chuckling. *Oh, dear. I really ought to be upset on Lois' behalf, but they're just too amusing. And I badly need the levity.* He winced slightly at the throbbing in his side - would it never *stop*? - and angled down toward the yacht. His vision revealed at least two lead-lined rooms which would need to be investigated...

While they were making their way to Centennial Park to meet Superman, Perry had managed to get hold of Lieutenant Sawyer. With all of the turmoil in the city, including continuing aftershocks from the earthquake, even off-duty Special Crimes Unit officers were doing whatever they could to help. Maggie managed to carve out a few minutes to escort the Lane twins to Metropolis General Hospital. Jason and Kala seemed pretty much okay, except that they were less interested in riding in the police car with its flashing lights than Maggie would've expected. She stole glances at them in the rearview mirror, sitting on either side of Lois' mother and holding her hands tightly.

"Other than exhaustion, they seem all right," Sawyer murmured to Perry, who rode up front beside her.

He nodded, adding, "Awful quiet though."

"I want Mommy and Daddy," Kala piped up, right on cue, and her brother seconded the plaintive wish. Fortunately, the adults all assumed they meant Richard - if asked, the twins would've clarified that they wanted *both* daddies.

"It's okay, kids," Maggie soothed. "First we have to get you to the hospital so the doctors can make sure you're okay."

"Nooooo," they whined in unison. "I don't wanna shot," Kala added, sniffing.

"I want Ignatius," Jason added petulantly, provoking a snort of tired laughter from the adults.

"Hush," Ella said. "We just have to make sure you're okay, then you can go home. Probably no shots."

The twins looked at each other across Ella's lap, both scowling slightly. They were old enough to know that 'probably' didn't mean 'for sure', but they both felt good after their sunbath. Except for being tired and cranky, but that was Luthor's fault for messing up their schedules and ruining their sleep.

"Godzilla should squish Luthor," Jason opined.

"Splat," Kala said emphatically. "Let's tell Superman he should make friends with Godzilla next time."

Richard and Lana had just come into view of the yacht when a red and blue blur soared toward them. Richard banked the plane slightly, circling above the *Gertrude*, and Lana checked his cell phone. The message appeared in seconds, and she read it aloud: "Lois not on board. I hear the helicopter heading south. Alert Coast Guard and follow me."

Lana looked up, meeting his amazingly blue eyes through the glass windshield. Superman looked ... worried? "What's wrong?" Richard asked rhetorically, seeing the same expression on the hero's face.

The cell phone chirped again. They had both forgotten that Superman could hear them

with perfect clarity in spite of the noisy engines and the wind speed. "Luthor has kryptonite. I may need your help," Lana read, then forced herself to swallow on a suddenly dry throat.

"Our help?" Richard said, his voice suddenly small. "Holy..."

Lana nodded, biting her lip. If Superman needed their help, the situation was truly dire. "Anything we can do," she said.

"Anything," Richard affirmed. "Let me radio the Coast Guard, and we'll be right there."

This time it was Superman who saluted first, and Lana had the awful sense of something final about the gesture. Then he was gone, heading with determination and speed for his most bitter foe ... and the woman he loved enough to risk his very life for her.

"Poor Clark," Lana sighed. Richard glanced at her, but only nodded. The hero's love was obvious to both of them. What possible chance did an ordinary guy like Clark Kent - their friend - father of the twins or no - have against the feelings between Lois and the superhero?

"Lower," Lex said tautly, staring at the alpha wave tracker, and Stanford brought the helicopter even closer to the waves. Lois was still holding herself tense against Lex's grip on the cuffs, waiting for an opportunity to strike. She had spent the past few minutes listening to Lex's plans for her, and his low hypnotic voice had chilled her blood. It was all she could do to keep an expression of cold fury on her face and suppress her rising gorge; her razor-tongued wit had deserted her in the face of Lex's diabolical designs. The fact that he had been stroking her cheek with the front sight of her own damned gun didn't help.

Lois was also torn between praying for rescue - for her future, if Lex had his way, was nothing less than hell on earth - and praying for Kal-El to stay safely away. Regardless of her prayers, he was coming. Words from the recent past echoed in her mind. *Superman would never deliberately abandon Lois Lane. Especially not now.*

She bit her lip to stifle a sob, but couldn't help the tear that trickled from the corner of one eye. *Kal-El, please know what you're doing - please be careful. If I have to die so you and the twins can live, then so be it. But I couldn't live knowing you were gone.*

Lex smiled at that tear and Lois' throat working. He ran the sight of the Ladysmith gently over her cheek again, almost a caress of cold steel. "It's almost over," he murmured softly.

The alpha wave tracker beeped loudly, and Lex swung his attention back to it. "Stanford, bring us as low as you can and hover," he commanded, then unbuckled his seat belt. He reached across and did the same for Lois, hauling her to her feet by one arm and turning her toward the helicopter's door. The Ladysmith was now pressed firmly against its owner's throat, Lex growling, "Try anything - speak one word - and the last thing he'll see is your brain splashed across the roof."

Lois swallowed, not trusting herself to nod. She might have one chance, but it would be slim and desperate. Still, she had to hope for that chance, or there was nothing left to hope for. The General's daughter steeled herself to be ready for any action as Lex pushed the helicopter's door open.

The rotors whipped up cold spray from the ocean's surface, close enough that the salt water stung Lois' eyes. Lex forced her forward, and Lois braced her elbow against the door and leaned out, into the roar of the blades above and the sea below. Luthor stood securely behind her, the gun steady as death, as he gripped the back of her belt and pushed her even further out.

For the first time since falling out of another helicopter so many years ago, Lois knew true terror. The spaceplane had been more disbelief and grief than anything else - this was an

all too familiar fear, the drop yawning below her and her feet sliding on the wet floor.

And here came a familiar savior, his suit vivid against the gray sky. Lois' felt palpable relief wash over her at the sight of him, a naïve reaction considering all she knew of Lex but one she couldn't deny. Kal-El slowed as he neared the helicopter, seeing Lois' precarious position. "It's over, Luthor," he called, voice strong against the sound of the helicopter. "Give Lois to me."

"Come and get her," Lex challenged, giving her another slight push to make her lean even further into peril. "Of course, she'll be of no use to you dead. Agree to my terms or I'll put one of her own bullets into her skull."

Lois snarled wordlessly at Lex, her vision reddening in rage. How dare he use her to bait Superman! His softly-spoken threats were terrible, but this was far worse torture than anything he'd promised her. He surely planned to somehow use her to kill Superman - just as Jor-El had predicted so long ago.

Kal-El drifted closer warily. It was hard to negotiate when both parties had to bellow to hear themselves. "What are your terms, then, Luthor?"

Lois cut him a pleading look, heartbroken hazel eyes meeting his stern blue ones. *Just go, she thought. Leave me and go on, take care of my babies - those are my terms. You can't always save me; let me die so you and the twins can live. Please...*

"I just want one small favor from you," Lex said.

"What is that? I'm in no mood for games." Kal-El had closed the distance to only ten yards, and his voice was now close to his normal speaking tone.

"What?" Lex called loudly. "I can't hear you over the rotors!"

Closer still, twenty feet away, every instinct of Lois shrilling at him to stay back. "I said I'm in no mood for your games!" Kal-El called. The look on Lois' face burned him worse than the shard had; he would give anything, even his life, to erase her terror. "What do you want me to do?"

Lois felt Lex tense, and he abruptly swung the gun away from her neck, aiming it at Superman. *What the hell is he thinking?* The thought flashed across her mind, and then she finally caught a glimpse of her gun as it moved. The hollowpoint bullets had been doctored somehow; something green protruded from the point of each...

Kryptonite! "Kal-El, GO!" she screamed, but Lex was already pulling the trigger. The last son of Krypton had never feared bullets; had stood patiently and let one bounce off his eyeball only a few months ago. He saw the cluster of minute kryptonite fragments one second too late, and the bullet smashed into his chest. The deadly crystal penetrated his flesh with all the velocity of Lois' prized .357 magnum rounds.

"Now fly," Lex said as the hero tumbled from the air with a shocked expression on his face. Before Luthor could pull the trigger a second time, Lois pistoned her cuffed wrists forward, then back, her elbow catching him in the ribs. Luck finally decided to smile on her, and she struck the same rib she had cracked earlier. Lex released his hold on her with a pained yelp.

Only one place to go. Kal-El struck the waves hard and went under almost instantly. Ignoring the height and her handcuffs, Lois dove after him without a second's hesitation.

Requiem For a Dream

The seaplane's engines labored to maintain its maximum speed, but Richard didn't back off the throttle. He had a bad feeling about this...

They broke through the cloud cover, and Lana gasped at the sight that met their eyes. Luthor's helicopter hovered close to the waves, Superman nearby. Suddenly the hero fell into the sea, and someone jumped from the helicopter after him. Richard and Lana only had a glimpse over the distance, but the flash of red was probably Lois' blouse. Only she would dive so unhesitatingly after Superman.

The 'copter wheeled about, moving slowly after Lois. Watching its flight, Richard noticed something odd about the pilot. Whoever was controlling the stick didn't seem too confident, a trait that chopper pilots rarely seemed to lack. It gave him an idea ... a dangerous one, but it offered hope. Below them, Lois' head bobbed to the surface.

He turned to Lana, torn. She shouldn't have been part of this - she shouldn't have to take this risk. They only had seconds in which to act, but he couldn't bear the thought of harming her. "Lana..."

Her heart beat quickly with fear. *This isn't just a search for missing kids - this is war, against a psychopath with no regard for human life. How did I get mixed up in this? I'm just a small-town girl who happened to become a fashion designer. How did I wind up a deciding factor in the fate of a hero?*

*That's right - I started out helping a childhood friend... No. Be honest. Most of the reason is this man beside me, whom I shouldn't be falling in love with. But I am. And in some weird way, it fits that I'm here with him now, while he tries to save the woman he's engaged to ... who happens to be the beloved of that friend. **And** the hero we all adore, who also loves her.*

That resolved, sea green eyes met his with perfect equanimity. "I trust you, Richard. Whatever you've got in mind, let's do it."

"Lana, we could... I think I can chase the 'copter off - he's more maneuverable, but I'm a gutsier pilot. It's just..."

"We could all die?" she said gently. "I know. But we're their only chance - the Coast Guard can't get here in time. And she can't hold him up that long. We *have* to."

Richard nodded slowly, swallowing past the lump in his throat. "Yeah. You're right. I just... This is damn dangerous - I doubt he'll let me hit him, but we could hit the water, and that'd be the end."

"So be it," Lana said, calm now. Her hand slid over his atop the throttle, fingers tightening slightly. "Richard, do it. At least if we all die together, we can figure out who's walking through the pearly gates with whom before we actually see St. Peter."

Chuckling against his will, Richard nodded and pushed the throttle all the way forward. He twisted the yoke, sending the plane directly at the helicopter. Over the howl of the engines, which penetrated even the headphones, Richard said loudly, "Lana, just in case we die here... I'm in love with you."

She whipped around to stare at him, eyes wide with shock, but before Lana could reply the nose of the plane tipped down, and they began a steep dive that threatened to pull her out of the seat. The speed of their fall filled the cockpit with the wild scream of the wind as Richard bared his teeth and aimed at the 'copter.

In that terrible moment, racing toward the sea at speeds the plane was never designed to withstand, Lana saw the world with a new clarity. All of a sudden, she felt totally and

completely alive...

The shock of icy water drove the breath from Lois' lungs as she dove in, instantly penetrating her clothes. Her soaked jeans seemed to weigh a ton, but she kicked hard and her head broke the surface.

Gasping for air, Lois flailed her cuffed arms to stay afloat, blinking to clear the salt water from her eyes. Kal-El wasn't far away, thrashing weakly. The helicopter's engines snarled behind her, coming closer... *I can barely keep myself above water like this; I'll never be able to hold him up. Gotta get the cuffs off.*

She wouldn't let herself think of anything else. If she started wondering how long Kal-El could keep fighting the waves, she'd panic, and that wouldn't help her pick the lock. Lois twisted her head and pulled one earring out, straightening its fishhook loop in her teeth. These were most likely Riley's cuffs, bought from a novelty store and not police-issue. If so, they wouldn't be too hard to pick.

Working on the lock meant she couldn't move her arms to swim, so Lois took a deep breath and slid the earring post into the lock. As she hurriedly felt for the tumblers, the water closed over her head...

The human heart is capable of monstrous deceits... His father's voice. It couldn't help him now - Luthor had tricked him. The twins were safe - he had that much to be thankful for - but Lois was still in Luthor's clutches. He'd failed her, again...

The old wound from the shard stung where the salt water touched it, and his whole side ached now with a deep throb. The right side of his chest seemed about to burst from pain; the bullet was lodged deep in his muscle, and its kryptonite-studded tip radiated burning lines of agony throughout his upper body. Even breathing was painful, each desperate gasping breath seeming to dig the bullet deeper.

Not even the city was safe ... that kryptonite-impregnated monstrosity was still out there in the ocean, still growing. He could hear the sea floor creaking, the sound conducted better through water than air. *I've failed... I've failed them all...*

The helicopter circled back, and Kal-El dimly saw Luthor leaning out of the open door, his gaze fixed on the waves. The hero's vision grew dark, and he saw the chopper jerk away, Luthor falling back inside.

That was the last thing he saw before blackness rolled over him, and he let himself sink with one final thought chasing him down into unconsciousness: *It wasn't all in vain - as long as Jason and Kala are alive, then everything I've lived for, everything I dreamed of, is more than just ashes on the wind...*

The damned lock *finally* gave just as Lois' lungs threatened to explode. With her hands free, she lunged for the surface, taking a rasping breath of the salty air. Only when her lungs filled again did she open her eyes.

Lois almost dove back under. The seaplane passed over her with a tortured roar, one of its pontoons only a few feet above her head. Lois turned to look, and saw the helicopter dodge it, just barely. The door was still open, and she could hear Lex screaming in fury, but the words were unintelligible.

None of that matters, she thought, scything through the heavy sea toward the spot where she'd last seen Kal-El. Waves blocked her view, and her sodden clothes threatened to drag her

down, but Lois forced herself onward.

A glimpse of black hair above the water, swiftly disappearing, and fear gave Lois the strength to reach him. Her arm plunged down through the tossing waves, desperate for one last little miracle...

She caught his cape, and hauled on it. Her arms burned with effort, her eyes stung from the salt water, and her entire body trembled just from these few moments of fighting the ocean. But her legendary stubbornness served her well at last - Lois managed to drag Kal-El to the surface, get her hand under his chin to keep his head back and above water.

He wasn't responding. She couldn't even tell if he was breathing. And using one arm to hold him up meant she was in imminent peril of sinking herself. Kal-El didn't seem to have any natural ability to float.

"Come on!" she yelled, her voice lost in distant thunder, the slap of waves, and the snarl of aircraft engines. "Come on, Kal-El, *help me!*"

But he lay limply, his head tipped back on her shoulder, and Lois felt exhaustion begin to weaken her furiously pedaling legs. She flailed with her free arm, striving to keep them both up. "I won't lose you like this," she panted. "Not again..."

"Goddammit, Stanford, it's just a seaplane!" Lex bellowed. "Just dodge him!"

"He's crazy!" Stanford yelled, overcorrecting as he swung out of the seaplane's path. One of the 'copter's skids clipped an unusually high wave, and Stanford hauled on the collective, striving for height. The geologist was sweating, his eyes constantly flicking back and forth between the front windows and the sides. "Mr. Luthor, he's trying to kill us!"

"He hasn't got the maneuverability," Lex snapped, holding on to the back of the seat as Stanford turned the helicopter in a tight circle. "Keep dodging him until the damn fool crashes. I am not giving up now!"

"He's a fighter pilot," Stanford retorted nervously. "You sent me to a twelve-week course! He's gonna smash right into us - oh, shit!"

The seaplane dove at them out of a cloud, engines howling in protest. Stanford yelped and jinked to one side, but it was a narrow miss. "Boss, he doesn't care if he kills himself!" he yelled. "As long as he takes us with him!"

Lex scanned the sea angrily. They couldn't hear the plane coming over their own engine noise, and the clouds worked against them as well. Stanford was losing it, Kitty was in hysterics, and he'd lost sight of Lois...

There! He just barely saw her, the top of her head cresting a wave for a few seconds. Lex started to yell to Stanford to bring them around, when Lois slipped underwater. "**NO!**" he roared. "Stanford, get us there! Now!"

"Boss-"

"*Do it!*" Lex snarled. *I won't let her go - I worked too hard to win this prize. She's the trophy that makes this victory complete. I won't let her get away from me...*

The rotor wash flattened the surface of the waves, and for a moment Lex saw Lois barely ten feet from him. She was clinging to the alien, who lolled limply against her, his complexion pasty. In spite of the fact that he was much bigger than herself, Lois was holding him up. *Fool, he's already dead*, Lex thought, and gripped the doorframe, getting ready to haul her out of the ocean by her hair as soon as Stanford got them close enough.

Just then, they heard an unfamiliar voice over the radio. "Hey, chickenshit, you ought to land that thing somewhere before you get killed! Be glad I don't have a 'copter or I'd take your

tail rotor out and watch you spin!" Richard White laughed crazily, and Stanford glanced at the radio only to see that he'd been transmitting his conversation with Luthor.

The seaplane dove again. It seemed to appear suddenly as if by magic, but the damn pilot had merely used the bright rays of the sun shining through broken cloud cover to hide his approach. Stanford screamed in terror and wrenched the cyclic, making the entire craft sway abruptly. "Boss, we're all gonna die!" He was answered by a war whoop from the radio and more laughter.

Lex had tumbled to the floor with that last move, and he saw Lois sink one more time. Six years ago, he wouldn't have accepted this defeat - he would've pressed on. Which got him arrested then; it would kill him now. Stanford didn't have the guts to outfly Lois' fiancé, and if he kept forcing the geologist he'd lose. Time to cut his losses. *Fine. Let her drown with her alien lover. There's always plan B.* "Let's go," he said coldly.

Stanford practically sobbed with relief now that this part of it was finally over. He pointed the 'copter's nose south and got them out of there at top speed.

Lois forced herself to the surface one more time and coughed for air, spitting out seawater. Her muscles burned, her eyes stung, her wet clothes weighed more every second, and Kal-El was dead weight... *Don't think like that!* she reprimanded herself, tearing another rasping breath from the salty air. *He's not dead!*

But she could feel no movement from him, and the dark thought took root and blossomed. *What if he is? What if he **is** dead? And Luthor's circling around, looking for you - Richard can't fend him off forever. How long can you hold the both of up?*

Long enough! The reply was a fierce snarl in her mind. *Long enough to save us both, or die trying! I won't lose him!*

You've already lost, the persuasive murmur told her. *He's already gone. Just let him go... Or hold on, and let yourself go. You don't want to live in a world without him, just stop fighting and let it happen...*

That deep pessimism knew nothing of Lois' willpower. Her entire life had shaped her for this moment; every setback, every challenge at the office, every callous remark from her father, had hardened her resolve. And she would not stop fighting now - not when everything hung in the balance.

"No!" Lois screamed, defying the part of her that wanted to give up. **"Kal-El, say something! Anything! Let me know you can hear me! *Kal-El!*"**

And, amazingly, his blue eyes opened. They looked into hers dazedly, full of pain. But he saw her; his eyes focused, and the ghost of a smile curved his lips.

Lois barely had time to process that miracle before she heard splashing behind her. Turning sharply, furious enough to take on a shark, instead she saw Richard swimming smoothly toward her. "Let me take him," he said, looping one arm through the hero's. "C'mon, Lois."

She wouldn't relinquish her hold, forcing her trembling limbs to help support Kal-El as they towed him back to the seaplane. It wasn't far, but every yard seemed like miles. Lana was in the open door of the seaplane, reaching out to help Richard aboard. He turned and hauled Superman out of the water, half-dragging the larger man into the plane. Lana held her hand out to Lois.

The reporter was exhausted. She had nothing left; every last drop of her strength had gone into saving Kal-El. Now she could barely cling to the pontoon, and a part of her was

ready to let go, ready to accept the darkness and surcease from pain that the deep water offered. Kal-El looked so pale...

A larger part of her was too Lois to quit. She reached up, and Lana caught her wrist. The two women locked eyes unexpectedly, weary hazel with wide green. Something passed between them then, some unspoken knowledge, and then Lana pulled Lois aboard with more strength than the raven-haired woman would have thought she possessed.

We have to get the bullet out. Lois thought she said it aloud, but her teeth were chattering so hard the sentence was unintelligible. Lana took one look at her and whipped off her own coat, wrapping it around Lois' shoulders. "Richard, first aid kit?" she said. "She's hypothermic."

"I'm fine," Lois said, forcing the words out. "I'm shivering, that means I'm not hypothermic. *He* needs help." Even as she spoke, she was navigating across the pitching floor toward Kal-El.

Richard was kneeling beside the hero, feeling for a pulse. He looked up at Lois, and his face paled. "So do you. Under the passenger seat, Lana - thermal blanket." She hurried to get it, and Lois collapsed to her knees by Kal-El's side. God, he looked so pale...

"Kal-El? Can you hear me?" Lois asked, touching his face. His skin was cool; compared to his usual warmth, this chill was ominous. Her hazel eyes turned to Richard even as Lana wrapped the thermal blanket around her. "He's been shot with kryptonite; we have to get him to a hospital, Richard."

"Luthor could come back any minute," Lana said. "We've got to get out of here. Richard, I'll keep an eye on them while you fly."

It wasn't an easy decision for Richard to make, but a necessary one. He didn't want to leave Lois' side or Superman's - they were both in poor condition. Logic prevailed. "Lois, try to keep warm," he said, and with a quick kiss to her forehead he hurried to the cockpit.

The gesture barely registered with Lois. She had found the bullet wound; it was closer to the shoulder, which was good, but the kryptonite was making Kal-El progressively weaker. He was wheezing now, coughing weakly, but seemed to be unconscious. Lois took the opportunity to peer closely at the wound, gritting her teeth at the sight of torn flesh.

Lana knelt beside her, holding the first aid kit. "Lois, I don't think..."

Lois cut her a savage look, and she hushed. The reporter's shivers were slowly subsiding now that the door was closed and she was wrapped up in the warm coat and the blanket. She'd only been exposed to the water for a few minutes, even if her clothes were still soaked in it. Grimacing, she pulled the blanket off and wrapped it around Kal-El, still worried about his temperature. "That bullet has to come out," she said quietly. "It'll kill him if it stays there much longer."

The plane's engines roared, and the floor vibrated as Richard strove to take off. Lana gulped nervously. "What do you want to do?"

Lois held one hand out, staring at it with a frown of concentration. She could steady it with an effort; good enough. "Are there tweezers in that kit? Forceps, something?"

Lana rustled through it. "Hmm ... there's these." She held out a long, slender pair of hemostats sealed in a sterile package, and Lois grinned.

"Perfect," she said, and took them. Now for the hard part...

"Please don't bite my head off," Lana began, "but do you really think you should be doing that?"

"One of us has to," Lois said coldly. "And forgive me for saying it, but I don't trust you not to stop if he wakes up. Besides, my father was a general. I'm certified in first aid and

survival techniques, including minor field surgery."

The designer swallowed again, her throat making a dry click. "Good point," she murmured, surprised by how easily she could picture Lois probing the hero's wound while he groaned in pain. "Then do it."

"Alcohol wipes," Lois said, and Lana handed them to her. She quickly wiped down her hands and the surface of the wound, then stripped the hemostatic forceps from the sterile wrapping. The entire plane was shaking with every wave they clipped, and Lois forced herself to wait until Richard actually took off. Then, taking a deep breath, she spread the wound open as far as it would go. Blood oozed from it, and the tissue was an angry, inflamed red.

Lois bit her lip and probed for the bullet, trying to be gentle but knowing she really couldn't. And all the while, that pessimistic little voice in the back of her brain said, *You know the kryptonite could've shattered on impact, right? It could be spreading throughout his body right now.*

"Shut up," Lois growled under her breath, and Lana looked at her worriedly. The engines were making the plane vibrate, and Lois had to brace her right elbow against Kal-El's chest to steady her hand. *I have to just do this. Whether it hurts him or not, I have to. It's better to try to save him than sit here panicking and watch him die.* With that resolution she sought the bullet again.

Kal-El was still unconscious, but he moaned thickly in pain. Lois bit her lip harder and kept on, tasting blood. It seemed like forever before the tip of the forceps touched something hard and metallic. The bullet was lodged too deep to see, so Lois had to feel for it, getting the tip of the forceps around it and then locking them on.

Please, God, let the damn kryptonite still be stuck in the hollow point, Lois thought. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and pulled the bullet out, smooth and fast.

Kal-El screamed, his eyes flying open. The sight that met his gaze was not exactly encouraging; Lois looked down at him, her eyes wide with horror, clutching the forceps with the kryptonite bullet in them. After a moment in which they stared at each other, each wracked by emotional and physical pain, Lois realized that just being in the same room with crystal was weakening him. She bolted to her feet, nearly stumbled over Lana, and rushed to the door.

Richard barked a startled curse as Lois flung the door open, the seaplane suddenly canting as its aerodynamic shape changed. "*Close the goddamned door!*" he bellowed as he fought the controls, but Lois flung the kryptonite bullet away first.

Then the door *wouldn't* close on its own, and Lana had to scramble to help her yank it shut. Lois had started shivering again in the cold wind that had blown into the cabin.

When she turned around, Kal-El was sitting up, his hand pressed to the wound in his shoulder. "Lois?" he croaked, and then his voice found strength. "Richard, Lana... How...?"

"She went in after you," Lana said as Lois fought the chattering of her teeth. "Luckily she managed not to get shot or drowned. We were right behind."

"Where's Luthor?" His breathing was still a little ragged, but they could see the color coming back into his cheeks.

Lois went to him and then hesitated, glancing toward Richard. She came to a decision and helped him to his feet, letting him lean on her, as she replied, "The sonofabitch got away. You were more important."

"Richard chased him off," Lana said quietly, holding onto the back of the front passenger seat. Strange how talking to the superhero seemed so natural after you'd watched someone rip

a bullet out of his chest. "I ... I'm glad we could help."

"So am I," he said, those intense blue eyes locked on hers. "Thank you, Lana. Thank you, too, Richard. That was very brave flying."

"It was crazy," Richard replied, looking back for a moment. Weird, the way he said their names was almost ... familiar.

But then he turned to Lois, and Richard and Lana both knew they were forgotten as soon as hazel eyes met cerulean.

"You saved me," he said softly, and Lois felt unexpected tears well up in her eyes.

"Returning the favor," she replied, trying to joke and failing miserably. She couldn't tell if he really felt that much better that fast, or if he was just trying to be strong in front of his audience. The past rose up between them...

The helicopter seat belt sliding through her fingers, Lois screamed louder than she ever had before as she fell. Nothing but air under her for sixty-five stories, and then pavement. No Pulitzer, just an epitaph. And at that age, a very short one.

Then strong arms around her, his slightly amused smile as her scream cut off in surprise. "Easy miss, I've got you." Grinning at her so much the secret should've been blown right there.

*Lois' eyes wide and startled. Utter incredulity at this most impossible of things with his arm around her waist. "You've got me?" She looked down, saw nothing supporting him. "Who's got **you**?!" And then thinking, the hell with it if we're both crazy, he saved my life; I'm holding on. Locking her arms around his neck so tight that her perfume clung to his uniform for hours, holding each other so tightly that the sensation was forever burned into their minds.*

Now it was he who had held on, clinging to life and hope long enough for her to rescue him. Kal-El touched her cheek, so gently. "Thank you," he whispered. "Lois, I never meant for any of this to happen to you..."

And he never had. Lois remembered walking tentatively through the Fortress *that* night, looking for him after having stepped away to get her mind together on current events, wondering if she'd totally misconstrued the look in his eyes and the warmth in his touch. Wondering if she was being a fool to hope. And coming upon him arguing with the hologram of his father, Jor-El coldly dismissive of this human his son fancied himself in love with. Seeing the determination in Kal-El's face, hearing him say, *Father, I love her*. In the face of all that had happened, their audience mattered little. "I know," she soothed gently, eyes closing at the touch, hand slipped over his. "It's the price I pay... the price I was always willing to pay. For you."

"I know," he replied. Kal-El cupped her face and looked at her for a long, searching moment. Her eyes opened and met his again, hers still full of fear and wonder, his both joyful and sad. All the thousand unspoken things between them shivered in the air around them, sang in their locked gazes.

Lana's eyes widened in shock, and she turned to Richard, the blood draining from her face. He had been watching them too, and the look he turned to her was just as startled. Richard nodded once; he had seen what she saw. Lois and Superman both stripped of all their masks and pretensions, reduced to the elegant simplicity of their love for each other. The same thought crossed both Richard and Lana's minds: *I guess we don't have to worry about Clark Kent having to compete with Superman. He's **been** the competition all along... and Lois has known it from the beginning. This explains everything.*

Kal-El leaned forward and kissed Lois once on the forehead, conscious of Richard and Lana watching so silently. Then he stepped back, as if the closeness was too much. His voice was very low as he whispered, "I never stopped loving you."

Lois looked up, worried now. Why did his voice sound so very final? Why would he say that in front of Richard? Her heart began to race, but she was rooted to the floor by a presentiment of disaster. She knew that look; her spine turned to ice. Lois' brows knit as she watched him take a few steps away from her, eyes widening as she started to shake again. A few steps *toward the door...* "What are you doing?" she asked, voice sharp with fear.

"I have to go back." Kal-El opened the door resignedly, Richard scrambling for the controls again as the force of their airspeed tried to spin the plane off course.

"You're hurt," Lois pleaded lamely, knowing even as she said it that he wouldn't stop for that. Tears began to well up in her eyes again, her voice hitching with her swifter breath. *Kal-El, don't be a virtuous idiot. Stay, stay with me, stay with the twins. Rest; you'll die if you don't. The island will keep. Stay with me...*

He took a deep breath, but before he could say something reasonable, Lois cut him off. "Don't do this," she said quickly, tone rising in panic. She sounded terribly heartbroken and lonely, so much like she had that morning in her office, just before he'd kissed her to take the pain away. But there was no kiss to be used now. "Don't you do this to me. Not now, not like this." Lois' voice dropped, forgetting who else was listening, and she added, "I can't lose you a second time. Not after all of this."

Kal-El's eyes on her were infinitely sad, the roaring wind whipping his hair and his cape. For a long moment he looked at her silently, memorizing her face again as if it were not already a permanent part of his memory. To his aching heart, she had never looked more beautiful than she did in this last moment. "Goodbye, Lois," he whispered huskily, and then he was gone.

For one long instant, Lois' heart stopped, and she stood frozen in place by horror. *He is! He's going to try something incredibly stupid and noble, and get himself killed. And he knows it - he's never said goodbye to me before. Never. Oh, God...*

Her heart contracted in a painful beat, and sobbing "Kal-El...!" she lunged after him. Lois would've gone out the open door - knowing he would come back to save her - if not for Lana grabbing her shoulders and pulling her back from the brink.

Lois fought her, the floor tilting as the plane canted, and Richard yelled, "*The door!*" while trying to hold level flight. Lana shoved Lois away from the door and reached out to grab the handle, yanking it shut even though she felt something in her shoulder tear with effort.

"*No! Kal-El!*" Lois screamed, trying to get past her, and Lana did the only thing she could think of to control the madly struggling reporter. She locked one arm around the back of Lois' neck and hugged her close, wincing as she got kicked in the shin.

One last intense effort to break free, and then Lois collapsed so abruptly she frightened Lana. Moaning, "No, no, no, it can't end like this, I can't lose him after this," over and over, she leaned against the redhead's shoulder and sobbed as if in pain from a mortal wound. Which, in a very real way, she was. With this, she could be destroyed in a way much more profound than any of Lex's plans for her.

Lana held her, marveling at how petite Lois actually was - as soon as she broke down, she seemed to lose several inches of height. The designer couldn't even offer comfort. She'd seen the finality of that goodbye in Superman's eyes. In *Clark's* eyes. Her own began to mist with tears. To discover something so amazing about an old friend moments before losing him

forever just wasn't fair...

Richard had far too much to think about, so he concentrated on flying the plane. They needed to get Lois to a hospital - God only knew what had happened to her while she was missing, and the ocean was dangerously cold. He forced himself to focus on being a pilot while anxiety over his fiancée, fear for his friend and idol, and worry over the twins chased each other around his mind.

Kal-El had heard what they could not: the deep discontented growl of crystal against stone, the earth protesting as the island forced a widening chasm into the seafloor. He knew what it portended. The salt water continued to react with the Kryptonian crystal that Lex had used to create the island, and the virtually unlimited supply of water meant that the crystal structure would continue to grow. Eventually it would become a new continent ... drowning most of Europe and North America in the process.

That was the long-term threat. More immediately, the new crack in the ocean's floor was expanding in the immediate direction of Metropolis. The city had already endured an EMP, fires, high waves, and an earthquake. If the island was allowed to continue its growth, Metropolis would be struck by more earthquakes, each one more violent than the last, until the city was literally torn in half by the chasm in the seabed.

Every moment that Kal-El delayed, his task became even more daunting with the island's continuing expansion. Still, he stole a few moments to rise above the clouds and soak up the sun's healing rays.

He listened carefully to the baleful song of the crystal below, trying to gauge how long he could afford to wait while he replenished his strength. Kal-El also heard Lois, heard her screaming for him before her voice broke down into sobs. *Oh, God, there is nothing more I want than to go to her and hold her. Now that we've finally reached this point - we both know how we feel about each other, and we both know about our children. Even the children finally know who I am. It seems like Richard would be willing to step aside gracefully. Everything I ever wanted for myself - the woman I love, a family - is finally in my grasp.*

But I can only seize it at the price of millions of innocent lives. How can anyone possibly envy me? All of this power comes with its own price. I can't be the man I am and turn my back on this.

I can't be the man Lois loves and refuse my duty. Even if it kills me to carry it out.

Images of his life flashed before his eyes as he soaked up the sunlight. His youth in Smallville, racing the wind through rippling winter wheat, his late afternoon conversations on the porch with Pa, standing beside Ma in the cemetery. Then finding the ship that had carried him to Earth, the years of tutelage with Jor-El, leaving Ma to go to Metropolis.

Then Lois crossed his path, challenging his preconceptions - challenging *him* - from the first moment of their meeting. She had been the first person he publicly saved, and even now he could see the startled look on her face. Their lives remained entwined from that moment on; even when he gave up his powers and nearly lost the world, she hadn't given up on him. The look in her eyes when their bodies finally joined, the pure trust and surrender, was almost worth all of that pain afterward - had he been the only one to suffer for their decision, Kal-El would consider it a fair price for the joy. But the agony in Lois' eyes after they ended their romance wounded him more deeply than physical pain ever could, and he'd chosen to take those memories from her.

The best of intentions, and the worst of results. Seeing her after that was torture; he knew

what had been between them, and her flirtatious smile pierced his heart when he had known her lazy, satisfied grin. Faced with that, Kal-El had to leave the planet, hoping Lois would go on with her life, be happy without him.

I was a fool. The thought saddened him even as he plunged out of the clouds, arrowing toward the island. Lois had been carrying his children even then, that last discussion they had had on her balcony, when he hadn't had the courage to tell her that he was going away. Because of his own decisions, Kal-El had missed their birth, their early years. And now, flying toward an island made of kryptonite, he knew he would very likely miss seeing them grow up.

Jason and Kala would never know their father, except in stories and the memory of a few moments they'd spent together. With Mr. Clark at the office, and then seeing Superman beaten before he found the strength to save them all. *Will they remember me? Will they be able to understand why I had to leave them? Will Lois? I don't know which tears me apart worse - having to leave her, or having to leave the twins.*

No more time to think on it. Kal-El's heat vision vaporized the water ahead of him as he flew down toward the seabed, already feeling nauseated by the huge mass of kryptonite ahead. The sea floor also evaporated before his heat vision, and he tunneled rapidly down toward the base of the island. Kal-El undercut it, hoping to leave enough stone between himself and the growing kryptonite to shield him from its effects.

Grasping the stone above him, he began pushing it upward. The weight was incredible, but Kal-El found he *could* move it. As he strained to lift the entire island, he prayed, *Please let this work. This island wouldn't be here if not for me; I brought this threat to my adopted world. Please let me have the strength to right this wrong. Even if it kills me.*

Fallen

Richard tried to steady his hands on the controls, flying through the worsening rain, but the implications of that revelation were making him shaky. *I was right on both suspicions. Clark is the twins' father and so is Superman. They're the same person. My God, what a perfect disguise.*

Seeing Lois and Superman had reminded him too strongly of that moment in the supply room between Lois and Clark. The same magnetic attraction fraught with tension - the same yearning look in Lois' eyes, the same heartache in his. The resemblance was too much to deny then. It was amazing how much a pair of glasses, a gray suit, and a completely different set of mannerisms could hide. If he'd never seen Lois and Clark in an unguarded moment, Richard might not have recognized the similarity.

But he had seen it. *I really did steal Superman's girlfriend. And I've been raising his children. Oh, holy... Kala's hearing! I **knew** that wasn't natural! And Jason breaks more of his toys than he really should. Those kids have been developing freaking **superpowers** right under my nose! How did I miss that?!*

Lana was easing Lois into a seat just behind him, and Richard grinned wryly. *That's how. Lois has been keeping his secret all this time.* Strangely, the knowledge made him feel just slightly better. Lois had lied to him, but given whom she was protecting with those lies, they didn't sting him quite so badly anymore.

It was a lot to think about, but Richard had even more worries. Lois' teeth were chattering; he could hear them from here. She needed to go to a hospital, and getting her to sit still long enough to be examined was usually difficult. She was currently being quiet, but he didn't expect that to last very long. And Jason and Kala had been on that island, exposed to kryptonite. They were safe now, according to Superman, but Richard's heart wouldn't rest easily until he saw them with his own eyes. Their human heritage should have protected them from the deadly radiation, but what if they'd inherited their father's vulnerability?

Behind him, Lana tucked the thermal blanket around Lois and sat beside her. Water was still dripping off the reporter's hair, and she was huddled into a miserable ball on the seat. Lana tested her temperature with the back of her hand and found it a trifle low, but not dangerously so. Lois was unresponsive, drowning in her own pain, and she didn't even move when Lana unzipped her boots and poured off the icy water inside them.

The designer didn't like leaving her like that, but she went up to the front to check on Richard. He had also been immersed in the cold ocean, but one glance told her he would be fine. Physically at least; his mind was another matter, churning with anxiety and shock. "Richard," Lana said gently, resting one hand on his shoulder. "Do you have any towels or anything on board? She needs to get dried off - so do you."

He blinked at her for a second, and then pointed out a cabinet in the wall. Lana found a couple of towels inside, and tossed one to Richard, frowning at the abstracted way he caught it. Then she returned to Lois, tousling the excess water out of her hair.

The reporter's eyes focused on Lana's face for the first time since Superman had woken up, eyes full of defeated sorrow. It was the first time in this entire escapade, from start to finish, that she looked once and for all as though she were going to give up. "He's going to get himself killed," Lois said bleakly.

Those words stung Lana. She was already getting a headache from trying to wrap her mind around the fact that the boy who'd watched her so wistfully all those years ago was the same person as the world's defender. She'd seen the same mix of joy and sorrow in Clark's

eyes, watching Lois and the twins in the Chinese restaurant. Seeing that yearning look again on Superman's face just moments ago made the truth very plain. To think she would lose him forever - the love that never was, the good friend he had become, and the hero she admired - that was just too much for Lana to contemplate. Lois' pain, in light of her own feelings, was impossible to even comprehend. How difficult all of this must have been for her all these years, just watching her now.

"No," she said firmly to Lois, letting her words convince herself also. "Don't you think like that. He's Superman - he can do *anything*. He managed to save the twins, Lois, and get them back to Metropolis. We have to have faith in him." *And in Him above*, she thought silently. *Dear Lord, please spare Clark. He's needed here.*

Lois was still shaky and disconsolate tears still sparkled in her eyes, but she made herself nod. What Kal-El was attempting was dangerous - incredibly, insanely dangerous - but Lana had a point. If anyone could succeed and survive it, he could. He had before, with nearly every odd stacked against him. He *could* do this, she tried desperately to convince herself. She couldn't silence the part of her heart that had already begun to mourn him, but the rest of her could pray as Lois had never prayed in her life.

The two women were silent, lost in their thoughts, until they heard Richard mutter, "What the...? Whoa." He was staring out the window, and Lois and Lana looked out the seaplane's windshield just in time to see what had put that amazed tone into his voice.

The weight was crushing, almost unbearable. Almost. Lifting the island made a mockery of all those times he'd flown swiftly and confidently, bearing burdens that made people stare in awe. A car? He could lift it one-handed. A jet? It had been difficult to stop, but once it lost its acceleration it wasn't particularly heavy. The *Daily Planet* globe? Awkward to handle because of its shape and size, but no test of his strength in the end.

This was a test, one in which he was very nearly overmatched. Kal-El strained with every fiber of his being against the monstrous weight of the island, his hands and shoulders already sore. The massive conglomeration of crystal, stone, and earth inched skyward almost imperceptibly at first, but Kal-El didn't let himself stop even for an instant.

Millions of gallons of water poured off the sides of the island as it rose above sea level. Huge chunks of rock broke away from the underside of the structure as well. Both of those reduced the weight by tons, but Kal-El felt very little relief in the terrible pressure across his shoulders. He could hear the low squalling of crystal grinding against crystal above him, and felt his heart sink as he realized that the kryptonite was still growing down through the stone toward him.

An involuntary shiver rippled through the hero. The reasonable, rational response to the deadly radioactive substance creeping closer to him was to flee, but he couldn't do that. No one else could have attempted this task - no one else could even dream of succeeding at it. It was his responsibility, just as the invasion by General Zod and his followers had been his responsibility.

And I very nearly failed then, Kal-El thought, his face fixed in a grimace of effort as the island rose a few more feet. *I almost wasn't able to win against them, and every life lost during their brief conquest still weighs on my conscience. I don't regret being with Lois - even if we didn't have Jason and Kala - but I regret the timing. And I regret letting myself be convinced that I couldn't be the hero and the man. I regret believing that I had to choose between Lois and the world.*

The memories were bittersweet now, but he didn't try to suppress them. From the moment Lois pulled the gun on him to the moment he'd awakened with her in his arms, those were the memories that gave him strength to continue in his Herculean task.

After seeing the twins safely into the emergency room and getting Kala a blanket to keep her warm, Maggie Sawyer headed back outside to her patrol car. Her radio crackled with updates, officers all over the city trying to keep the peace in the face of panic and disorder caused by the EMP, the fires, and the earthquake. It wasn't an easy day for the Metropolis police department. *Why couldn't I have listened to my mother and become an insurance saleswoman instead?* The wry thought made Maggie chuckle - she was a cop to the marrow of her bones, even when her city was coming apart at the seams.

"Lieutenant Sawyer!" The call over the radio was so full of astonishment that the officer forgot to code it. Sounded like Davis, maybe - she'd have to talk to the younger cop later. "Lieutenant Sawyer, look! Up in the sky!"

"Ten-four," she said brusquely. Metropolis General Hospital was situated not far from the river, and from the emergency room Maggie could look down the broad avenue and see almost all the way to the bay. The skyline was just clear enough for Maggie to see what had Davis so flustered, in spite of the rain clouds moving over the city.

"Holy Mother of God," Maggie muttered. Something huge was slowly rising into the air - something that looked like an island. For a moment she was frozen in shock, simply staring. She only knew one man who could do such a thing.

Maggie turned and hurried back into the emergency room. In a low voice, she told Perry, "Come with me." He left the twins with Ella and followed her outside to the ER's covered circular driveway, where the sight of the island lifting toward the clouds left him speechless.

"Listen, White, you'd better not roll on what I'm showing you until I say so, or so help me I'll have your head on a platter," Maggie said threateningly.

"Are you out of your mind, Sawyer?" Perry growled over the sound of the raindrops. "Ella and I have been getting updates from the Coast Guard and the Army - that damn island wasn't there yesterday. *That's* what caused our earthquake. And that's where Luthor had the twins. Now Superman's taking the thing out of our atmosphere? Something *huge* is going on, and *that* is just the tip of the iceberg."

"Still-" Maggie started to cut in, but Perry overrode her.

"And my best damned reporter is right in the thick of it! I don't know exactly where she is right now, but you can bet if Superman's carrying a whole *island* up into space, Lois will be involved somehow! We sat on the news about her twins getting kidnapped - we even held the presses when Lois herself got snatched. You really think I'd roll on something this big without her eyewitness account?"

"You're a shameless newshound, White," Maggie said. "Lois and the twins are mixed up in this, and I don't want them dragged through the papers if I can help it."

"Then talk to Raines' tabloid," Perry retorted. "The *Planet* won't print a word of this until we have Lois' input. The story wouldn't be complete without her, true. But Jason and Kala are pretty much my grandkids, and I wouldn't endanger them no matter *how* big the story is. No, we're going to have the exclusive straight from Lois herself - and *she'll* decide how much we can print."

Lieutenant Sawyer looked at him in mild surprise. She'd known for years how close Lois and Perry were; in spite of all their quarreling, they truly were like father and daughter. But

she hadn't known until this moment just how deep the editor's affection for his successor was. That he would sacrifice a story, give up the chance to be the first paper publishing news of this magnitude, spoke volumes of his concern for Lois and her twins. Hell, if Perry was as cutthroat as she was accusing him of being, he'd already have interviewed the twins.

Maggie just nodded at last. People were stopping in their tracks, cars screeching to a halt at the wondrous sight above them. No one on Earth had ever seen an island fly ... and it seemed no one, besides than the policewoman and the newspaper editor, wondered just what it was costing Superman to perform this amazing feat.

His strength was bleeding away like water running out of a sieve, and he had no way to staunch the flow. Pure kryptonite had pierced the stone above him, huge jagged crystals glowing an evil green as they grew closer. Even worse, the sheer size of the island kept him in its shade, cut off from the life-giving sun. Kal-El struggled upward, the muscles in his arms trembling with effort, a vein standing out in his forehead.

A quick glance showed him that he was just above the clouds, with many miles to go before the massive crystal structure was free of earth's orbit. But he couldn't give up. Letting go now would cause the island to fall back into the ocean, causing a tsunami. *I have to find the strength to go on, I have to.* The thought was desperate, his determination fading in the face of the pain and weakness radiating through him.

Jor-El's voice echoed in his mind. *Kal-El, my son, you're all that remains of a once-proud people. And in you Krypton's glory will live on...*

The words galvanized him. *I'm not the Last Son of Krypton anymore. I have Jason and Kala... I have to do this for them. Even if kills me.*

Of all the images that had flickered before his vision, each bolstering his strength on the long journey up, the last one was the most powerful. The twins, *his* twins, Jason and Kala looking up at him with such wonder as they bathed in the light of the sun. For them - he had to do this for them. The island and its growth of kryptonite would always be a threat to them if he didn't force it far enough out into space. That gave Kal-El the will to clench his teeth and force himself onward, temples throbbing with agony, every muscle shaking, his entire body on the verge of collapse.

Faces swam before his blurring vision, each with its own memories: Pa teaching him to drive the tractor; saying goodbye to Ma before he left in search of Krypton; Jimmy getting his first front-page photo and buying everyone cigars as if it were his first child; Perry trying to scold him into showing a little more spine around Lois - oh, Lois, how he regretted leaving her like this. For an instant, she was there with him in his mind, a reminder of her impish grin, usually tossed over her shoulder just as she was gearing up to get into some trouble. *Thank God, I told her I love her. I never want her to doubt what she meant to me ever again. She already had to for long enough.*

Weak as he was, there was no way Kal-El could foresee surviving this. Surely this would end at any moment, his body closing down and floating forever in the frozen void of space. Although it did little to console him, at least he'd said goodbye this time...

He was high above the earth when his strength finally trickled out. With one last feeble push, Kal-El began to drift backward from the island. Though his sight was dimming, he saw that the mass of stone and crystal was moving steadily away from him. *I did it - it's out of orbit, it'll keep going until it hits a comet or something. Thank God...*

Conscious thought blinked out then, those cerulean eyes rolling closed, and as the hero

began to fall back into gravity's grasp, a last memory came to comfort him. *The twins. Jason's bright blue eyes, so merry and so calm at the same time. Kala's crooked mischievous smile, the mirror of her mother's. Their small arms around his neck, so trusting, his daughter's voice murmuring, "Daddy."*

When Richard and Lana had flown back to Metropolis that morning - *was it only this morning? It feels like a lifetime*, Richard thought - they had docked the seaplane as close to the *Daily Planet* building as possible. That marina happened to be close to Metropolis General Hospital, and Richard's car was now parked in its garage. It seemed as if luck was with them for the moment. He taxied the plane over the choppy surface of the river, and jumped out to hurriedly secure it, ignoring the rain on his already-wet clothes.

Lana managed to get out before Lois did, and turned to help the reporter onto the dock. The wood planks felt a little unsteady under Lana's feet, as if the surge from the earthquake had loosened the pilings. Not a very pleasant thought.

Lois held onto the door for a moment. Her entire world still felt utterly askew, her thoughts and emotions twisted by ongoing events to the point that standing, let alone even walking forward was difficult. Despite how long she had been out of the freezing water, her toes were still a little numb, and even with her boots dried off and back on, her feet weren't warming up. In spite of that, it wasn't in her nature to show hesitancy, and she covered her reluctance to jump down onto the dock by looking up at the sky.

The island was no longer visible above them in the storm-tossed sky; Kal-El had taken it above the cloud cover some time ago, no sign of either him or it, which could only mean one thing. Closing her eyes in relief, Lois' heart swelled as she let a small smile of thankfulness spread across her lips. He *had* done it. He had done the impossible, *again*. *Oh, thank God*, she thought wearily and with more gravity than she ever had before.

But as she opened her eyes again, Lois startled when her sharp vision caught something bright burning in the sky above. Some part of the island falling through the atmosphere, heating up with the friction of re-entry? But for all its brightness, it seemed very small...

Lois' heart froze in her chest as the grateful smile drained off her face, watching the object's descent with utter dread. Icy chills ran down her spine, her stomach knotted, and her breath stuttered. Not a chunk of rock burning up like a meteor... The orange glow left the falling object as it slowed against the air, and Lois could just barely make out its shape and a flash of red swirling around it...

The intensity of her devastation roared in her ears as her gaze remained locked on the plummeting object, which was becoming easier to see by the instant. *Kal-El*, she thought, her heart breaking, and it seemed as if her mind had shattered, too. Her traitor thought of what seemed like years ago echoed back to her, *What if we save the twins, only to lose their father? What if it's a trade?* Then as if awaked by a vicious slap, Lois jumped without hesitation, trying to hit the dock running, screaming his name. The world was surreal around her, her now-rapid heartbeat the only sound she could hear in that awful moment. She had to get to him, she had to fix it, had to take back everything. It couldn't end like this, not like this...

Lana had to grab her again, nearly yanked off her feet by Lois' hysterical attempt to get to the falling hero. "*Richard!*" Lana yelled, in tears herself as the situation nearly undid her as well. He hastily knotted the lines securing the seaplane and rushed to help Lana.

Between the two of them, they managed to stop Lois from running headlong in the direction they'd seen Superman falling. She'd screamed herself hoarse, the unfamiliar name still

falling brokenly from her lips when Richard picked her up and carried her off the dock.

No one was in attendance at the marina, fortunately, and they were able to get the sobbing reporter to Richard's car. Still holding her, he told Lana, "Get my keys - left front pocket. I'll drive, but I'm not putting her down anywhere but the back seat."

Lana nodded; Lois was being incredibly unpredictable, nearly catatonic one moment, possessed of extraordinary strength and determination the next. The redhead couldn't help blushing a little as she reached into Richard's pocket for his keys, but she quickly got the back door unlocked and got in with Lois as soon as Richard set her inside.

Richard got in the driver's side, glancing at both women in the rearview mirror. "Lois, we're taking you to Metro General," he said firmly.

"No," she murmured, swallowing painfully. "No, I have to go to him..."

"An ambulance will get there first," Lana said, her voice gentle. "They'll probably take him to Metropolis General, too."

Richard nodded as he started the car. He actually had no idea what would happen to Superman, to Clark, but he'd say anything to quiet Lois while they drove. Lana could only attempt to soothe her as the raven-haired woman whimpered, curled up near her in her own anguish. Now they could see that she had a necklace of bruises forming on her throat, and Richard wondered fearfully how badly she'd been hurt before she ever jumped into the water.

Traffic was dreadful. Simply, utterly, awful. Not only was it raining, not only were there wrecks on most major streets, but some cars had simply been abandoned as their owners gawked at the island and the falling hero. Richard gripped the wheel and cursed under his breath as he drove into oncoming lanes and up on sidewalks, weaving a path to the hospital. He was more conscious than ever of Lois' pale skin and haunted eyes in the rearview mirror, and his mind insistently reeled off a list of calamities she could be suffering from: broken bones, internal injuries, shock, hypothermia, internal bleeding... The worst of them was shock. Lois wouldn't even know the extent of her own injuries if she was in clinical shock, and her condition could rapidly worsen.

Just hold on, he prayed, listening to Lana's soothing murmur as the redhead tried to keep Lois warm.

Sirens howled ahead, and Richard snapped his full attention to the road. A cavalcade of police cars roared through the intersection in front of him, leading an ambulance with its siren wailing. The cruisers were actually nudging abandoned cars out of the road to make a clear path for the ambulance.

"That's him," Lois whispered, sitting up.

Richard couldn't fault her logic; no other person would get that kind of urgent treatment at a time like this. "Buckle up," he said, and floored the accelerator.

His Saab fell in line right behind the ambulance, chasing the procession to the hospital. Richard gritted his teeth as he drove; he knew he could follow any turn the ambulance could make successfully, but their course felt more like slalom skiing than driving down one of the largest streets in Metropolis. *Lois could do this without turning a hair, wet streets or dry*, he thought wryly, wrenching the wheel left around a stalled pickup and then right around two wrecked taxis. *I'm a lot happier working in three dimensions.*

They made it to the hospital before the pulsing sirens managed to give Richard a migraine. Richard didn't even slow down at the security booth, just followed the squad cars and the ambulance right into the emergency bay. He pulled the Saab up onto a concrete median and opened his door just a fraction of a second after Lois opened hers.

"Hey! You can't park there!" the security guard yelled. Richard didn't even turn to look, his eyes on Lois as she nearly stumbled and then broke into a tired run toward the ambulance, never even noticing the continuing shower.

A familiar blonde head was getting out of one of the cruisers, and Lieutenant Sawyer did a double-take to see Lois coming toward her. "What the..." she began, and then took in Richard, Lana, the car, and the security guard. "They're fine!" she called, thoroughly confusing the guard, and then focused her attention on Lois. "Dammit, Lane, how do you always manage to show up at a moment like this? You've got more lives than a sack full of cats."

The reporter could barely summon up a rusty chuckle, her mind fixed on the gurney the paramedics were unloading. Even though uniformed officers surrounded it, she could see a flash of blue and red. "Maggie, is he...?" she started to ask as she got closer.

Lieutenant Sawyer got a better look at Lois, and her expression of surprise became one of concern. "He's unconscious. Lois, you come with me. They might need you." She caught the reporter's elbow in a firm grip, and then looked at Richard as she added, "The twins are okay. They're in the waiting room with Perry and Ella..."

Before she finished the sentence, Richard was gone, rushing through the doors to the waiting room. Lana followed him, and Maggie propelled Lois through the paramedic's entrance. At least she tried to; Lois halted and craned her head around, her heart torn between her children and their father. She caught one glimpse of her mother in the waiting room, flanked by Jason and Kala. They seemed all right...

"**DADDY!**" both twins shrieked in surprise and delight, leaping off the bench. Richard fell to his knees, his arms flung wide, and Kala and Jason dove into his embrace. Lois savored one last look at them, Richard kissing them both and the twins hugging his neck, before she let Sawyer pull her into the emergency room.

"You look like hell," Maggie muttered, flashing her badge to get them past the nurses' station.

Lois' fragile control broke yet again, and she snarled, "Yes, well, I've been kidnapped, punched, tied up, beaten, almost raped, beat up the guy who tried, got smacked in the head fighting Luthor, *he* strangled me unconscious and then held *my own goddamn gun* to my head - and just to make my day complete, I jumped into the freezing fucking ocean to save Superman! *So excuse me if I don't look like fucking Miss America!*"

Doctors, nurses, other patients, and police officers all looked up interestedly as the raving reporter hustled past them, Maggie setting a swift pace through the warren of treatment rooms. Sawyer chuckled and replied to the tirade, "Miss America's blonde this year, isn't she?"

Lois stumbled again, and swore loudly at Maggie, herself, and fate. The lieutenant caught her arm again to steady her. "Nice to see your life is back to normal, Lane. Causing trouble, kicking ass, and swearing like a sailor." Pale blue eyes caught hazel, and a wry grin curved Maggie's mouth. "I missed the *real* you."

"Bite me, Sawyer," Lois growled. "Where the *hell* is he?"

"All the way back," Maggie replied. Watching her friend a moment longer, her keen policewoman's observation noted how played out Lois was. Under the expensive coat, she was also soaking wet, and her complexion was pale except for dark smudges of exhaustion. Yet she still forced herself to keep up the bruising pace. Wonderingly, Maggie said, "You're scared, aren't you?"

A blazing look from hazel eyes, and Lois hissed, "No, Sawyer. I'm *terrified*."

Then they arrived at a large glass window that gave them a view into the treatment room

where Kal-El lay, a nurse rhythmically pumping air into his lungs. Doctors and nurses swarmed over him, milling incomprehensibly at first glance, but there was method to their swift actions. Lois' gaze locked onto his still form, feeling once again as if her heart had frozen.

She approached the glass warily, her hands coming up to meet those of her ghostly reflection. Two strong male nurses grabbed Superman's suit at the neck and *ripped* it open, baring the chest Lois knew so well even from so long ago. The reporter flinched a little, disturbed by the violence of the motion. One nurse started attaching EKG leads to Kal-El's chest while another clipped a pulse oximeter to his ring finger.

The doctors quickly found the gunshot wound and flushed it, removing a couple of tiny fragments of crystal. They also discovered an injury Lois hadn't seen, what looked like a stab wound in his side. She shivered as she saw them extract another small shard of crystal. *Pierced twice, and he still managed to lift an island*, she thought.

A number of hospital staff and police officers had gathered, keeping vigil over the Man of Steel while the doctors worked frantically to save him. Someone murmured, "Is that Lois Lane?" But Lois herself never even glanced around. Even with the crystal out, he was so very still...

Don't die on me, she began to say, but remembered Kala's hearing. They were so far away from the waiting room, it seemed impossible that she could catch the words, but Lois took no chances. "Don't quit on me," she whispered, staring as if she could burn a hole through the glass.

The doctors were still moving at a frenzied pace, one of them staring at the heart monitor and scowling. Lois' breath froze as she saw the green line on the monitor go flat...

One doctor attempted to get a needle into Kal-El's vein, but the metal bent without piercing his skin. Another gave an order, and a nurse rolled a cart over to the bedside. Lois' eyes widened as she recognized the defibrillator. "Don't quit on me, Kal-El," she murmured, her voice rising in pitch and volume as the machine charged. "You can fight this. Don't quit now, this is nothing..."

Everyone in the room stepped back as the physician in charge pressed the defibrillator paddles against Kal-El's chest. The shock intended to jump-start his heart rebounded through the machinery, causing it to explode. The watchers and the hospital staff leaped back as the lights flickered.

Even the catastrophic failure of a defibrillator wasn't enough to completely short-circuit the hospital's electrical systems. They'd been designed with multiple backups, and soon the lights and monitors came back on. What they showed was depressing: Kal-El still lying there so very motionless, and the heart monitor still tracing a flat line. The doctors looked down at their patient, then at each other, with devastated expressions. There was nothing they could do for him.

Lois lost it then, pounding on the glass in front of her and shouting, "No! No, don't you quit on me! I know you can hear me, dammit! Don't you quit! *Don't make me lose you again!*"

Her outburst shocked Maggie so badly that the lieutenant didn't even think to restrain her. A large orderly tried to pull Lois away from the window, but the hysterical reporter shoved him away with strength born of desperation. Maggie realized that the glass might not be shatterproof; the way Lois was pounding on it, she was in very real danger of breaking it and cutting herself. The policewoman grabbed her friend's arm and pulled her away, Lois fighting her every inch of the way. Unnoticed, uncontrollable tears poured down her face as she screamed to the unmoving figure on the gurney, "No! *No! I'm not letting you quit on me! I*

*know you can hear me! Fight this! **FIGHT IT!** You've managed to save the whole human race, don't tell me you can't save yourself!"*

Her voice had grown hoarser as she shouted, her throat afire. The further Maggie and the orderly managed to pull her away from the glass partition, the harder it was to watch the heart monitor. Several of the fluorescent bulbs had gone black during the power surge, and the room had no windows to the outside...

Lois' eyes shot wide open with realization. No windows - *no sunlight*. She found a last reserve of strength and dug in her heels, refusing to be moved. "Sunlamps! Someone get a sunlamp in there!"

At first the hospital staff outside the room looked at her dubiously, but Lois fixed her gaze on the most senior of the spectators and snarled, "He gets his power from the sun! Don't just stand there, you white-clad idiot! If you want to save him, *he needs sunlight!* Don't you think *I'd* know?!"

The doctor stared at her, brow furrowed, and then understanding dawned. This was Lois Lane - if anyone would know how to save Superman, it would be his chronicler. A renewed burst of activity met her words, and the orderly rushed off along with several others. Maggie relaxed her grip, watching Lois warily. Her posture seemed calm, almost resigned, but her eyes were still wild with fear.

Warily, Lois walked back up to the observation window. Her breath fogged the image before her, her throat thick with tears. Her voice was so rough now that she could no longer scream - she could only hope.

Pressing one palm against the cool glass, Lois whispered, "I don't know if you can hear me, but you fight. I need you ... *we* need you. Please, Kal-El... *Fight...*"

In the waiting room, there had been a few moments of confused babbling while Richard cuddled the twins protectively and Ella and Perry fired questions at him. Jason and Kala needed him more, though, and he let Lana answer for him.

"Lois is going to be okay," the redhead said. "She just went in back with one of the police officers to see Superman..."

"She's *here*?" Ella interrupted. The fire that blazed in her hazel eyes was very familiar to those who knew Lois well. "I'm going to see my daughter."

Before she could march up to the admitting nurse and demand to be allowed into the treatment area, Kala stiffened in Richard's arms. "Something's wrong," the little girl whispered, her eyes huge and seemingly hollow with fear. In the next instant, she tried to bolt for the nearest door.

The adults and Jason found themselves trying to calm and restrain Kala as she struggled, tears rolling down her face as she screamed, "We gotta get to Mommy! Please, somethin' bad's happenin'! Hurry, we gotta get to Mommy!"

When Your Angels Can't Sing

"I'm not sure about that new boy I hired," Ben said, idly rumpling his Beagle's ears. Barkley sighed and rested his head on his master's knee, listening to the familiar female voice coming from the telephone.

"Oh, really?" Martha replied. Ben could hear water running in the background; she was probably washing dishes. "What's bothering you about him?"

"I don't know," Ben sighed. Barkley pawed his leg, reminding him to keep up with the petting, and the older man chuckled. "He just seems a little... spacey sometimes. Like his mind's miles away."

"Mm-hmm," Martha said. The running water cut off, and then Ben heard the television in the background. "A lot of kids these days are like that. Scatterbrained. Most of them can't keep their minds on one thing more than a minute... and almost all of them have driver's licenses."

Ben chuckled. "Now that's a scary thought." He turned on his own television set, asking, "What are we watching tonight, Martha?"

"Oh, I'm waiting for *Jeopardy* to come on," she said. "Still the best game show on television."

"I'll agree to that," Ben said, flipping through channels until he reached the network.

Comfortable silence reigned between them as they waited for the show to start. It wasn't always possible for them to be together - they each had their own farm to take care of, and Ben rarely stayed later than seven for propriety's sake. So Martha and Ben had arrived at this solution for their all-too-quiet evenings.

Just as the theme music began to play, the show cut off, replaced by a news broadcast. "Aw, darn," Ben grouched, and then went silent.

Scenes of devastation filled the television. The city of Metropolis was a shambles, struck by fire and earthquake. But that was not the worst of it. "Live video of Superman's fall..." the announcer began, and then the images on the screen blotted out everything but Martha's sudden gasp of horror.

In silence they watched the Man of Steel falling from the sky, and then the video switched to another. A shaky hand-held camera panned around the crowds milling in the street outside Centennial Park, then jerked upward to catch the blue and red blur rocketing toward the trees.

The impact shook the cameraman's hands, shook every tree in the park. A cloud of dust and debris rose, blowing outward, and Ben heard Martha groan as if in mortal agony.

"Martha?" he said quickly. "Martha, are you all right?"

"My God," she whispered. "Oh my dear Lord... Ben, I think you'd better get over here-"

"On my way," he said, prying Barkley's head off his knee and grabbing his car keys. Could even a hero like Superman survive a fall like that?

"-and take me to the airport," Martha finished, stopping Ben in his tracks. "I'm going to Metropolis."

"Martha?" Ben asked incredulously.

"Ben, my son lives in Metropolis," she said, her voice dreadfully calm. "And with... with its defender hurt... Clark might need me. There's... there's no one to watch over the city now..."

"Martha, you might not even be able to *get* to Metropolis," Ben argued. "The city... you saw it. The airport might not even be open."

"I'll get there," she replied. "Don't you worry about *that*, Mr. Hubbard. Now are you going to help me or not?"

In the midst of the frenetic activity surrounding Kal-El, a nurse picked up the steel tray holding the crystal fragments and walked out of the room with it, intending to hand the strange green shards over to the lab. Moments after she left, she turned a corner around the x-ray department, and the lead shielding in the walls cut off the kryptonite's deadly radiation.

Beep. Such an unassuming little sound, but it meant so much. The doctors in the room turned to look at the heart monitor, where a spike appeared on the flat line. *Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Lois felt hope swell in her heart, and strangely it brought fresh tears. She drew in a shaky breath, watching as the slow beat scrolled across the monitor screen. Kal-El's pulse was weak, but steady, and it seemed to hypnotize Lois.

No one questioned her presence now, the hospital staff moving around her as she kept her vigil. For several minutes she watched the monitors, watched his still face, as sunlamps were brought in and set up beside him. In the bright light, Kal-El looked almost exalted, his features seeming to glow. *You have to live, Lois thought. You have to recover. Not just for me - for Jason and Kala.*

She was barely aware of a nurse approaching Lieutenant Sawyer, hearing her own name in their murmured conversation. Then Maggie was gently tugging her sleeve. "C'mon, Lois," the policewoman said. "Your kids are in the waiting room - they need you, too."

Jimmy Olsen sat down very slowly, staring at his camera. His stomach felt fluttery, his head so light it seemed as if it might just float away any second.

The photographs he'd taken were good. Pulitzer-good. But the best of them all - the most iconic, the most original, the shot he *knew* no one else had - was the one that made his throat tighten. Superman, lying unconscious in the dirt at the bottom of the crater his fall had created.

That photo seemed to stare up at Jimmy from his digital camera's screen. Superman looked so... There wasn't a word for it. Broken, weak, vulnerable - those kinds of adjectives weren't meant to apply to the Man of Steel. Jimmy swallowed around the lump in his throat.

"The Chief would never run it," he murmured to himself. True, but he could have shopped it to other papers. Even magazines. That photo was worth a lot of money. Buy-a-new-car money. Hell, buy-a-new-house money. The Olsens could use it.

Superman's face in sharp focus, his skin so pale, smudged with dirt from his impact. The way he lay sprawled, one leg twisted under him. Shattered tree trunks at the edge of the shot, and the steep wall of the crater. Worst of all, Superman looking so... lifeless.

Even in black and white shots, he always seemed to explode with color, a personality so vibrant that it made itself felt even in images. But this shot, though it was in color, looked drained. Washed-out. And the hero himself looked almost...

Jimmy shook his head. He wouldn't even think it. Sighing a little - it could've won a Pulitzer, or it could've made his bank balance a lot bigger - Jimmy pressed the delete button.

The four adults had just managed to get Kala calmed down a little when she suddenly tensed again. Richard caught her shoulders as her tear-stained eyes lit up, looking toward the door. "Mommy?" she said, a trifle uncertain.

One side of the double doors swung open, and Lois appeared, the hand pressed against her forehead nearly covering her face. She looked weary, almost at the limit of her endurance, but at the sight of the twins, the hand fell away and a smile slowly formed. Kala and Jason, of course, ran to her, and Lois had to kneel down quickly to keep from being knocked over.

For one long moment, Lois merely hugged the twins, fresh tears flowing as she held Jason and Kala tight. *They're here, they're here. Oh my God, it's really them. My babies, oh my God...* They hugged her back just as tightly, Kala still sniffing. "Is... is Superman gonna be okay?" the little girl asked.

"I hope so. I'm so glad you're okay. Mommy was so worried," Lois murmured brokenly, kissing Kala's forehead, then Jason's. The last time she had seen them, Luthor and his goons were loading them into the helicopter and it had scared her half to death. Now, reunited, she couldn't seem to let go of them, nor could they let go of her. Two days apart seemed like eons, and Lois kept stroking their hair and kissing them. Just holding them tightly didn't seem enough. *Finally I have them back. My poor babies - I will never, never let that happen again. I'll kill Luthor if he touches you ever again... And I won't miss next time*

At last, though, mother and twins were satisfied that this reunion was real, that nothing would separate them again. As soon as Lois stood up, Ella caught her shoulders and pulled her into a hug. "I was *worried* about you."

Lois leaned against her mother, letting out a shuddery little sigh of relief. "I'm okay, Momma. Really, I am."

Ella pulled back and held her by the arms to look at her, love and vexation mingled in her expression. "Lois Joanne Lane, you turned my hair white before I was fifty. I'd be a fool if I thought you'd slow down anytime soon." She sighed, and smiled as she kissed Lois' cheek. "I'm just glad you're all right, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Momma," Lois replied. She glanced over Ella's shoulder at Perry, and gave him a tired grin.

"Glad you're back, Lane," he said gruffly. "Hate to have to run your department for you much longer."

"Love you too, old man," the reporter shot back. Quickly scanning the group, she asked, "Where's Jimmy?"

"We didn't have room for him in Sawyer's car when we brought the twins here," Ella told her. "He stayed at Centennial Park."

"He'll meet us back at the *Planet*," Perry said confidently. "Olsen got some good photos today, I bet. Boy's head is gonna swell."

Richard and Lana exchanged a glance, and then he added smoothly, "As for Clark, he sent me a text message. The earthquake left him trapped, but he said he was okay. He even gave Superman his cell phone - that's how we were able to tell him where we were, and how Jason called you, Elinore."

Lois blinked. "You're sure he's okay?" It hurt her to say it, knowing that Kal-El was still lying unconscious in the treatment room behind her, but she had to protect him. Even if it hard to even keep her mind straight right about now.

"We think we know where he is," Lana said. "There's no way to reach him now, but the rescue crews ought to get him free soon, I hope."

Lois was still nodding, trying to figure out what to say next, when Maggie came through the doors. "Lois, S.T.A.R. Labs finally got here. They're transferring Superman to their facility - they want you to go, too."

For a moment, the reporter could only stare at her. *Why?* The question immediately answered itself. *No one knows more about him than I do.* Perry pushed her shoulder gently. "Go on, Lane. I guess I can hold down the fort a little longer; you follow the story."

"Lieutenant Sawyer, Lois needs to see a doctor, too," Richard said.

"She's an Army brat, she'll get seen faster at a military facility," Maggie replied.

The twins suddenly clutched Lois' hands. "We're going, too," Jason said, doing his best to sound stern. Kala nodded, staring up at her mother. The looks on their little faces were so determined.

All of the adults looked down. Lois didn't want her children out of her sight, not after *finally* getting them back. She looked up at Maggie, the question unspoken in her eyes, and the lieutenant nodded. "Bring the kids, too. I know better than to ask you to leave them now, and the guys at S.T.A.R. should know it too."

"All right," Lois said with a sigh, nodding. For a moment she looked down at the twins, her heart aching just to be able to look at them up close again. *They have a right to see him, especially if there's a small possibility he might...* The reporter cut that thought off cold. *We're just going to have to be very careful what they say and do. He saved them, so their behavior shouldn't be too suspicious. I'll just have to warn them at some point.* Her decision made, she turned back to her mother and Richard and Perry, shrugging helplessly.

"He needs you," Ella said, and the secret shared between mother and daughter lay under those words. "I'll tag along for the twins' sakes. I believe Joffrey is in command at S.T.A.R. You remember him, Lois - General Unsworth."

There was no arguing with Ella in full Army-wife mode, so Lois didn't even bother to say anything. Besides, only her mother knew why the twins would have to be closely watched inside a top-secret military facility - or so Lois thought.

Richard came forward then, hugging her briefly. "Take care," he said, kissing Lois' cheek. "If you need me, for anything, you know how to find me."

She kissed him back, feeling the new distance between them and finding herself unable to say or do anything about it. Or the rush of guilt that accompanied it. She owed him so much for all of this. And Lana, who had had no reason at all to risk her life... "Richard, I..." *Later*, she thought. "I know," she replied, giving him a sad smile. "You take care, too. I ... I'll be in touch."

No more time for goodbyes. Lois took a deep breath and turned to Maggie, the twins on either side of her holding her hands and Ella right behind them. "Let's go."

Ben had been right; getting into Metropolis wasn't easy. She had refused to listen to reason, stubbornly insistent on getting into the city if she had to *walk*. Martha had to make a fast exchange to catch the right plane, and then they were delayed getting off the tarmac. Flights all across the eastern seaboard were delayed by the earthquakes.

Unfortunately, the airline had chosen to keep the passengers occupied by playing the news on the big screen at the front of the plane. Superman's fall and his desperate ambulance ride to Metropolis General Hospital were shown again and again. Martha closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the seat. *Son... I hope you're okay. I love you so much.*

Her mind traveled back to that fateful afternoon, she and Jonathan riding alongside their own fields just minding their own business. Suddenly, fire rained from the sky; Jonathan had swerved the truck in surprise, blowing out a tire.

Martha remembered the deep sense of disquiet that swept over her at the sight of the scar burned into her cornfield. While Jonathan examined the truck and muttered a few choice words, she had been drawn toward the destruction.

Even now, more than thirty years later, Martha could still feel the sharp sense of wonder and surprise that had swept over her when a *child* walked out of the smoking wreckage. A

little boy, her heart's desire, the only thing Jonathan had never been able to give her in their marriage. Every other dream she'd had, he had made come true, but that one seemed impossible.

Until the day a miracle fell from the stars and landed beside her. *My son, my only son. And what a miracle you turned out to be.* Always a sweet child, affectionate and kind - mischievous as all boys were, but never mean-spirited, not for an instant. All of his powers, his noble mission - and the virtues he'd learned from her and Jonathan. She had always been proud of him, every second of his extraordinary life.

His most recent mission flitted across her mind. *Lois Lane and her twins ... maybe my grandchildren. What's become of them? Did he find the kids and save them from Luthor? There's no way to know, yet. I saw him lifting an island into the sky on television before Ben came over. I would've never guessed Clark could do something so... impossible.*

But the impossible seems to be his specialty. Impossible, for a child who looked so human to have such powers. Impossible, for him to grow to manhood with those powers and never lose his sweet nature, never be corrupted by arrogance or greed. Impossible for him to go on such a long journey, and then return home...

Oh, dear Lord, I only just got him back. Please don't take him away again so soon. I lost Jonathan; please don't make me mourn for my son, too. A mother should never see the death of her child. Please... Tears began to slip silently from her closed eyes.

A stranger's hand covered hers. "Ma'am?" Martha blinked, seeing the young man who'd taken the seat beside her. "Ma'am, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said quietly, wiping away the tears. "It's just ... my son lives in Metropolis."

"My sister, too," he replied. "I don't know... Would you like to pray with me?"

Martha smiled. "I would. Thank you." *This is why my son keeps doing what he's doing - people who care about each other, who offer whatever comfort they can. Clark believes that people are innately good, and folks like this prove him right.*

With Lois and Ella and the twins gone, Lana, Richard, and Perry were left feeling a bit awkward, the secret hovering in the air between them. Fortunately, Perry solved the problem. "Well, boy, are you a newsman or not? Let's get back to the *Planet* and see if any of the presses are still working. We can't really roll the whole story without Lois, but we ought to be able to put out a small evening edition..."

Richard looked at Lana and shrugged. "Sure, Uncle Perry," he said. "You want to stop by Centennial Park and pick up Jimmy first?"

"Sure," Perry said, but his eyes had already taken on the glaze that meant he was framing up the front page. He muttered potential headlines all the way to the car, and then absently hung on to the door frame whenever Richard had to weave around stalled cars. "Dammit, what're we gonna lead?" he said at last, exasperated.

Richard had managed to circle Centennial Park. Crowds were already gathering there - the police were keeping them back from the impact crater, but Richard could see a mound of flowers and cards piling up around the gates to the park. As Jimmy jumped off the low stone wall and jogged toward the familiar car, the perfect front-page headline occurred to Richard, and he grinned at his uncle.

"Call it 'Lois Lane Rescues Superman,'" he said as he unlocked the doors for Jimmy. "I'll write up the eyewitness account."

"Wow," Jimmy said, having heard the title. "Did she really? I knew Ms. Lane'd turn the

tables on Luthor!"

Before the three newspapermen could really get started discussing the technical details of the next issue - presuming the printing presses were even functional - Lana cleared her throat. "Actually, Richard, I think I'll get out here."

"Lana..." He turned around to look at her worriedly.

Her eyes met his steadily. The knowledge they shared would be too much of a temptation to discuss, but both of them knew how very important the secret was. It was better that she stay away for a while. "Besides, I can keep an eye out for Clark," Lana said softly, and Richard nodded, understanding what she meant.

The car pulled away into the horrendous traffic, and Lana headed into the park, keeping away from the yellow police tape that marked off the actual impact site. She didn't particularly want to see that, anyway. Lana's mind was made up: he *would* recover. She wouldn't allow herself to think of any other outcome, would keep her mind determinedly focused on the positive.

All she really wanted at the moment was someplace she could lose herself in a crowd and think. *Clark is Superman*. The idea tolled through Lana's mind, and it made a weird kind of sense. The boy she'd known was one of the few people on earth who could have such immense power, and never once use it for personal gain. *Even I would be tempted, now and then. They say absolute power corrupts absolutely. I guess that's why everyone loves him so much. He's incorruptible*. Lana smiled absently. *That's Smallville for you*.

General Unsworth met Lois, Ella, and the twins at the entrance to S.T.A.R. Labs. He didn't even seem surprised by the children's presence when they got out of Sawyer's patrol car. "Evening, Elinore, it's a pleasure to see you again," he said, then turned to shake Lois' hand. "Glad to see you made it, Laney."

Lois remembered him vaguely as a friend and colleague of her father's, a man who smoked a pipe when he visited and tended to pat her and Lucy on the head. She hadn't seen him in eight years or so... and *no one* called her Laney anymore. But there was a family reputation to maintain and Kal-El's health to secure. Even if her father had been a horse's-ass. "Thanks, General. Glad to be here, sir," she replied. Her eyes scanned the unassuming concrete garage, looking for the ambulance that had transported Kal-El.

General Unsworth squeezed her hand lightly. "Superman's already here. They tell me he's stable. You and your children should see a medic."

"I'm fine, sir, at least for now," Lois said, seeing the twins both watch the older man in his dress uniform. All the medals still seemed terribly impressive when you were that age. "Listen, Superman..."

"We've got sunlamps on him," General Unsworth told her. "*You* have one heck of a set of bruises on your throat, young lady."

Now Lois began to frown. She recognized that patronizing tone, one her father took with her quite often. If she didn't get control of this quickly, they would start to pay more attention to her than what was really important: concentrating all their efforts on *him*. "I'm fine, sir. And just the sunlamps might not be enough..."

"Lois might be concussed, sir," Maggie cut in at the same moment that Ella elbowed her lightly. Lois shot them both a poisonous look, which the policewoman and the general's widow both ignored.

"We'll take care of her and the kids, Lieutenant," the general told Maggie. "Thanks for

bringing them in. Now, come along, Miss Lane."

Oh, that's right. He's another one of those 'I'm a four-star general, even civilians should obey me' types like my father. Now I remember why I never kept in touch with any of his friends... Trying not to grit her teeth in irritation at having been overridden *twice*, she and Ella followed him to an unmarked door while Maggie got into her cruiser. The twins never relinquished their grips on Lois' hands.

Elinore added, "My daughter and granddaughter have also been in the water, Joffrey. With the temperatures at sea, I'm concerned about them both." Lois glared at her as General Unsworth scanned his thumbprint to open the door.

"I'll let the medics know," he replied. "You're not going to give them any trouble, are you, Laney? I remember hearing you were a terror about doctors when you were younger." That comment raised Lois' blood pressure several points as they entered a white antechamber, two on-duty soldiers saluting the general. It didn't help that his remark reminded Lois of her never-fully-exorcised fear of hospitals, which this trip wasn't helping.

"Mommy," Kala whispered curiously, "how come he keeps calling you Laney?"

General Unsworth chuckled as they passed through a second set of doors to a long hallway. "Because, princess, when she was about your age, she acted just like a miniature version of your grandfather. Everyone on base called her Little Laney."

Ella caught Lois' elbow, seeing the pulse start to throb in her neck. "Yes, well, Little Laney isn't so little anymore, and she much prefers to be called by her given name."

"Sorry about that," General Unsworth said sincerely. He met Lois' hazel eyes, saw the steel behind them, and lowered his voice a trifle. "You know, he never would've said it to you - Sam wasn't that kind of man - but your father was very proud of you, Lois. Every front-page article you ever published hung in his office."

Ella winced a little; she had never told Lois. Her husband and her eldest had become so estranged that any mention of the other's name provoked a fight. She didn't know now how Lois would take the news.

Lois blinked in surprise. Even all these years after his death, it seemed she hadn't entirely shaken off his ghost. "Thank you for telling me," she said at last. "I'm glad to know that, at least."

General Unsworth nodded, having heard enough of Sam's griping about his headstrong daughter to understand why she was so guarded. From then on he led them quietly down a seemingly endless maze of all-white corridors, past several security checkpoints.

The twins were staring around them in utter fascination, amazed by the uniforms and the guns. Fortunately that kept their minds off the long walk and their empty stomachs. At last General Unsworth stopped at the open door to an exam room very similar to the one in their pediatrician's office. "Well, children, this is Doctor Patterson," he told them as the female medic smiled at them both. In spite of the white coat that the twins always associated with shots, Doctor Patterson looked normal and friendly, the first truly welcoming face in this expanse of somber uniforms. "Be kind to them, Shelby. Seems these two have had quite the past few days."

"Thank you, Joffrey," Ella said, taking the twins' hands. "We'll be all right. Lois..."

"I want to see him first," she said sharply, giving her mother a defiant glare as she knelt down to hug Jason and Kala. Lois hated leaving them, but she saw the dark circles of exhaustion under their eyes. "You two, be good for Nana, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jason and Kala chorused, hugging her extra tight. With a long last look

back at her, both of them nodded to her as they went into the room and Doctor Patterson closed the door behind them.

Lois heart lurched, her eyes tearing up slightly. Just the thought of letting them leave her side for a moment... *Get over yourself, Lane, it's just a doctor's visit. They understand what you're doing and why. And Mom's with them. No one else is going to take them away. You'll get them back.* Standing back up brought on a wave of dizziness that she fought off, pinching the bridge of her nose.

General Unsworth cleared his throat. "Let's get you to that medic."

She turned slowly, her hazel eyes flat with aggravation. *Oh, for crying out loud!* "For the last time, *I'm fine.* I want to see Superman. *Now.*" Mentally, she dug her heels in, the same she had several times in the last few days.

"You're as far from fine as you can be without a broken bone," General Unsworth replied. "And as far as I know, you might have one of those. You look like hell, Lois."

"Either take me to Superman or I'll find him," she said stubbornly. This argument was starting to get on her nerves; exhaustion dragged at her, but Lois fought it with the last vestiges of her anger. She would not be barred from seeing him. "I won't take 'no' for an answer. I owe him."

He nodded slowly. "I see why you never joined the military," he commented. "You'd have made a good commander, but following orders to get to that point would've been a problem. All right, follow me." The pace he set was brisk, but Lois followed doggedly. She had to keep moving, couldn't stop now.

After several minutes and two more armed checkpoints, Lois found herself standing in front of another glass observation window. Even more equipment was hooked up to Kal-El, and high-intensity lamps shone down on him. At least she was seeing him, seeing the heart monitor still tracing that steady beat.

Lois stood there watching him carefully, palpable relief washing through her. *Maybe, just maybe, it will be enough,* she thought, feeling her weariness double now without the anxiety of not knowing where he was. "Sunlamps might not be enough," she began, and General Unsworth saw her head fighting to sag forward. "He gets his power... from the actual *sun*..."

"We're having him moved to a suite with a skylight." The general's voice seemed to come from the other end of a long tunnel, and Lois' vision began to gray. This was the limit of her endurance; she had hung on through terror and panic, but the pure relief of seeing him alive and even slightly stable, after seeing the twins sound, undid her.

"That's... a good... id-" Lois' eyes slid closed. Just resting them sounded so good right now. Just for a moment...

General Unsworth caught her as she fainted, collapsing right outside Superman's hospital room. "Doctor Donner! Got another patient for you!"

Shattered trees lay at odd angles, and the crowds staring past the police line were unusually somber. Dark thoughts troubled Lana for a few seconds - he'd looked so pale, and Lois had been so frantic. Could this momentous day really be the hero's last? Lana shook her head sharply, warding off that train of thought. She refused to dwell on it, keeping a prayer for him in the back of her mind and the confidence that he would recover firmly in the front.

By avoiding the thick trees where Superman had fallen, Lana had wandered onto familiar ground. Only a few days ago, the grassy meadow before her had been the stage of Metropolis' fall fashion show, and she had been rubbing elbows with big-name designers. *With other*

big-name designers, she thought. I'm one of them now ... last week, I would've said that nothing else in my life could be as important as getting that recognition.

*The redhead chuckled softly. Now look at me. I'm carrying the biggest, most explosive secret I could ever have imagined, Superman's secret identity. And it turns out the hero and the boy who had such a crush on me are the **same person**.*

A sudden memory from high school came back, startling laughter from her. Brad had been a jerk to Clark after football practice, like he always was, and had left him at school while Lana and the others drove home. Surprisingly, he'd been leaning against the Kent truck, grinning secretively at them when they drove by. Brad had asked, "How'd you get here so fast?" and Clark had shrugged and replied casually, "I ran."

*He **did** run! The sneaky devil! I wondered how the heck he managed to pull that off - I would've wondered even longer, if it hadn't been for Mr. Kent's dying that same day. It wasn't long after that before Clark left town, and I barely saw him again until this last week.*

*I never **really** saw him until I saw him with the love of his life. I just saw a sweet guy I'd been friends with since we were kids. Only when I saw him with Lois did I recognize the man that boy had grown into ... and regret having been so short-sighted all those years ago.*

But then, I'd already met Richard. She wasn't proud of the smile that curved her lips at the thought of him; he was still engaged to another woman, even if Lois had 'Clark's Soul Mate' engraved on her heart. That relationship was over - that moment on the seaplane had proven it - but Lana didn't want to be a thief.

She forced her mind away from the memory of seeing him here, his easy smile, the unexpected attraction between them. She had almost forgotten how that felt, the sudden spark that seemed to brighten the entire world...

Standing on the edge of the meadow, Lana was exposed to the cold breeze that came up as the day ended. The rain had stopped earlier, but the ground was wet, and the designer abruptly realized that Lois still had her coat. *She needs it more than I do*, she thought, and headed back toward the park entrance, shivering.

Evidently she'd been lost in reminiscence for longer than she'd thought - the sky was rapidly darkening, and the crowds around the impact crater were even thicker. Lana saw that the mound of flowers beside the police tape had risen to several feet high. She briefly wished she had brought something, some offering to make her own prayer part of the collective hope being displayed here.

A sudden gust of wind whipped her hair into her eyes, and Lana hunched her shoulders against it, turning her back. As she did so, she caught sight of a very familiar silver-haired head in the crowd. "It can't be," she murmured, weaving through the throng to get closer.

Lana could only see her from the back as the older woman knelt down, gently placing a work-worn hand atop the profusion of flowers. Her shoulders trembled ... and Lana touched her arm. "Mrs. Kent?" she asked.

Martha turned quickly, her eyes startled and tear-stained. "Lana," she said a trifle nervously. "I... I didn't expect to see you here."

Sympathy welled up, so strong that it nearly brought tears to Lana's eyes. "Mrs. Kent... Martha. I know where Clark is. Come on." The older woman's eyes widened almost comically, and Lana nodded. "I was with him," she whispered. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

In the small hours of the morning, Lois' heavy lids slipped open slowly, finding herself in a strange bed. And she wasn't alone. She turned her throbbing head slightly to see Kala

nestled against her right shoulder, Jason curled against her left with his arm around her. Seeing them there, so close she could hear their breathing, reassured her - if anything had been wrong, they would've been in hospital beds of their own, not sharing hers. She simply lay there for a moment as she tried to get her wits about her, kissing Jason's hair as she drew his small arm away and slipped out from under Kala's head.

Sitting up in bed without disturbing either of the twins was a challenge, especially as Lois discovered that she was wearing a hospital gown and had an IV in the back of her right hand. *Dammit. How long have I been asleep?*

She scanned her surroundings, still a little groggy and confused about exactly where she was. Ella was asleep in a reclining chair at the foot of her bed. *Okay, that's the twins and Mom. Where's Richard ... wait. The last time I saw Richard he was at the hospital...*

Memory returned sharply. She was in S.T.A.R. Labs, she'd gone there with Jason and Kala and Ella, and ... Kal-El... *If we're all here, then who's with Kal-El?* Lois punched the button at her bedside that called for a nurse, thought better of it, and then started trying to maneuver her way out of bed without waking the twins.

It was Ella who woke up, though. "Lois, you need to rest," she said immediately, getting out of the chair and going to her child.

"Forget that," Lois whispered fiercely. She was only too aware of where she was and that they might be heard. "Help me up. Where is he? Who's keeping watch over him? My God, how long have I been out?"

"A few hours," Ella replied, helping her to her feet. Jason and Kala started to move in their sleep, and Lois and her mother both froze silently while they waited to see if the kids would wake up. The twins just cuddled against each other, and Lois sighed with relief.

"Make sure this damned thing is tied shut, Momma, please," she whispered. Her own clothes were probably gone - soaked in seawater, they'd be unwearable anyway. Ditto for the boots; she was stuck with thick beige hospital socks that had rubberized soles. *What a great fashion statement*, Lois thought to herself as Ella secured her hospital gown.

"Just where do you think you're going, Lois?" Ella asked, one silver brow raised.

Ah, but they'd left Lana's coat. *Thank God.* "Boy, is that a rhetorical question. Where do you think I'm going, Momma? Hand me that coat."

Ella just crossed her arms and stared. An expression Lois had been familiar with her whole life, only this time it didn't deter her.

"I'll do it myself if I have to," Lois growled under her breath as she rolled her eyes. Her back was stiff from lying down flat in the hospital bed. "I had some rest, and obviously I'm not dying. I'm going to see him."

Sighing in defeat, Ella brought her the long coat. "Just how do you think you're going to find his room, anyway?"

"Oh, I'll find him, even if I have to check the whole building," Lois muttered. She saw immediately that she wouldn't be able to get the coat on properly with the IV in. The bag of fluid was almost empty anyway, and the coat was a necessity for coverage and warmth. *Why do they keep hospitals so damned cold, anyway?* Lois let the thought distract her while she peeled back the tape on her hand, grimacing. "Look in that cabinet, Momma, and find me a bandage, please?"

"Lois, what are you-" Ella began, then winced in sympathy as Lois gritted her teeth and pulled the needle out of her vein. She applied pressure quickly, her lips moving angrily with words she wouldn't say out loud in front of her mother or her children.

Knowing how much her daughter had hated needles, ever since she was a child, with that act Ella realized that Lois couldn't be swayed. Since there was no stopping her, she might as well help. Lois' hand was soon bandaged, and the warm coat secured over the flimsy hospital gown.

Making her way back over to the bed again briefly, Lois watched Jason and Kala curled close in the deep restorative sleep only a child knows. The helpless ache in her chest made her smile. *Will you two ever understand just how much I love you, just how much you mean to me? What it felt like to know I might lose you, too? My brave little munchkins.* Tenderly, she ran her knuckles over her little boy's warm cheek before stroking back yet another of Kala's errant curls. *If he has my heart, you two are my soul. My strength. Mommy loves you both so much.* Softly, she leaned down and kissed the twins again lightly, her gaze lingering on their faces. Then she turned to Ella and whispered with emotion clear in her voice, "You stay with them, Momma."

"I've never left their side," Ella reassured her. "I never would." As much as she loved and trusted the Army, Jason and Kala's parentage was *definitely* on a need-to-know basis, and the military didn't need to know.

Lois went to her mother now, hugging her tightly. Quietly, comforted now by the scent of her mother's perfume as she always had been as a little girl, she murmured softly, "I know that, Momma, I never doubted it for a moment. But you know why I have to do this. I need to know what's happening with him. For me and the twins both."

"I know," Ella said as they pulled away, touching her daughter's face. "As well as I know that you won't rest until you do it. Just come back before they wake up so they don't worry over *you*. We both know that they won't sleep past seven."

"Agreed," Lois whispered, turning toward the door. "I love you, Momma. I'll be back."

She had almost reached the door when the summoned nurse arrived, doing a quick double take. "Miss Lane, you need to get back in bed," she began, and Lois walked out the door, herding the woman ahead of her.

"No, I *need* to make sure you're taking the best care possible of Superman," Lois said once she was outside. *How the hell did I forget hitting that damn button? Idiot.* Now that her voice probably wouldn't wake the twins, she let her tone become sharp. "I made it clear to General Unsworth, so don't make me repeat myself. I know more about Superman than anyone else on this planet, so I'll stay with him."

"But Miss Lane--"

"No buts," Lois growled. "If Superman dies, do you *really* want to see the public reaction to this Pulitzer-winning reporter's story about how *you* refused to let the *one* person who could save him in to see him?"

The blonde nurse gulped, then her face hardened. "Fine, Miss Lane, but I'm telling Doctor Donner where you went."

"Fine by me," Lois replied archly. "And you can also tell him to leave that room alone for a little while. My twins need their rest after all they've been through. I'll get back there after while"

The woman huffed, leading the way with her back stiff. Lois just barely managed to hear her muttered comment, "If they need their rest so much, maybe they should be at *home* with their father..."

Lois thought about that a few seconds, then planted her feet, grabbed the taller woman by the shoulder, and spun her around abruptly. *Okay, that's enough of that, sister.* She leaned in

close to the nurse's shocked face and spoke before the younger woman could gather her wits enough to react. "Alright, listen, you arrogant *brat*. If *your* children had been kidnapped, held captive by a *maniac*, possibly drugged and God knows what else, then rescued from certain death by a superhero who happened to be your *ex*, would you *really* want them far from your sight? As for myself, I've been beaten, almost raped, and had to fight said maniac just for the chance to almost *drown* saving the man in that room! The man who almost *killed himself* trying to protect you and every other good-for-nothing ingrate on the East Coast!"

She had to take a breath, and her next words were a snarl. "So do I have to knock you over the head with a wheelchair and stuff your sarcastic ass into a supply closet, or are you going to *shut up* and lead me to Superman?"

The nurse blinked. She'd been warned, by Mrs. Lane and General Unsworth, that this uppity reporter had an attitude and the determination to carry it through. Not to mention that fact that her father had once been a high-ranking general. She just hadn't expected *this*. Military training took over, and she simply said, "Yes, ma'am," and turned to silently lead the way.

Very soon, Lois came to a door guarded by two uniformed soldiers. They let her pass on General Unsworth's prior orders. The room beyond was flooded with light from several sunlamps, making it almost as bright as day. Kal-El was still unconscious, but as Lois approached his bedside she noted that his complexion looked better. It might've been her imagination, but his pulse on the heart monitor seemed stronger, too.

Sighing, Lois sank down into the chair by his bedside and slipped her hand into his just outside the halo of light. "I'm here, Kal-El," she whispered softly. "And I'm not leaving you. I meant what I said. I *won't* lose you again. And I don't plan to let you walk out on me again, you got me?"

His skin was warm, and his breathing was deep and regular. His pulse was a little slow, but Lois could feel it in his fingers, and the steady beat reassured her. Her eyes began to slip closed again as sleep stole over her.

He once told me he's like a solar battery, she thought, twisting around in the chair until she could rest her cheek on his hand. *If they can recharge him enough... Not if, Lois, when. When. Come back to me, love. Come back to all of us.*

Belief

*Tonight, you arrested my mind.
When you came to my defense.
With a knife, in the shape of your mouth,
In the form of your body,
With the wrath of a God.
Oh, you stood by me.
And I'll stand by my
Belief.*

~Gavin Degraw, *Belief*

A gentle hand touched Lois' wrist, taking her pulse. It was enough to bring her out of her fitful doze, and her hazel eyes looked up to meet dark brown ones. "Good morning, Ms. Lane," the new nurse said.

"What time is it?" Lois groaned as she sat up slightly. It seemed like she was asking that question a lot lately. She tried to let go of Kal-El's hand unobtrusively, not wanting anyone to realize that she had been holding his hand - sleeping with her cheek on it - since she arrived.

"One o'clock in the morning," the nurse told her. She was of Indian descent, and her smile was warm and genuine. "You're doing well - but I expected that. Anyone strong enough to threaten Gwen with a wheelchair is going to be fine. I'm Tage, by the way. Any change in our star patient?"

Several hours had passed, then, since Lois had come into the room, and solemn silence had reigned, broken only by the steady beep of the heart monitor and the hum of the sunlamps encircling Kal-El's prone form. It had been almost nine hours since the Man of Steel had plummeted from the sky - and still no change. Lois shook her head mutely, watching as Nurse Tage checked Kal-El's vitals. She wrote everything down on his chart, then turned kind, wise eyes on Lois again. "Can I get you anything, Ms. Lane?"

"No, I'm fine," Lois whispered.

"I'll be back in a few hours," came the reply. "Press the call button if you notice any change, or if you need me." She patted Lois' shoulder and left the room quietly.

Lois lay sideways in the bedside chair now, fingers entangled with his cool ones again as she watched that handsome, still face. She'd never noticed just how rosy with health his skin had been until now, his pallor stark. Never had she seen his expression so blank, even in sleep. With every beep of the monitor with no physical change, a little piece of Lois died, the chance of him waking up seeming less and less likely. He was in there, the monitor proved it, but for how much longer? No one had any knowledge of Kryptonian physiology beyond Kal-El's own, and he was obviously in no shape to enlighten anyone else. All they could do was wait and hope.

She longed to reach out and touch his face, be closer to him, but it was impossible with the intensity of the lamps' beams. If it had been summer, the warmth put off by them would have made the room unbearable. As it was, it was almost comfortable. Leaning forward to kiss the back of his hand, Lois laughed a little bitterly. *What, Princess Charming, do you think a kiss would bring him back to life? How old are you, twelve?* But even as the thought crossed her mind, she was tempted to try it. Anything. Anything to bring him back to her. She'd even willingly walk back into Luthor's clutches just to see him open those beautiful eyes again. Eyes she was privately terrified would never open again.

Stop it, Lois. Just stop it. You know him, you know he'll do the impossible. Especially

when you were involved somehow. Have faith in him, Lois. You believed instantaneously in a flying man who saved your life all those years ago, a man from another galaxy. And you never stopped believing in him, even when you tried. Believe now, because he needs you now. He needs you.

That brought fresh tears to her eyes. She felt so helpless now, unable to bully, fast-talk, or even force things to work. She couldn't beg or manipulate anyone to make this stop. She couldn't make anything do anything - she was powerless. All she could do was be here and hold his hand, watching him sleep in a way that made it seem as if he were already mostly gone from her. As if he were already...

Even now, she could remember another time she had seen him at rest, a faint smile teasing his lips as she had lain there next to him all those years ago. Could remember how enchanted by it she had been, knowing it was because of her but also knowing that it suited her image of him perfectly.

That made her pause. Did he know? Really know? How much she had loved him all along, the fact that she had noticed or been reminded of so many details about him over the years?

Wonderingly, she stared at his still form for a long moment before she spoke aloud suddenly, "You *don't* know, do you? Any more than I did about your thoughts on me." She was silent for a moment after the revelation; thinking about what she was going to do, feeling like a fool. But if it worked...

"I'm not even sure if you can hear me, but they say that sometimes when people are..." Lois stopped herself again, feeling self-conscious for another moment, then pushed on, "I don't know if you can hear me, Kal-El, but I think you have a right to know now. I'm not sure how much of it you've already guessed. Other than all of that schoolgirl fawning I did in front of you at work. Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is to think back on that? Especially back when I first met you? Both of you?" She had to chuckle, shaking her head.

"Do you have any idea how long it took me to get my mind around that? When I first met you as Clark, I thought, 'Poor guy. He's so old-fashioned and *nice* that he's going to get eaten alive. He's going to last about twenty seconds with these cutthroats. What the hell was Perry thinking hiring this guy?' Especially once you mentioned your mother. Dear God, Kal-El." Just thinking back on his expression when he had taken her bait, replying utterly deadpan, *Actually, she's silver-haired*, she bit back a snicker. "And the best part was realizing later that your mother really *was* silver-haired. And the fact that somehow, through sheer likability and well-bred manners, Clark Kent managed to survive."

"And the alleyway, that afternoon when we were mugged?" One eyebrow arched, Lois grinned at the memory. "Very subtle. It took me a little while to figure that one out. I must have reacted the exact way you expected, because I really did think 'Clark' was an utter lightweight when you 'fainted'. You caught that bullet, didn't you? It didn't misfire. You saved my life in that alley and never even said a word about it. And then you slipped up about the x-ray vision when you looked at my purse. How I missed that the first time around, I'll never know. Must have dismissed it as one of those strange Midwestern farm boy things. But you know, despite his complete case of fish-out-of-water, I really liked Clark by then. He was a bit quirky, but... endearingly so. As long as he didn't get in the way of my headlines. Which hadn't started *yet*." She paused to snort.

"Funnily enough, I felt bad about the way I had just brushed you off the night 'Superman' debuted. We'd gotten to be friends by then. I knew I could trust you more than any of the

other guys in the office other than Jimmy, who was just a kid at the time. I don't think I've met anyone in my life more sincere than Clark. I remember that the President was going to be in town and I had been more dismissive than I should have been, trying to plan my questions. You know how I am when I'm on a big story, and poor Clark just got left in the dust. Ten million thoughts in my head and no control over my mouth. What made me smile a little about it once I knew the truth was the fact that you didn't even *own* a car as Clark; how was he even going to be able to give me a lift to the airport? Then again, if I had taken Clark up on that little transport, I might have had to wait longer to meet the rest of you. Which was like nothing I had ever dreamed of. I don't think anything in my life was the same after that moment. Then again, how often do you meet a flying man?"

The newsroom was a shambles. Luckily, three presses were functional, so Perry, Richard, and a few loyal staffers managed to scramble together a brief evening issue. Richard typed up his eyewitness account of the confrontation with Luthor, unable to maintain strict journalistic objectivity. This was *Lois* he was writing about, her determination and her ultimate heroism. He doubted they would have a relationship left after everything that happened, but that didn't mean he'd stopped loving her. To have seen her in peril, and to have seen her courage pull through against all odds, only increased his admiration for her.

And Superman... *He's Clark, for the love of God. I was buddies with Superman. Oh, my God - I'm Superman's boss.* Richard sat bolt upright, staring blankly across the room as the realization struck him again. *This is gonna screw with my head for weeks. And if it's surreal for me, what must it have been like for Lois? She has to know - it explains the way she's acted since he came back...*

He shook himself slightly. *Get your mind on the job, White.* Richard quickly reread the article, deciding to let its hero-worshipping tone go uncorrected. *If anyone in the history of the world deserves bias, it's him.* He emailed it to the print room, thankful that some of the computers were still working. If they'd all been broken, Perry would've had his staff using the few manual typewriters scattered around the office.

That task complete, Richard headed for Perry's office. The Chief was looking at two mock-ups of a paper, but it wasn't the evening issue. Richard saw that as he walked in, coming to an abrupt halt at the sight of the forbidding headline 'Superman Dies' in huge black letters. "Jesus, Perry," he said. "It's a little morbid, don't you think? I mean, he's in stable condition by the last report..."

The old newshound looked up at him somberly. Now Richard could see the haunted look in his eyes, the lack of sleep combined with the burden of reporting such news. "Always be prepared." Perry slid the other cover across his desk. It had the same article, the same photo of Superman catching the *Daily Planet* globe, but the headline on this issue was 'Superman Lives'.

Richard breathed a sigh of relief. Having both covers before him seemed less of an evil omen. "Any word on Lois and the kids?" Perry asked.

His nephew shook his head. "Ella called a couple of hours ago and let me know they were all okay, but nothing since then. Apparently Lois passed out from exhaustion, and the doctors want her overnight for observation."

Perry chuckled. "That oughta be fun," he commented. "Lucky for them, she'll want to stay near Superman. She's going to get the first interview when he regains consciousness, you just watch."

Richard smiled. *He* knew it was more than the story, and he was fairly certain Perry knew as well. His uncle wasn't in possession of all the facts, though, and was trying to spare Richard's feelings. "I'm sure she will, Uncle Perry," he replied. "Lois has never let go of a story. Especially not a Superman exclusive..." *Particularly those two exclusives that call me Daddy.*

His cell phone chirped, but the number was unlisted. He answered it anyway, and the veneer of weariness dropped from his features when he heard the voice on the other end of the line. "Ella? How is everyone?"

In the suite at S.T.A.R. Labs, Lois' voice softened the hiss of the oxygen line, filled the quiet between the beeps of the heart monitor. "It wasn't as if it was my first, tenth, or even twentieth flight in one of those whirring buckets of bolts. I was really only concerned about getting to the airport before the Big Cheese touched down in Air Force One. Nothing that day even began to prepare me for what happened. One minute I'm on my way to nail President Salkind to the tarmac, the next thing I know I'm dangling sixty-five stories over the sidewalk from a seatbelt. I've had some pretty crazy things happen to me in my life, before you showed up, but that? Nothing that had happened to me *back then* could top that. Not even sneaking off-base in Italy during lockdown."

She was quiet for a long moment, eyes running over his face as it rose to life in her memory, "And then the 'copter started to tip. I can still hear the screech of the metal. I couldn't breathe." Lois closed her eyes for a long minute. "That was it. I knew it. Only twenty-five, just finally making my way through the 'old boy' network and beating the glass ceiling, and it was over. I was going to die like this, hanging out of a helicopter like some brainless twit in an action movie. I had about sixty seconds to hate fate. And then the belt broke." Her voice was choked, reliving the moment.

"One minute was all the difference in the world. Thirty seconds while I was just in free-fall, heart in my eyes, bracing myself for the pavement. I can't remember what I was thinking. I don't think I was thinking, actually, too terrified. Stunned that it was over this soon. Just when I was starting to make it, after nine years... Thirty more seconds when I suddenly jolted to a stop. An utterly impossible stop in mid-air. I was so shocked, I jerked my head up and there you were. I just ... I..." She had to laugh then, the old awe still in her tone as she shook her head. "After all this time, I'm not even sure I can describe that moment for me. Other than, I had never heard of an angel in spandex before. You just... And then when the 'copter fell... And you just *caught it*, like it was only a toy. It didn't seem possible, it was so surreal. The world just shifted. And as I started to get my bearings, had the roof beneath my feet, you turned to me and smiled." A little smile of her own crept across Lois' features then, the memory of her stammered questions in light of later events amusing. "You were so careful with your answers, but so polite, as if this was just something you did everyday and you just happened to be in the area, which of course, you had been, *Clark*." Another snort of laughter. "*A friend*. Oh, Kal-El..."

"Somehow I managed to get my head together enough to make it to the airport before Perry could get me checked out by more than one medic. I was in the back of a taxi on my way there when the bulletin about the air trouble the President was having, but that disaster had been averted. And then there you were again, setting down Air Force One when I got out of the cab. I don't think I've ever felt so much wonder in my life. You didn't even stay long enough for Salkind to thank you, but just before you flew away, I managed to get your

attention again and when those eyes of yours looked back at me, I just felt my heart seize. Somehow I managed to tell you who I was. And you smiled and waved before you flew off, which I think is all too funny now."

"What you missed was the amount of reporters that hadn't heard about the save and went wild to know I'd met you. I guess it was my fault the whole *Superman's Girlfriend* thing got started since I seem to remember implying that we knew each other a little better than we did, but you might just have heard that. I seem to remember a cute little snark during our interview that made it seem like you had. Something about me being the first to know if you had a girlfriend."

"Of course, the next morning Clark was so solicitous over me, I should have known something was up. Especially after he handed my ball cap back. Somehow he had managed to be Johnny-on-the-spot. Wonder why," she commented ruefully, squeezing his hand. "You wouldn't let me out of your sight for more than a few minutes at a time. You and Jimmy both. Me, I was fine, but you two... You were just so adorable about it. So much so, I was about to shake you both. And let's not even go into the damn argument over as to whether your 'first appearance' was a hoax or not. Looking back on it now, the whole 'on-wires-Peter-Pan' debate, I don't know how on earth you kept a straight face. And Lord knows I gave you both barrels for it. I don't know how you thought you were going to convince with the 'done with mirrors' thing. You can't catch and hold someone with mirrors, no matter what you do."

"And then, in Perry's office at the Massacre, the reason you had hovered became clear. Not that I had a clue it was you at the time, but don't think I didn't smirk over that later. That little note card was nearly enough to stop my heart. Of course, the Chief was having a field-day. My God, he was absolutely over the moon. And the first time we see this 'Caped Wonder', where is he? On *our* roof. Do you remember how much that man grinned that day? Loueen made comments more than once that she half expected him to start *giving out* cigars. Then again, with that little note in hand, my mind was a million miles away. Other than Perry's little smartass 'girlfriend' comment, and he knew full-well about the rumor that had started, nothing completely penetrated the fog in my brain after that."

"And then, sly devil that you are, you had to throw me even further off the scent by having Clark remind me for a dinner date I had forgotten about. Actually, I'm not even a hundred percent sure that you *had* brought it up before that moment. It was incredibly cute, but I remember getting your number on that one." Even now, she could see the look on his face when she tossed off the 'and if I'm not a good girl, let's let Jimmy take the pictures' comment over her shoulder as she walked away. She'd been so proud of herself for zinging him on that at the time, not even knowing that his pained look was two-fold. "It also seems that I made a hero blush, which was probably the reason I got paid back for it that night. I doubt you even remember that..."

She was quiet for a moment, her mood mellowing as she came to this part in her tale. If there was any memory that had so many emotions tangled up in it, it was this. At the time, it had been exciting and awkward and funny. But now, knowing where they went from here and how often she had thought back on it, it was so much more to her. "I didn't know if you'd really come. Part of me wondered if it was a little prank Bill Freizon and Gil planted to make me look like an idiot. It wouldn't have been the first time. But a part of me... You said it awhile back and it's true. I'm a cynic; sometimes I think I was born one. A sucker born every minute and all. But the night you showed up... I'd always had a fairly open mind, having been a rebel since the womb, but..."

Lois stopped then, groping for the words. Even now, all these years later, she knew she still sounded like the enamored twit she saw herself as then. She looked away for a moment, out into the darkness of the room beyond them. "It... it was like the world had suddenly opened up wider than I had ever seen it before. It all felt new. So many things felt possible then. I *wanted* to believe in you, something Perry would have been amused to know. Amused, hell - he would've been *thrilled*. Lois the Disparager acting like the wide-eyed teen she never was. That would have been a gas for the boys at work."

"And my traitor emotions were up to things I didn't even want to acknowledge. Standing up there on the roof of my apartment in a damn evening gown, on pins and needles, with a bucket of ice and champagne on my patio table, trying to act casual. God, who was I kidding?" She rolled her eyes, sighing disgustedly at her younger self. "In an evening gown. Like I was just going to hang around the house and do my nails or something. Exactly how credible did I think I was being?" Shaking her head, she went on. "But then, just as I was getting ready to give it all up as lost and drink the champagne anyway, talking bravado to myself to feel better, there you were. Again."

In her memory, that moment was so crystal-clear. Her heart had just stuttered for an instant when he had called out his greeting, startling her so badly she had literally jumped to her feet, barely able to make a response in kind. Until then, she hadn't been aware of just how nervous she had been. But when he had offered to come back later, her panic had known no bounds. "I felt just like an idiotic sheltered sixteen-year-old on her first date, not able to function at all. We both know that that isn't the case at all and I've never felt out-of-sorts with a man before in my life, but you..." She had to put her head in her hands, shaking her head for what seemed like the millionth time. "That entire *interview* was a disaster. I can't even remember having a coherent thought in my head for longer than ten seconds. This was it, the interview of my life. A sure-fire Pulitzer and I was so tongue-tied and flustered that it all came out was... God, I was such a dope. I mean, at least I got a little bit of useful information in there someplace, in between my stumbling and your teasing. Some of the questions were deliberate, meant to surprise an answer out of you, but none of it came out the way I meant it." Lois paused then to look over at him, remembering that night. "And from the moment we sat down at that table, I just... I couldn't take my eyes off you. I was just overwhelmed ... and more than a little intrigued. Oh, intrigued, hell. Who am I kidding? I was so attracted to you I couldn't stand it, but I'd always told myself that I never got involved in my stories, never got mixed up emotionally with anything except the job itself. And then, feeling myself start to slip but trying to fight it off with serious questions, you offered to take me flying."

She closed her eyes then, sighing out a deep breath, then smiled. "You know it started then, don't you? When we first took off, I was terrified. I trusted you, I don't know why, but I trusted you immediately. Even though you had told me no more than ten minutes before that you were from another planet, it never even crossed my mind to be afraid in the slightest. Somehow I knew that I could trust you. But then, once I figured out what to do, I can't even describe for you the way that flight felt. Even after all these years. It was... God, this sounds so stupid, but it felt like what I thought falling in love must feel like. It was amazing and I couldn't believe I was sharing it with you. And then, like every idiot taking chances, I pressed my luck while trying to hold your hand and went too far. Only to fall again, metaphorically instead of literally, the moment I was caught."

Lana and Martha made it through the crowd around Centennial Park and to Lana's hotel,

which fortunately wasn't far. Her room was largely intact, except for the windows, and safe to stay in that night. All Martha wanted was an explanation - a *complete* explanation. So Lana set up the in-room coffeemaker and began telling the story from the twins' kidnapping all the way to that moment on the plane, when Clark - Superman - flew away to deal with the island.

"That was when everything started to make sense," Lana said, hours after she'd begun. It was now later than both women were accustomed to being awake, but neither could sleep. "Seeing them together at that moment, that's when Richard and I both realized who he was. We would've never guessed if we didn't know Clark well."

Martha sipped her coffee, wincing a little because it had grown cold and bitter during the tale. Her mind was a whirl. She'd known Lana Lang since the tall, poised redhead before her was just a leggy girl. If anyone outside of family could be trusted with the secret, it was Lana. But every mother's instinct to protect her child rebelled against this. *Will he come to harm from her knowing? And what about this Richard White she's trying so hard not to speak of with affection?*

Lana couldn't imagine what was going through Martha's mind, the older woman's eyes purposefully shuttered. What would it be like, to guard a secret like this for so long - alone? She shivered at the thought of such loneliness. And when Clark had been gone for so long, his mother must've been heartbroken... "Mrs. Kent, I'm his friend. All I want is to protect him and the children."

A sudden flare of emotion in Martha's expression. "You mean Lois Lane's children? Are they...?"

It wasn't her place to tell this, but it had to be told, and she was the one in the right time and place and circumstance to tell it. "Yes, they're Clark's," Lana said. "I'm pretty sure he knows it for a fact, now. If not, she'll tell him when he wakes up. Lois has been by his side from the beginning."

Martha smiled crookedly. *When, not if.* That was Lana - stubborn optimist. She'd stuck with Donald a lot longer than she really needed to, hoping things would take a turn for the better. *Unlike her marriage, Clark's recovery isn't a lost cause,* Martha told herself. *Her hope is better placed.* "Well. Things are going to get very interesting in the near future, then."

Lana nodded, thinking of Richard and Lois. "I wish we could get in to see Clark," she said quietly. "I just... I've been praying for him."

"Me, too," Martha replied, placing a hand over Lana's. "You said Lois Lane was with him?"

"She was with him when he was shot," Lana said quietly. "Martha, she's the one who saved him that time. Lois kept him from drowning, and she pulled the bullet out. He left us to take the island up - an island made of kryptonite - and we brought her back to the city. It just happened that we got her to the hospital around the same time he arrived, and one of the cops took her back to see him."

"No one knows that you and I know him as well as we do," Martha mused, "but the woman who got herself engaged to another man is by his side now. In a *military* facility. God does have a sense of humor."

"She'll take care of him," Lana said. "You didn't see her when he was hurt. Lois won't let anything else happen to him. She'd do permanent damage to anyone who tried to harm him. That I can promise you."

Martha swirled the coffee idly. Then she looked up, piercing blue eyes meeting Lana's green. "Tell me about her," she said. "I've heard a great deal about Lois from Clark, but he's

biased. What do you think?"

Lana leaned back and sighed. "She'd never fit in around Smallville," she said frankly. "Lois ... Lois is complicated."

"Oh? And women from your old hometown are simple, Ms. Internationally-Known Designer - who learned embroidery from me?"

"That's not what I said," Lana replied with a little smile. "Lois isn't that easy to describe. She's... She's very strong. Physically, for her size, she's strong, but emotionally she's Atlas. Beautiful. And stubborn. She'll fight for what she wants, and she fights like a man - very direct, take-no-prisoners."

"Oh dear," Martha said quietly.

"Lois' father was an Army general," Lana continued. "She's moved around a lot, lived in several cities. Several countries, actually. Very modern, very cosmopolitan. Not too concerned with tradition - not religious, either. She's a good person, Martha, but an ethical one instead of a moral one. Lois will always stand by the people she cares about, and she cares about Clark. A lot. And your son loves her very much."

"He told me she had a fiancé."

Lana glanced down at her own coffee then, and Martha didn't miss the gesture. "Ah, yes - Clark was gone for more than six years. Besides, I don't think Lois and Richard will be together very much longer..."

Martha knew perfectly well that there was nothing she could do for Clark now. But this conversation was at least keeping her from going out of her head with fruitless worrying, so she pursued the point. "Mm-hmm. Richard White. Anything you'd like to tell me about that, Lana Elizabeth Lang?"

With Lana's pale skin, her blush was even more evident. "Um... no, actually. He's a good man, but Lois isn't in love with him. Not anymore. They fought like cats and dogs pretty much the entire time we were trying to find the twins." It was an exaggeration, and Lana knew it, but that one apocalyptic argument outside IHOP made it mostly true. "Anyway, the only reason Richard and Lois haven't officially broken up is that they were too busy trying to rescue Jason and Kala. He knows, too - I don't think he'd feel right about marrying Lois even if things weren't so rocky, because he knows who the kids' real father is."

Martha gave her a look, but Lana had learned to deal with maternal chiding during her divorce and just met her gaze levelly. After a moment, the redhead added, "Speaking of the twins, you haven't asked about your grandchildren."

Sipping the coffee again, Martha sighed. "Yes, well, I'm still getting used to the idea. Clark has suspected for a while that they might be his. So have I - the timing seemed too coincidental. But to actually hear it confirmed is kind of... It's big news. It'll take a while to process the idea."

"They're adorable. Bright, outgoing, well-behaved - mostly." Lana chuckled. "Around your son, they get a bit excitable. I think they've known for a while, although they must've figured it out themselves. Richard and Lois dote on them, but not too much; they're not spoiled or anything. Good kids."

Martha saw the wistful look on Lana's face, and sympathized. She had once felt that same expression on her own features every time she saw a woman with a child. And then God had seen fit to trust her with raising a hero... Martha smiled at the thought, and the smile turned unexpectedly into a yawn.

Lana was trying to stifle a yawn of her own, and the two women chuckled at each other.

"I suppose we should try to get some sleep," Martha ventured.

"We're not going to be able to rest very well, but it's worth a try," Lana replied. "I'll have to get hold of Richard tomorrow and see if he can get us to S.T.A.R. Labs. I don't even know where it is."

"I'm sure it'll be common knowledge by tomorrow," Martha mused.

"It's a top-secret military facility," Lana told her.

The older woman just laughed tiredly. "This is *Superman* we're talking about, Lana. Word about him has a way of getting around."

Nurse Tage came back into the room while Lois was reminiscing over that romantic flight, and the reporter quickly wiped the dreamy look off her face. "No change," she said sadly.

The Indian woman smiled at her anyway and handed her a covered tray. "You haven't had anything to eat, so here's an early breakfast. As for him, Doctor Donner doesn't expect to see a change until sometime after sunrise, if there is one today. His vital signs are stable; his pulse is steady, and he's breathing on his own. Those are good signs for now, Ms. Lane." She continued to look over the machinery surrounding the hero, writing down notes. Lois took the lid off her tray, releasing the aroma of oatmeal, toast, and bacon - even the hospital coffee smelled delicious at that point. Tage continued, "The EEG does show brain activity; that's an even better sign. This may not even be a coma as we understand the term, Ms. Lane. It might be a trance state peculiar to his people, something to accelerate healing."

Lois nodded, grateful for the optimism. Tage opened Superman's eyes gently, checking the contraction of his pupils with a pen light, then added, "I'm done for now - someone will be back for the tray. Keep talking to him. He may be able to hear you, even if he doesn't remember it later. Your voice will give him somewhere to come back to."

"Thank you," Lois said, smiling back as the nurse left. Having not eaten since breakfast at IHOP yesterday morning, she set about devouring her breakfast. The little container of orange juice next to her coffee made her chuckle, though.

"Freaking *orange juice*," Lois sighed when she'd finished the food. "You know, I can't even stand the smell of it now? Even before Christmas rolled around that last year, I must have had something like three colds in a row. Started right after my birthday and just never let up, remember? I got lucky right before the Christmas party and then by the time New Years' rolled around, I was sick again. Although I really think I caught a bug in Paris while I was there on that..." She stopped then, her voice winding down to nothing. It seemed like she had found her way to the next part of her story without even meaning to. Setting the tray on a bedside table, she sat back in the chair again, trying to think where to pick her narrative back up. "I guess I should start the story up again around the holidays that year. We'd been working together for quite some time then, Perry throwing us at the same stories. I never wanted a partner; I liked working alone. I guess Perry thought I needed someone to keep me out of trouble once in a while."

For a long moment, she just watched his face. Lois took his hand again, holding it between both of hers and briefly kissing his knuckles. "Kal-El... What was it, about a year between our first meeting and that trip to Niagara? Around that. I started to have my suspicions during all those stories we did together. I was spending so much time with Clark, but I kept seeing Superman as well. Weird that he always showed up where I was ... and when Clark was locked in the bathroom, or had gotten lost, or had stepped out for a moment. You'd mastered both guises - there was nothing about your mannerisms that suggested Clark Kent

could *possibly* be Superman. And those glasses - do you even know they make your eyes look *gray*? I noticed the resemblance, but half a dozen tall, blue-eyed, black-haired men had publicly claimed to be Superman by then. You put a stop to it, but it made me a little more curious."

"It didn't help that we'd gotten closer by that time. Clark was my best friend - we'd gone on a couple of dates, but I kept you at a distance. I... I knew how you felt about me." Lois chuckled softly. "God, I feel like such a bitch saying this, but you might not remember it, right? Anyway. I was used to guys falling in love with me. Clark made it obvious, and there was something really sweet about it, though. Not like Lombard - equally obvious, but in his case it wasn't love. Come to think of it, most of them were probably more lust than love. Clark, though... You know why I never let things between us get past a certain point? Not because you weren't good enough for me - I know some of the jerks around the office thought that was why."

Strange, how this could be so hard to say. Lois looked down at his hand, his skin so warm against hers. "A guy like Clark... I would've hurt you. I would've used you - I *did* use you, a little bit. You remember those trips we went on, chasing down political scandals or busting up financial scams? Always a suite at the hotel, you wanted to be close enough to keep an eye on me, and I thought I'd be protecting *you* if anything happened. You'd take the couch and I'd have the bedroom to myself. I would've *never* agreed to that with any of the other guys, but I trusted you."

"Remember how, when we'd had a really rough day, pounding pavement for sixteen hours or poring through public records until our eyes watered? I used to find some reason to go walking through the front room of the suite in just a long slip... You were always so scandalized, and I was always so blasé." The memory of those times, strolling past him casually and snickering to herself when he dropped whatever he was reading, his voice rising shrilly as he scolded her. "I really was that relaxed about it, by the way. But sometimes, I'd do it just to jerk your chain, just to hear you tell me I should be more careful, anybody might walk in. Knowing I could shake you out of your tree like that always made me feel better about having had an awful day. It's ... it's vain of me, but knowing I had that kind of affect on you made the most frustrating days end well, at least."

"Yeah, I knew how Clark felt about me. Superman was something else. I never knew how *he* really felt. You were always so solicitous, always so delighted to see me, but there was that little bit of reserve. We'd almost kissed back in California - I could've strangled Jimmy with my bare hands for walking up just then! Once or twice since, you and I had locked eyes, and I thought we were about to kiss, but you always held back. God, I felt so *stupid* when I figured it out! As Superman, you were treating me the way I treated Clark. Only with more affection and less sarcasm. And I think you never deliberately teased me the way I'd bait Clark."

A faint blush rose to Lois' cheeks as she remembered the Christmas party. She'd begun to suspect by then, but it was just the faintest glimmer in the back of her mind, easily dismissed by the patent absurdity of the notion. "Christmas ... that last Christmas before you left. I was starting to wonder by then, but it just seemed so impossible. And that night, I guess I made a bit of a fool of myself. *Never* drink at the company party, Lane. God." Lois shook her head, picturing the dress she'd worn and the attention it had drawn. "Every man there was trying to get me to stand under the mistletoe. Everyone but Perry, Jimmy, and Clark. That was why I was so affectionate with you when I left; you were a complete gentleman, and I wanted everyone to know I appreciated it. That's why I hugged you and kissed your cheek, and you

didn't have to drag me under some parasitic bit of greenery to get it, either. I bet you were laughing at me when you saw me on the balcony later, 'just flying by'. I was just as delighted to see you then as Clark was to get that kiss at the party. No wonder I started to figure you out."

There was a long pause while Lois gathered her thoughts again. "By the time Perry sent us out to Niagara, I was almost certain. That fiasco with the fruit cart - I think I know how you did that, now. It only put me off for a little while, though. Especially when you saved that little boy at the falls. Kal-El, you couldn't have hid it from me forever. You were smiling even when I was trying to confront you in Perry's office - you *wanted* me to know. You'd never tell me yourself, but you wanted me to be smart enough to figure it out. Although I think I surprised the heck out of you with the *way* I finally busted you."

Another soft laugh. "That whole episode was staged, you realize? I was *waiting* for you to open the door so I could stroll out of the shower in just a towel. Clark had always completely lost his head whenever I flashed some leg. If your reaction was genuine, not part of your naïve farm-boy disguise, showing *that* much skin would keep you off-balance for what I wanted to do. It was so cute, watching you try to scold me about my fixation with Superman, when you couldn't make your eyes behave. You tried valiantly, but these legs are my secret weapon against men." This time the laugh was less stifled, Lois shaking her head slightly. "Everyone has one best feature, and that's mine. Guaranteed to make any male I'm investigating focus more on them than on what I'm asking. It worked on you..."

But that brought her to the final proof. Superman and Clark Kent *were* the same person, a person she soon learned was called Kal-El. Over the last six years, Lois had come to terms with the revelation, learned to think of the man she'd known briefly in the Fortress as the real person. Clark and Superman were both facets of his personality, but neither was truly the man she'd fallen in love with. Clark's kindness and honesty - and yes, his naiveté - were part of the real Kal-El, but the clumsiness and absolute social awkwardness were the disguise. And Superman's courage and integrity were real, but his confidence wasn't always as unshakable as he made it seem. Kal-El was the source from which both public personas were drawn. Kal-El was Lois' lover, the twins' father...

"I think we both remember what happened after that," Lois said quietly then, her voice heavy with meaning.

Written In The Stars

Is it written in the stars?
Are we paying for some crime?
Is that all that we are good for
Just a stretch of mortal time?
Or some God's experiment
In which we have no say
In which we're given paradise
But only for a day...?

~Aida, Written in the Stars.

"I don't buy it," Maggie Sawyer said flatly.

Officer Smith glared, and slapped the folder down on the table in front of her. Someone should've told him the Special Crimes Unit Lieutenant had been awake for almost thirty hours at that point, but no one did. Even cops like a fireworks show. "Look. It's all there. The ballistics match, the prints match - even the partials off the ligatures match the index prints. The motive was openly stated in Davis' hearing. You're denying the obvious, Sawyer."

One blonde eyebrow raised slowly, Maggie glaring at the younger man silently until he cleared his throat and added, "Lieutenant Sawyer, I mean."

"If you forgot that I outrank you just now, how can you be certain you didn't forget something in this investigation?" The question was perfectly polite, but the arctic-blue gaze boring into him was coldly furious. Maggie continued without waiting for an answer, "There's a whole history here, and Luthor has hoodwinked justice before. I won't have it happen again, not on my watch. You go back to the Coast Guard boys and double-check everything. *Everything*, Smith."

"What about *her*?" Smith said, his voice suddenly contemptuous.

"*I'll* cross that bridge when we come to it," Maggie replied. "We couldn't get to her now if we wanted to."

"And you don't want to," Smith accused. "You're a little too close to the press."

Silence reigned in the precinct. Sawyer had a stellar record, but also the reputation for not suffering fools gladly. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him, and officers nearby silently counted to ten. They began to exchange nervous glances when Maggie kept her lips sealed for another ten count; that meant she was thoroughly ticked off.

When she finally spoke, her voice came out very smooth, even and controlled. "Smith, *if* you gather sufficient evidence, *I* will bring her in for questioning. In the meantime, *do your job*."

"Yes, ma'am," Smith said stiffly.

Maggie waited for him to get several strides away before calling out, "Oh, Officer Smith?" The man turned to look at her, anger still clouding his expression, but he kept himself mostly under control. The lieutenant smiled - almost friendly, that smile, if you didn't look at the eyes - and said, "Don't ever question my integrity again, Smith. If she's guilty, I'll nail her for it, no matter how long we've been friends. But I know her well enough to know she wouldn't do this." *Not and leave evidence for me to find*, she added silently.

Lois was still swamped by memories. "I knew... But I didn't really *know* until I pulled the trigger, and you gave me that incredibly affronted look. My God, it was amazing how fast you went from Clark's anxiety to that peevd glare. It took me a few seconds to get that through

my mind. Clark Kent is Superman. My best friend is the man I fell head over heels for. Makes your head hurt if you think about it long enough..."

"And then you were so serious, frowning at me, telling me that Clark would've been killed if I was wrong." Lois laughed then, much as she had years ago in that awful honeymoon suite in Niagara. "Oh, Kal-El, the look on your *face* when I told you it was a blank! 'Gotcha!' Did you really think I would've shot Clark? I mean, *Clark*. Come on..."

Falling silent as she tried to see from his point of view, Lois mused softly, "You know, I don't think you ever realized how much I cared about Clark. That you could think for a second I'd shoot him... Kal-El. I *loved* Clark. Just not ... like that. The way I picked at you all the time? Ever notice how the only people I teased like that were you, Jimmy, and the Chief? Lombard, jeez, I tore Lombard's head off once a week. Usually for trying to jerk *your* chain. But I only ever picked on the people I cared about, you know? Like Perry and his rants. He never yelled at the ones he hated; he pink-slipped them and went on with life. I was never vicious to you, or I never *meant* to be, just a bit of harassment."

She paused, rubbing his hand slowly between hers, and then chuckled at the memories that thought provoked. "Except the clothes. Dear God, the clothes were absolutely the worst back then. And the glasses. I know *why* now, but dear Lord in heaven, those god-awful suits. I tried to help on that front; God knows I tried. And I only once got to see how you'd dress when you weren't being the hero or the nerd."

It was inevitable that she would come to this point at last. It was like a cavity you know you have to get filled, but you avoid because you know it will cause you pain. Lois sighed, bracing herself for the emotional stress she knew this would put her under. But he needed to know, regardless of what it did to her to revisit these thoughts. "After we left that god-awful hotel room in Niagara, and had that dinner at the Fortress... I remember walking up on that discussion you were having with Jor-El, the one I don't think you intended for me to hear... No wonder I'm no fan of his. Talk about making a girl feel unworthy, especially in light of what you were being expected to do. It amazed me that you were willing to stand up to him for me. It amazed me even more that you gave up your powers to be with me... *Me*, of all people. Ticked Jor-El off pretty well, too. He cut me a look that could've killed me, while you were exposing yourself to the red sun's rays. I'll never forget watching you walk out of that chamber and come up to me... or what happened after..."

Lois' laugh sounded a bit forced as she placed his hand gently down on the blanket. Dear God, did she have another memory that was more bittersweet than that one? Even now, his words echoed back through her mind and broke her heart. Standing up gingerly, she stretched her back and started to pace. "Actually, for a while, I *did* forget it. But you know all about that. And I finally know why you did it. It didn't help me very much, you know. People around the office acted like I'd lost my mind. I'd come in to work exhausted and weepy, utterly not myself and without informing anyone but Perry that I was even still alive before that moment, then after you dropped by I had a fainting spell that left me feeling basically okay, except that I'd lost three days. Three Kryptonian criminals try taking over the planet, I'm smack in the middle of it, and I can't remember a thing! I can't even remember coming back to Metropolis or losing track of Clark. I even forgot most of being in Niagara! Even Jimmy thought I'd lost it."

Slowly walking around the room, feeling cramped muscles in her legs and back begin to loosen, Lois' dark brow furrowed as she continued to reminisce, "Amazing how losing three days can be like losing a lifetime. It took me a little while to work out how much I'd forgotten.

I started seeing a psychiatrist for the amnesia - *that* helped a lot; he told me I was extremely defensive. I told him my ex was a shrink, too. I saw him write 'hostile' in my chart... Well, you remember some of that." For the first time, Lois considered those two months from his point of view. She turned to look at him, lying so very still.

"Clark was incredibly nervous around me for a while. Almost as tongue-tied as the first few weeks we knew each other. I chalked it up to him thinking I was nuts for seeing the headshrinker. And Superman ... it's funny. I'd always been a little anxious around Superman, a little flighty. After those three missing days, I was much more comfortable around you. It was as if my heart knew what my mind forgot."

"But all of a sudden, Superman was reserved around me. You never flirted anymore, and that had been a staple of our relationship from the first interview. I just kept wondering what was wrong and if it were somehow my fault. I just wanted to fix whatever had you off-balance," Lois' voice was softer than ever, caught up in her own tale as she came back to his bedside. Sliding back into the chair, she found herself watching his face again, considering what he might have felt. "It must have been so hard for you. There I was, smiling and making sly double entendres and asking you if you were okay, and you knew all along what had happened."

"And then Clark was gone, without a word to me. You disappeared while I was out of town on a story. It was supposed to just be a short leave, and we had to call your mother to find out you were gone indefinitely! You were surprised I was mad at Clark when you came back? Best friends don't do that, Kal-El. They don't just walk out of each other's lives without a goodbye." Unable to help herself, Lois felt tears prick her eyes, remembering the suddenly emptiness she had felt when Perry had told her. "*Clark* wouldn't have done that. Whether you realized it or not, that hurt me more than Superman abandoning me did. At the time, I had no memory of why the hero's absence should've hurt so much. Other than my silly crush, which is all I thought we had. But Clark ... you and I were so close. I don't think you ever realized how much I cared about you." She bit her lip, concentrating on the pressure to get herself together. She didn't need to be breaking down so soon, not with so much to tell. Taking a deep breath, she continued.

"And then, just as I got my mind around Clark being gone, Superman disappears. *That* should've been a big hint to the secret right there. You saved that woman in Paris, and that was it, nothing more heard from you until the Genesis launch six years later. God, Kal-El, the things that went through my mind... And then when Richard told me Clark was in Paris, when you confirmed it... I could've missed you by days. By *hours*. I wonder sometimes how things would be different if we'd met up in Paris while I was chasing your alter ego."

At that moment, the door opened after a short knock, and Nurse Tague came in with a pitcher of ice water and some cups. Thankfully, Lois had been speaking softly enough that no one could've heard her outside. Her throat still hurt from screaming at Luthor, and on the seaplane, and in the hospital, so she had to keep her hoarse voice low in the first place. "Here, Ms. Lane. I should've brought you this earlier, but we've had to update the general every hour. High-profile patient, you know."

"Thanks," Lois said. Her throat *was* dry, and she quickly poured herself a glass and sat down to drink. For a while, she drank silently, and Tague checked up on Superman again before leaving.

For a moment, they both just lay there in the stillness, Lois bracing herself for the most difficult part of the tale and the part he'd wanted to hear most. The only question was how to

tell it.

All over the city, people were trying to get back into their normal rhythms. For some, however, that meant taking advantage of the unsettled state of affairs. The press had pounced on the story, and every paper, from the smallest weekly local to the two biggest dailies, was trying to get the scoop on Superman.

Of course, some reporters had better connections than others. Toby Raines dialed a very familiar number, and couldn't help smiling at the gruff voice that answered, "Sawyer."

"Maggie, it's me," the *Daily Star* reporter said. "Listen, you got any inside info on Superman? The bullpen's going nuts over here."

An aggravated sigh whistled into the phone. "For the love of... Toby. No. We are *not* having this conversation. Again."

"C'mon, Mags, help me out here," Toby coaxed. She leaned back in her chair and stared out the shattered window. She could just see the *Daily Planet* building from here ... well, she would've seen it if the globe had still been on the roof. It didn't matter; she knew exactly where it was. And what they were doing, damn them. "Word on the street is the *Planet* has an eyewitness account. *And* that Olsen kid was *in* Centennial Park when Superman landed. I know you know something. You're not giving me an unfair advantage; you're just leveling the playing field..."

"Forget it," Sawyer replied sharply. Toby just grinned; so she *did* have something. "Listen, I know it's your job. I know you're the voice of the people; I know this is the first amendment; I know people have a right to know. But I've already been razzed about my connection to the press once today-"

"That little twit Smith got his knickers in a twist again over that nonsense at the firing range last week?" Toby interjected, but Maggie kept right on speaking.

"-and he's got a point, Toby. *No*. This is *my* job."

"Keeping people in the dark?"

"*Protecting* people. Especially Superman."

Silence on the line. No arguing with that statement. Toby watched the handful of staffers who had made it back into the building after the earthquakes. They were all doing exactly what she was doing: trying to wring information out of their sources. The only problem was, when it came to Superman, it didn't matter how well-connected you were. The *Planet* had the advantage every single time. They had the connection no one else did. Speaking of whom...

"Hey, Mags. Heard anything about Lois and the twins?"

"Dammit, Toby, you are *not* running a front-page story about the woman right after her kids got snatched!"

"Whoa there, Lieutenant," Toby retorted. "Remember, I was helping her! I'm asking for *me*, not the paper."

Another silence. "Promise me you'll leave the kids out of it, Toby."

"As long as I can," Toby said. "If everyone else jumps on it, I'll have to do damage control."

"Oh, like you did damage control over that press conference where she bit his head off?" Maggie asked. "The *Planet's* story of the day was the fire; *yours* was the woman scorned."

"Yes, well, I *had* to," Toby hissed. "I'm not in management like *she* is; I still have to take orders. Notice I never said anything about him kidnapping her for a little heart-to-heart, though, did I?"

"Yeah, gotta give you that," Maggie replied. "You only stab our friends in the back once per day."

"I let the exclusive slide, Mags! That's like ... that'd be like Lois telling the truth that time Superman helped land Air Force One! 'We've been out a couple of times' my foot, she'd just *met* him."

"*Fine*," Maggie said at last. "The kids are okay - a little quiet, but okay. Lois, last time I saw her, was pretty banged up... Actually, she looked like hell, but she was back to her old self."

That was enough to make Toby sit up. "Her old self? Pre- or post-engagement to the flyboy?"

"Circa the early Superman stories," Maggie said, and Toby could hear her smile.

"Holy... Well, *that's* good news, anyway. I was starting to worry about Stepford Lane. Not that I don't like what's-his-name..."

"Richard White."

"Yeah, him. Bloody nepotism in the newsroom. He's a decent guy, but... I'll have to see if I can run Lois down and yank her chain a bit, just for old times' sake."

"You won't reach her, she's in S.T.A.R. with him - oh, *shit*..."

"Thanks, hon," Toby said silkily.

"Goddammit, Toby Marie Raines, you tricked me! I swear, if you..."

But Toby was already replacing the receiver gently. "Hey, boys," she called out to the other reporters. "One of you find me some *other* way we figured out that Superman's in S.T.A.R. Labs, would ya? I've got a story to chase."

Her phone was already ringing again, and Toby picked it up as she swept her tape recorder into her purse. "Maggie, you know Lois would've done the exact same thing..."

"End-of-conversation-itis," Cat Grant chuckled. "This is me, Toby. And what exactly are you doing that our favorite fearless *Planet* editor would've done? Besides turn up at Metropolis General soaking wet and raving like a madwoman."

"None of your business, Cat," Toby shot back. "I've got to run."

"I'll be on camera before you go to print, Raines. Dish, and I'll credit you."

"Get your own sources, Grant," Toby told her.

"C'mon, gal reporters have to stick together," Cat wheedled.

"You're not a reporter, you're a *news anchor*," Toby hissed at her, grinning at the old argument. "Heavy, dull, and sinkin' to the bottom."

"Ouch, Raines. Almost sounds like you know how much of an anachronism print media is these days. Then again, I don't mind sinking considering what floats around here..."

"Say what you want, Lane and I have scooped you so much you may as well change your last name to Litter," Toby replied. "If it wasn't for the illiteracy rates in the inner city, you wouldn't have a job."

"Fine, Raines. Then I won't share info with you. I know where Lois and the kids are."

Toby had been about to hang up, but she paused and sat on the edge of her desk. "How'd you get that?"

"By sinking to the bottom of the story, Raines," Cat told her. "A source's son works in Metropolis General. Did you know hospitals have electricians on staff? He heard *your* lieutenant say they were taking Superman to S.T.A.R. Labs. Lois, the twins, and her mom went along for the ride. I'll bet Maggie's too principled to give you the lead, isn't she?"

"Thanks, Cat, I owe you," Toby said. "I guess you heard Lois is fine, then?"

"Cussing like a sailor and picking fights with hospital orderlies," Cat said. "Looks like we have our old competition back. But what do you have for me? Share and share alike, remember?"

"Nothing you didn't already know, but you saved me from having to hear another lecture from Maggie. See you at S.T.A.R.," Toby replied, and hung up. To rest of the newsroom she said, "Nevermind, got it covered. Mank, come with me," and headed out.

The electrician wasn't the only person at Metropolis General who had overheard the news about Superman, nor was he the only one who passed that information on. Within a few hours, word began to circulate around the city. Not just among journalists; people began turning up at the front entrance to S.T.A.R. Labs, the institution's public face. While police tried to keep them moving along, the citizens of Metropolis milled in the street. Waiting. Hoping. Praying. The news media, meanwhile, covered the crowd forming out front, and kept their own vigil.

The hours wore on and the sky above lightened. Lois' eyelids felt heavy, and weariness seemed to pulse through her bloodstream. At least now she'd gotten through the rollercoaster their relationship had been - from flirtatious friends to lovers to exes, and back again to friends with no memory of the rest on her part, in less than three days. Lois pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to stave off the headache that always came after tears. She'd shed a few of those so far, but not nearly as many as she would by the time the full story was told.

"I really do hope you can hear me," Lois said rustily. She took a sip of water and continued, "I'm going to feel like the world's biggest fool if I pour out my heart to you, tell you everything I've been afraid to say all this time, and you don't remember a word of it." She laughed in bittersweet amusement. "Kind of like old times, hmm? You told me everything back then, and for a long time I couldn't remember a bit of it. And when I did..."

On the verge of that melancholy memory, standing on the balcony and looking skyward with tears streaming down her face and the twins kicking lustily in her womb, Lois was given a reprieve from having to relive it all by a polite knock at the door. She looked up sharply, her fingers tightening on his, bracing herself for another interruption, this time maybe even Donner coming to return her to her own room. But somehow, she didn't think so. "Who is it?" she called out, her voice still strained.

The door burst open in answer, the twins scrambling toward her, crying her name in almost a panic. Ella was right behind them, muttering, "Kala! Jason! *Behave! This is a hospital!*"

Lois tried to sit up then, only then realizing how she must've looked resting her elbows on his bed, his hand entwined in hers. But the twins didn't care; their only concession to Ella's strict admonition so far had been to keep their voices down, whispering fervently as they hurried across the expanse of the room, "*Mommy!*"

Jason slowed down as he neared Superman's bedside, and his sister did the same. "We were scared," Jason said as they came to stop beside Lois' chair, very softly, eyeing all the creepy hospital equipment around Superman.

"You weren't there when we woke up," Kala added, then clambered into her mother's lap for a hug. Jason followed her example, making Lois suddenly thankful that the twins were a little small for their age as she shifted in the chair to allow for the three of them.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Lois murmured, pressing her lips to their hair, arms curling around them protectively. "I didn't want to leave Superman all by himself. At least you two had your Nana with you. After all he's been through, it didn't seem fair to do that."

Both twins turned to look somberly at him. "He's still sleepin'?" Kala asked, looking up at her mother, her brow furrowed.

"He's got to rest, baby," Lois told her gently. "What happened took a lot out of him. We need to use the lamps because that's how he gets his strength: from sunlight. You know, like the solar lights we have along the dock? They soak up the sun during the day so they can burn all night?" Both twins nodded, with a better understanding than she suspected. "Only he's never really needed to do this. But he used up all the strength he had to save us," she said softly, her worry bleeding into her expression for a moment. "Once his strength is back, he'll wake up." Lois made her voice sound certain.

"He's gonna get better, right?" Jason asked worriedly, perhaps hearing some trace of doubt in her tone. "I want him to." He and his sister both searched Superman's face, their frowns of concentration identical. "I like him," Jason whispered.

"Me, too," Kala added softly, her eyes never leaving Superman's face. "He's nice to us."

"It's going to be okay, you guys. He's been through worse. Your Daddy's going to be just fine," Lois soothed, holding them tighter to her even as she heard her mother's startled gasp from beside her chair. Looking up to Ella, she smiled reassuringly, "They know, Momma. The secret's out. Luthor told them who their father was."

"Nuh-uh," Jason replied, shaking his head. "Kala knew before that."

"Cuz girls are smarter," she said haughtily. Amazed, both Lois and Ella exchanged looks before Lois caught her chin and turned Kala to face her, a questioning look in her eyes. The raven-haired little girl merely blinked and said, "I heard you and Nana talking."

Ella sucked in her breath. The only time she and Lois had discussed that with the children anywhere nearby was that day they'd gone to the planetarium, right before the Pulitzer ceremony... "Honey, you heard us then and you didn't say anything to anyone for *three months?*"

"She told me," Jason piped up importantly.

"Yesterday," Kala shot back. "I mean, day-before-yesterday."

"Yeah, well, I-" Jason never finished his sentence, because Kala shot him an evil glare. He quickly changed gears and said instead, "I woulda known too if I could hear *everything*. Too bad I got stuck with bein' strong."

"Boys," Kala hissed contemptuously.

Lois and Ella just stared at the children and then at each other. They both knew Kala liked to be a know-it-all. That she had kept a secret of this magnitude for this long was nothing short of a miracle. *My God, if she had decided to end any of the schoolyard arguments over whose Dad was the best... But she didn't. Even if I did confirm it without knowing. And she didn't tell anyone.* Lois looked down into hazel eyes that were the mirror of her own, shaking her head slightly, the affection and wonder there clear from her tone. Unable to help herself, she gave a small smile of disbelief. "Kala, how...?"

Kala beamed up at her and shrugged, trying to look innocent and succeeding only in looking toothy. Lois chuckled, thinking, *I guess keeping secrets runs in this family.*

Ella cleared her throat. "Lois ... it's getting late. Well, it's getting *early*. I just spoke to Richard a few minutes ago, and he said the news of where Superman is being kept has already been leaked to the press. There's going to be a media circus around here before long."

Lois bit her lip on a curse, and the twins, sensing boring grown-up talk, slithered down out of her lap and peered over the edge of the hospital bed. "What are we going to do?" the raven-haired woman fretted to her mother. "The last thing we need is for..."

"We need to get them out of here," Ella said. Jason was watching Superman's face intently, while Kala slipped her small hand into his. Their grandmother continued, "The sooner the better. It's not safe for them, especially since they know. Richard can meet me outside with them, but it has to be soon or we won't be able to sneak them past the reporters."

Lois watched her children a moment, the respectful way they moved around Kal-El's bed. She knew the ways of reporters on a hot story and it really didn't come much hotter than this. They would be out and in force for this one, respectful or not. And she would know. The twins didn't need to be at the center of a press mob, didn't need flashbulbs going off and microphones thrust into their faces. She'd been trying to hide them from that their entire lives...

"You're right, Momma," Lois said softly, and pressed the call button. "Call Richard. I need to talk to General Unsworth and see what we can do about keeping the press under control. They'll be on this like vultures."

Ella could only smile sadly and rumple her daughter's hair.

Nurse Tage arrived within a few seconds of the call. Her gaze went first to her patient, but there was no discernable change. "Yes, Ms. Lane?"

"I need to speak with a commanding officer," Lois told her. "The media has gotten wind of where Superman is, and my children should get out of here before the press swamps us." She looked down at herself, and chuckled dryly. "I'd also like to get my clothes back, if I can. Or *some* clothes. This hospital gown isn't very comfortable."

"We can manage that," Tage said confidently. She left the room, and Lois stood up, wincing a little. The chair was making her back stiff...

For a moment, her attention was off the twins. Jason and Kala stood beside their father's bed, watching him seriously. Jason's mind was still spinning with all the recent revelations, and now he was also worried about Superman. Why hadn't he woken up yet? He'd been asleep for a long time...

Kala scowled. She had grown accustomed to the notion of Superman as Daddy, so worry was stronger in her. It felt like *forever* since Superman had taken them both up into the sky. He'd been strong and awake then, and now he stayed asleep. It scared Mommy ... and that scared Kala. She tried to distract herself by looking at Mommy. "Are we goin' home?"

"Yes, sweetheart," Lois told her.

"Can Superman come home with us?"

Lois had to stifle a chuckle. "No, Kala, he has to stay here until he's better. I'm sure he'll come visit us when he gets out of the hospital."

"Promise?" Jason asked.

"Of course he will," Lois replied. Nurse Tage returning with her clothes saved Lois from having to promise on the uncertain future, or explain to the twins that she would be staying with Superman while they went home. She wasn't looking forward to *that*. Thanking Tage, Lois went into the bathroom to change.

Both twins looked up at the nurse curiously as she tucked the blankets around Superman and adjusted his oxygen line. They had to step back to let her work, and Jason noticed Superman's suit neatly folded on a chair in the corner. He wandered over to touch it, reverently running his fingers over the S-shield. Kala stayed by her father, moving only as much as Tage needed her to.

While Lois got dressed, General Unsworth knocked at the door. Ella went outside to speak with him, and a few minutes later Lois came out of the bathroom to see Kala looking at the wall with a curious scowl. Her questions were forestalled by Ella coming back in and

telling her, "Joffrey says the media is already here. I'm going to call Richard back - he said he could get here anytime - and Joffrey's going to get his men and the police to distract the reporters. We'll go out the front."

"Momma?" Lois said questioningly.

"They've had police out front for crowd control for an hour," Ella said. "Once they start cordoning off the garage we came in, all the reporters will head over there. We can get down the front steps relatively unbothered."

"They won't all leave," Lois said direly. "I know I wouldn't have - I'd have someone on both exits from the moment I realized he was here."

"No, but most of them will. And the ones that are left will have to deal with civilians and cops. Nurse Tage, may I use the phone at the nurses' station again?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Lane," Tage said. They left together, Lois hanging back a moment.

"Kala, Jason," she called softly, her heart contracting at the sight of them. She went to get Jason, who scampered back to Superman's bedside and hopped up long enough to kiss his father's brow.

Not to be outdone, Kala scrambled onto the bed and hugged him, whispering in his ear, "Get better, Daddy," and kissing his cheek. Only then would they follow Lois out into the hallway.

Another impromptu shrine of flowers, cards, and letters had grown up on the sidewalk across from the front doors of S.T.A.R. Labs, twice the size of the one at Centennial Park. It was just dawn, but the street was filled with people, many of them carrying hand-lettered signs.

The weather was cold and damp, and most people huddled inside their jackets and coats. Several people had brought thermoses of coffee, and the hot beverage was being shared around equally. The attitude of the crowd was somber and reverent, and they all moved along for a little distance when the police asked them to.

Reporters were another story. The media was hot on the trail of a story, and representatives of the fourth estate paced tensely, eyeing the doors. Some young buck from the tabloids looked at his fellows, and his brow wrinkled. "Hey, who's here from the *Planet*? Biggest story in town and they didn't send anybody?"

"Twit," Toby Raines growled as she walked by, keeping her collar turned up so that none of the police officers would recognize her. "This's *Superman*. Of course they have someone."

Another reporter added, "Rumor is Lane's inside with him." Neither of them heard Raines swear under her breath - not even *that* was an exclusive anymore.

On the other side of the street, Martha Kent and Lana Lang stood in the lee of a bus shelter, sipping coffee and listening to the crowd murmur about Superman's bravery. In spite of having dozens - hundreds - of people around them, they both felt acutely alone in their knowledge. Only they were keeping vigil for more than a hero.

"Oh, no," Lois muttered, staring out the mirrored-glass front doors. The crowd outside was bigger than she would've thought - but fortunately, there weren't many reporters in it. She was waiting for Richard's car, the twins each holding one of her hands. Ella and General Unsworth were surveying the crowd as well, the general looking distinctly displeased.

"You're staying, Ms. Lane?" he asked, turning to look at her.

"Yes," Lois said, and the twins turned to look at her. She tried to smile brightly at them as she said, "I'll walk you to the car, sweethearts, but Mommy has to stay with Superman and

make sure he's okay. All right?" The mere thought of them not being nearby where she could see them tore at her, but it had to be done. The sooner they were away from here, the better. She didn't want the military to get a hint of their heritage, and their fondness for Superman could only be explained as gratitude for so long. "As soon as he wakes up, I'll come home. It won't be long."

"But Mommy..." Kala started to whimper. "We miss you. I don't wanna go home without you!" Jason simply tightened his hand in hers, those blue eyes troubled.

Lois stroked Kala's hair and squeezed Jason's hand reassuringly. "Baby, I'll be home soon. You two need to go with Nana and Daddy and get your rest, okay? I don't want you getting sick too."

Mommy-logic was mostly infallible, but the twins tried for outright denial. "We won't," they said in unison, giving her their saddest looks.

"C'mon, Jason, Kala," Ella said gently. "Don't make this any harder on Mommy. Daddy and Uncle Perry and I will be there, and it will just be until Superman wakes up." The pouting scowls she received told her that twins would accept it, but they didn't have to *like* it.

A few moments passed in silence before Lois saw Richard's Saab nose its way along the crowded street and come to a halt directly opposite the doors. It almost seemed accidental, as if he was merely pausing in traffic and the cops simply hadn't chased him away yet. The soldiers in uniform standing at parade-rest on the steps didn't appear to notice Richard, either. *Finally*, Lois thought. Taking a deep breath, she squeezed the twins' hands. "Okay, let's go."

Ella saw the look in Lois' eyes, and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Joffrey, I'll see you later, when all of this has died down. Thank you so much for all you've done."

He shook her hand gravely and replied, "It's a pleasure, Elinore. Be safe."

Jason craned his head back to look up at the general in his dress uniform, and said quietly, "Bye."

"Take care, son," Joffrey said. Then he nodded to the two soldiers standing by the doors, and they opened them for the Lanes.

"I'll be right back," Lois said to General Unsworth, and then headed out, bracing herself.

At first it seemed all right. The crowd looked at her, but no one recognized her right away, and the steps had been kept clear for the exit. Richard had gotten out and opened the doors, and for one moment Lois was looking up, startled by the size of the crowd and trying to catch Richard's gaze. An enterprising photographer could've gotten a clear shot of her then, but only one was in place to do it.

The *Daily Star's* photographer Mankiewicz recognized Lois Lane immediately. He was only around the front of the building because Toby Raines was hiding from Lieutenant Sawyer, who was one of the officers cordoning off the rear entrance to the facility. Mank started to raise his camera, framing that shot in his mind...

...and Toby grabbed his arm. "Not the kids," she hissed.

"But Toby, the shot," he began, and she shook her head sharply.

"Not the kids, Mank. *Leave them out of it.* We're not the *Inquirer.*" A second later, it was too late; Lois dropped her gaze, letting her hair obscure her face.

The twins, of course, were amazed by the crowd. They'd hesitated only a moment as they started down the steps, but with Mommy and Nana beside them they had the courage to look all around them curiously. Jason spotted a flash of red hair across the street, and elbowed his sister. Both children grinned to see Miss Lana, especially when she raised her hand in a slight wave. Kala and Jason both copied the gesture, wondering who the older lady beside Lana was,

and why she was watching them so intently.

They made it to the car without incident, Richard hugging the twins as he helped them into the back seat. There had been a few flashbulbs going off as they descended, mostly from camera phones in the crowd, but the reporters were only just beginning to realize what was going on. More cameras captured Ella getting into the front seat, and Lois kissing both twins and hugging Richard quickly. She ignored the swarming press long enough to kiss his cheek and whisper into his ear, "I'm staying - get out as fast as you can. They'll mob the car if you don't."

"I know," he whispered back. "Is he...?"

"Stable, but still asleep," she said. "Lana?"

"Somewhere out there," Richard said. "With... with Clark's mom."

Lois took a startled step backward. *Clark's mother? The silver-haired little old lady from Kansas? How on earth...?* But Lois quickly gathered her wits; as far as she knew, she had to maintain the fiction. "Any news on Clark?"

Richard blinked at her for a second. This wasn't the place or time to explain, reporters shouldering their way through the crowd toward them. "Not yet. I'm sure he'll turn up. Go, before they swamp you."

Lois nodded, and by the time Richard got back to the driver's side she had already turned her back. Now her fellow reporters had found her, and flashbulbs popped constantly, microphones thrust in her direction. Uniformed soldiers on the steps kept the press far enough away that Lois was able to walk back up to the doors freely, but everyone was firing questions at her.

"Lois Lane, any news on Superman?"

"Miss Lane, is Superman awake yet?"

"When is he expected to recover?"

"This way, Miss Lane!" a photographer called, but Lois kept her head stubbornly down. Lana's coat and her own long hair obscured her enough that the photos they were taking would barely be printable.

"Miss Lane, are you still in love with him?" someone yelled, and Lois' back stiffened, but she kept walking. *Only a few more steps.*

"Is he still in love with you?" someone else called, and Lois was glad that her expression was hidden. She marched stoically to the doors, never turning toward any of them.

"Lois! Hey, Lois!" Toby and Mank were near the top of the steps, and the *Daily Star* reporter knew she had to try for a decent shot of Lois to make up for passing on the photo of the twins. Hating herself for it, she whistled piercingly, and then yelled, "*Lois Joanne Lane!*"

Almost at the doors, Lois froze, and she started to turn. But she recognized the voice, and instead of whipping around for a perfect shot, she merely called back, "I'm not turning around, Raines! Get over it!"

Toby bit her lip and called back, "You'd have done it to me!" as Lois disappeared inside. She could just barely see Lois turn and glare furiously at her through the crack in the closing door.

Martha let out a sigh, and Lana turned to smile at her. "Well, that's Jason and Kala," she said quietly. "And the black-haired woman in my coat was Lois. The other woman with them was Lois' mother, Elinore Lane."

The older woman's eyes were distant and thoughtful. Her grandchildren... her son's lover.

She'd never seen Lois in person before today, and never seen the twins at all. Amazing, how much of Clark she could see in both children, even at this distance. That amazingly black hair on the little girl, so like Clark's. And the boy's quick smile, his expression so sunny even in the midst of all of this strangeness. *They're definitely his. I don't need Clark to confirm it, there's no way they could be anyone else's. They even move like him...*

It was almost like seeing Clark as a little boy again, bringing back a flood of memories. She had worried over him so much when he was little, always terrified that someone from the government would find out about him and take him from her. Apparently Lois had the same fear. Martha read it in the way she'd kissed the twins as they got into the car, the way she'd tried to hide them coming down the steps. Her love for them, and her maternal protectiveness, was very clear. Though Martha couldn't completely relax until she saw her son healthy and whole again, seeing his children eased her heart.

"And Jason does have Clark's blue eyes," Lana murmured. That finally brought a smile to Martha's lips.

Somebody Else's Life

Lois fought to control her temper, pausing just inside the doors to take several deep breaths. Toby had a point; this was the job, and if Raines was caught up in something newsworthy, Lois would've been angling for an interview. It just ... irritated her to no end. Among other things.

Shaking her shoulders lightly, as if brushing off all of the questions from the crowd, Lois headed back down the hallway to the elevators. No one challenged her; apparently General Unsworth had given her clearance before he'd left again. That was just as well, since the reporter was in no mood to cope with bureaucratic red tape at the moment.

The two soldiers on duty outside Kal-El's door nodded to Lois as she went inside. She'd been hoping to find him awake, even though that would mean she missed his return to consciousness. But no such luck. However, Nurse Tage was in the room. She'd folded down the blankets covering him and was checking his wounds, changing the bandages, and examining her patient thoroughly.

The first thing that struck Lois was the sight of his bare chest, the planes of his muscles achingly familiar. That triggered a flashback, to one of the first memories she'd gotten back. Lying cuddled against his side, her hand resting possessively on his chest, his arm around her shoulders. Opening one eye long enough to make sure it was real, and to see the sleepy and *very* satisfied smile on his lips. For so long Lois had thought that moment was a dream, a fantasy, in spite of its sharp details.

She must have sighed, because Tage looked up and gave her a slight sheepish grin. "He's healing very quickly, Miss Lane," she said, and started to cover him again.

"Wait," Lois said, and the nurse's eyebrows rose slightly. Lois looked up at the skylight, seeing the dawn streaming in. "Let the sun hit his skin. He can't get sunburned, and the blanket might be interfering."

"Good call," Tage said. "I suppose with the sun coming in, we can turn off these lamps. They're putting out more heat than I really feel comfortable with."

Lois nodded agreement, and waited as Tage called Dr. Donner. They briefly consulted, and Lois grinned a bit when Tage replied to one of his questions with, "Miss Lane agrees." It was nice to be consulted, to have her knowledge valued.

In a few minutes, the sunlamps were moved away, and the brightening daylight poured down on Kal-El's chest. His heart rhythm was definitely stronger, though he showed no signs of waking. Tage left to bring Dr. Donner the encouraging news, and once she was gone, Lois sat down on the edge of the bed.

"If I'm going to talk about this part," she murmured softly, looking down at his handsome face, "I want to be close to you, as stupid as it's going to make me feel to do this." For a long moment Lois just watched him, and then cautiously placed her palm against his chest. The rhythm of his breathing didn't change at her touch; it was Lois who inhaled sharply, and then let that breath out with a sigh.

"The memories. As far as I knew when you left, we hadn't even kissed. I started having dreams..." She trailed off with a chuckle. "Well, maybe you won't remember this, so I'll say it even though it's stupid and romantic and embarrassing. Ever since that interview, I *always* dreamed about you. About what it might be like, between us, if we... Yeah. That's supposed to be the *guy's* line. 'I dreamed of you.' Sounds so corny... or maybe a little bit shallow. Obsessive, too. But it's true; I did have those kinds of dreams. The reality was far beyond them, though..."

Lois got a little lost in her memories, her hazel eyes looking into the past. He had been the only man she pursued, the only one who completely undid her façade of sophisticated cynicism. The only one to turn her into a blushing, stuttering romantic the way he did at that first interview. And those three momentous days, which had been lost to her for so long...

"I can't believe I'm discussing this," Lois said, bringing herself back to the present. "Anyway. Let's start over again. When everybody at the *Planet* figured out I had amnesia, Perry sent me to that psychiatrist who said I was hostile. He wound up tentatively diagnosing me with post-traumatic stress disorder. I can't blame him - I was pretty anxious about losing three whole days, I had the insomnia, and after a while I started showing depression, too. Textbook symptoms. The only thing I lacked was the fear, and I guess that got chalked up to disassociation.

"He figured that something terrible must've happened to me during those three days to make me forget, and he wasn't the only one - Perry had his suspicions, too. What no one would say to me was what they thought could've happened to traumatize me that badly. The shrink wanted me to figure it out on my own, without pressuring me into a breakthrough. Perry ... Perry must've guessed, but I don't think he could admit to himself.

"You never heard about this part, Kal-El. In either guise. When my amnesia went on for so long, pretty much everyone involved in the case looked at the facts and drew a conclusion. I'd been kidnapped by three men, all of whom it turned out had just been in prison. Sure, they had Ursa with them. But she was one of them, and I was the outsider, the captive. I was also *yours*, and they all hated you. It's very logical."

Her voice dropped again. "No one would say it to me, but they thought I'd been raped. Possibly by all three of them. I couldn't remember anything - I could only remember arriving in Niagara. The rest was gone. Zod was questioned in prison, and he denied it. Loudly - Jor-El wasn't the only one who thought of us humans as lesser creatures. Non, well, he just looked confused at them. But Luthor, that son of a bitch... Luthor never denied raping me. Never confirmed it, either, just smiled and insisted he have a lawyer present for *all* questioning. Bastard. I should've put a bullet into him at the damn trial..."

Lois forced herself off of that train of thought. "Anyway, I found all that out later. I'd started getting flashes of memory back, little things. Almost falling while Non was carrying me, that was one of them. Trying to come to Perry's defense and nearly breaking my hand on Ursa's jaw. I knew all three of them on sight, knew their names, recognized their voices - I just couldn't remember how I knew.

"I didn't let being in therapy stop me from chasing the story when you left, though. And I never told the shrink about the *other* memories that were coming back, the ones I thought we just silly little fantasies. Daydreams. I'd heard enough from Elliot the last time he and I broke up, when he read that headline of Perry's. I didn't need another lecture on why women fantasize about Superman, or what flying symbolizes according to Freud. So I hid that, too, even though those daydreams were so *real*. Flying over a snowy landscape; watching you pour champagne; kissing your hand. Even the gunshot, but I couldn't remember when or why. No details in any of it, no context. Just the images.

"It got worse once I found out I was pregnant. *Then* the headshrinkers, the one back in Metropolis and the guy I was seeing in France, decided to tell me about their suspicions. From the first, I didn't believe them. Even though the idea that I'd been raped made a lot of sense, I knew it hadn't happened. I was going crazy, trying to figure out how I'd ended up pregnant when... Well, this is embarrassing, too, but I hadn't been sleeping with anyone since I met you.

There was one more time with Elliot, right after the interview. After that ... there was no one else.

"Well, luckily, the doctors soon decided I wasn't far enough along for the twins to have been conceived during the missing three days. I wasn't even showing yet; blood tests revealed the pregnancy. Just so you know - this might be useful to you at some point - the gestation for Kryptonian-human hybrid twins is about eleven months. Give or take. Anyway, I started spinning the cover story about the one-weekend stand then, to explain how I'd gotten pregnant. I was lying to my therapist and wracking my own brain all the time, trying to remember. I *knew* I had to protect my child - didn't find out they were twins until later - I knew this pregnancy was special. That feeling kept me from doing anything drastic, even though I hated being pregnant, hated the idea of becoming a mother.

"It never even entered my head that you were the father." Lois paused, her eyes going unfocused. "As far as I knew, we were just flirty friends. *I* wanted more, but I didn't know *you* did. And the flashes of memory I was getting just seemed like fantasies. Until that one time I woke up, remembering how you woke me up that morning in the Fortress..." Lois' voice trailed off, shivering at the memory.

"I had never dreamed *that* before. It was so clear - every sense perfect. That started to give me the idea that something might have happened between us. It was just too surreal." Lois' expression clouded over, her eyes gone dark. "That was the worst time. Doctors trying to push me for information, my belly starting to show, random little flashes of memory coming back. Including a few things about Clark. You bringing me that bouquet in Niagara. Bloody pansies... And flashing my legs at you, which was a little racier than I usually was with Clark. Holding the *gun* on you, now *that* was weird as hell. I thought I was going crazy."

Looking around guiltily, Lois gave in to her desire to get closer than she currently was. She needed his nearness painfully at this point in the tale, a constant reminder that he was next to her. Carefully, she maneuvered her way into the bed until she could lay back beside him, holding his hand. "Kal-El... It was driving me up a wall, all the things I knew without knowing why or how. I spent a lot of time crying in the bathroom at the *Quotidienne*. Which was also just wonderful - I heard enough whispers in Paris about how Superman had only been gone a couple months, and his girlfriend was pregnant with someone else's kid. I couldn't go home - Metropolis would've crucified me in print for that. People *still* speculate about just what happened back then. I couldn't face that, not knowing myself what had happened, so I was stuck in Paris."

Lois sighed. "My therapist taught me this trick for dealing with repressed memories. It has to do with moving your eyes side to side while trying to think about the thing you've forgotten. I was using that, on my own, to try and get at enough memories to finally make some kind of sense. One night I was in the tub, soaking, trying not to look at my belly, and I started doing the eye movements. I was half-mad from frustration and pregnancy hormones... God, I was a terror then, my mood swings had half of the *Quotidienne* staff fleeing in terror. And I'd just been on another crying jag. Anything that might stop it would help, even if it brought on a nervous breakdown.

"I decided to focus in on the memories of Clark, since that was the most realistic and the least threatening. I remembered you coming into my office after everything was over; I remembered feeling tears on my face. That was strange enough, me crying at work. Then the pain, the emotional agony. And then seeing you take the glasses off... I realized then who you were. *All* of who you were.

"The shock - Clark and Superman, the same person. It made so damn much sense, and the déjà vu, feeling *exactly* the same way as the moment when I'd first found out, knocked me into total recall. I felt that kiss in my office all over again, and then my mind warped back to that first reveal in the hotel room. I heard the gunshot, and saw you straightening up, staring at me. I sat up in shock and awe, experiencing that moment all over again right there in the bathtub.

"The water got cold while I relived those three days. Every moment, complete sensory recall, Kal-El. The flight to the Fortress, the taste of the champagne, the spike of terror when the hologram of your father turned that savage glare on me. And after ... oh, God, after. That night was like nothing in my experience, like nothing I'd ever dreamed of having. Every idiotic romantic fantasy I'd mocked myself for having came true; the unstoppable Mad Dog Lane had fallen in love and couldn't deny it any longer.

"And then the next day, the diner, attacking that greasy trucker who beat you up. Seeing the news. The way you refused to talk to me in the hotel room that night, lying in bed with my back to you and trying not to cry. I felt so *guilty*, Kal-El. I felt like Jor-El was right, I'd ruined you. And you wouldn't even let me *help*."

Her voice caught on a sob, remembering. He had even shied away from her touch then, refusing what comfort she could give, closing himself off from her. The years had given Lois the perspective to realize that Kal-El had been ashamed of himself, and felt undeserving of comfort. Undeserving of *her*. He just hadn't realized how badly he'd hurt her then.

Lois turned to snuggle up against his side, her hand on his bare chest, feeling the slow rhythm of his heart. Déjà vu of the sweetest kind. Her tears came freely as she whispered, "Then you were gone the next morning, no note, nothing. You had no powers, it was freezing, we were in the middle of nowhere... I thought I'd lost you. I thought you were going to die out there in the snow. Kal-El, after all we'd had, I didn't want it to end like that..."

"And seeing you again, with your powers, fighting Zod and his little gang. I was so grateful, so glad to see you alive, and scared to death all at the same time. They had *your* powers, and there were three of them... In the Fortress again, that bitch Ursa hanging onto my throat, thinking it was all over. Thinking they were going to kill me anyway as soon as they got done humiliating you. Nothing in my life hurt so much as watching you kneel in front of that sick bastard Zod - and knowing it was *all my fault*."

Lois mastered herself, rubbing her eyes. "All of that came back to me, as real and immediate as if it were happening again. I got the wonder, the love, the pain, and the terror. And then the astonishment when you trounced Zod. I loved that moment, Kal-El. Seeing you triumphant again, God, my heart just *leaped*. I was so delighted I had to knock Ursa out just to express my happiness." Lois chuckled for a moment, but it quickly turned to sniffing again.

"Of course, it couldn't last. Outside the Fortress, and on my balcony. We tried to be so reasonable. I couldn't fight to stay with you, I couldn't argue with the conclusion you'd come to, because I believed Jor-El, too. I believed it was *my* selfishness that almost doomed the whole world. And then the memories brought me right back to my office, to you telling me you liked worrying about me, and me breaking down like a fool. And the last thing I remembered was you telling me 'One day you'll...' One day I'd meet someone. Oh, Kal-El, I could never meet anyone who'd replace you."

Hugging him impulsively, Lois bit her lip. In a husky whisper, she told him, "I really did have a nervous breakdown when I remembered it all. I cried like a hysterical little girl, cried for everything I'd lost - lost twice over, since I'd lost the memories, too. Cried for your child who would never know you. I didn't think you'd come back; I'd heard about Krypton by then. I

thought you would find your own people, and I'd be left behind. Forever."

For long moments, Lois just lay beside him, cuddled close while the sun bathed Kal-El's body. If anything, her life had gotten *more* unbearable once she discovered the truth. Not knowing had driven her crazy with frustration, but knowing what she'd lost - *exactly* what she'd lost - had been worse. Lois didn't tell him that, however. When she spoke again, her voice was still low, but she'd finished with tears for the moment.

"All I could do was pick up the pieces and try to keep moving along. I never wanted to be a mother; I was terrified of the prospect. But they were *your* children. What else could I do? I couldn't give them up, no matter how scared I was. They were all I had left of you... Not to mention, it wouldn't be fair to adopt the super-babies out to some poor unsuspecting couple.

"I was six months pregnant before I told anyone back home. Calling Mom was the hardest. Bless her, she immediately wanted to come to Paris to be with me. Well, no - she wanted me to come home, and I wouldn't do it. The next best thing was for her to come to France. And Lucy was ready to come right along with her, too. If it hadn't been for Little Sam and Nora, I think my baby sister would've been here the whole time.

"Lucy had some choice words for me, though, about slipping up and getting myself pregnant so soon after you'd left. We only argued about it once; she called me out about cheating on you, in very unflattering terms, and she asked me rather abruptly what I was going to say to you when you came back. That was enough to break me down crying, which Lucy had *never* done to me before. She never said another word about it...

"By the end of my term, I was *huge*. Lucy and Mom had both come to Paris, and Perry was calling practically every day to make sure I was all right. Jimmy was always in the background, too. I must've drunk my weight in orange juice, trying to balance out the Belgian chocolate I craved... Speaking of cravings, I'll have you know I quit smoking - cold turkey - the moment I found out I was expecting. Good God, that was *awful*. Morning sickness and nicotine withdrawal do *not* cancel each other out. That's two things I can never completely enjoy again, courtesy of you: cigarettes and orange juice. I always feel guilty about the one, and the other makes me nauseous just thinking about it. I craved something in the juice while I was pregnant, but since then ... bleah."

Lois shivered a little, just thinking of it. Ella had pressed it on her, wanting her to take her vitamins and drink juice and God knows what else she had managed to swallow down. Especially when the doctors had deemed that the twins were underweight. Only now she understood that they hadn't been. Just two months behind an ordinary human child's development. "I refused to go to Lamaze classes," she continued, "because I had Mom and Lucy. So when I went into false labor in a board meeting at the *Quotidienne*, I panicked. The doctors put me on bed rest, which I *loathed*. Two weeks of nothing but going out of my mind with boredom and anxiety. Mom and Lucy kept trying to get me excited about it; they wanted to buy baby clothes and talk about my ultrasound, which I refused to even hear the results of. Mom knew that the twins were a boy and a girl; I didn't want to know. Serious ostrich-syndrome; if I kept my head in the sand long enough, maybe the problem would go away by itself and I wouldn't have to deal with it.

"I kept thinking like that right up until I went into labor. If I'd panicked at false labor, I was *hysterical* when I realized it was the real thing. Not only was it painful - by the time I got to the hospital it was too late for an epidural - but I had no idea what the twins would look like, if they'd be born with powers ... or even if I'd survive giving birth to them. And no one else knew what I was going through. I kept it all a secret, but I left enough hints in my will for Mom

to figure it out if something happened to me. I think I stayed just calm enough for neither of them to realize that was actually happening." The tears had come again, her thoughts of that day so extreme. She could see the moment so clearly; the first time she had seen their children.

Picking up his hand, Lois kissed the back of his knuckles, imagining for a moment that she felt some slight response, some minute tension in his fingers that hadn't been there before. After a few moments, she decided it was just that: imagination. Her voice was thick with emotion when she murmured, "Everything changed once they were born, Kal-El. My God, they were beautiful. Well," she paused to laugh, "They were once they got them cleaned up. Jason was first; Kala came only a minute and half after him. Before I knew it, he was in my arms, peering up at me with those big blue eyes so much like yours. Except for the one cry to prove he was breathing, he was absolutely quiet, watching me intently, looking around curiously. I fell in love at first sight. Even harder than I fell for you. Still didn't know a damn thing about being a mom, but right then I knew I'd kill or die for him, that he was *mine* in a way nothing else had even been, and that was enough."

"And then Kala. As soon as they got her out, she wailed like a fire engine. Screamed the whole time they cleaned her off, but as soon as they got her wrapped up she quit just long enough for them to hand her to me, too. I had just gotten slightly used to the one looking up at me and then there was another. And then I felt it again. I loved her from the first look, your black hair and back then, your blue eyes. I had one twin in each arm, and Kala started to hitch like she was going to start howling again, but then she decided to nap first." Smiling fondly, the pain of grief lost in the delight of remembering how quickly she'd grown to love the twins, Lois began to tell him about their childhood.

"Hmm," Dr. Donner said, his eyes going distant. He rubbed at his silver-streaked beard as he often did when deep in thought, and Tage waited patiently. They were standing by the nurses' station, looking over their most illustrious patient's chart.

"It won't be easy to convince General Unsworth," the doctor said at last. "But I think you're right. We're seeing a steady increase in his EEG waves since dawn. Opening the skylight might do the trick."

"That glass is designed to keep out UV rays," Tage observed. "I think the general will agree to open it if *you* ask him. There's nothing he wants more than to see Superman healed, right?"

"Oh, absolutely," Donner agreed. "He's been willing to pull out all the stops on this case, reassigning personnel, the works. He even ordered the surveillance equipment turned off when Ms. Lane woke up and went into the room."

"That's ... kind of him," Tage said.

The doctor chuckled. "She's a reporter *and* Sam Lane's daughter. If we'd left a bug or a camera in that room, she'd find it. General Unsworth doesn't want her disturbed." Donner shrugged and tucked the files under his arm. "I'll go ask him about opening the skylight. He'll want to station soldiers on the roof and make this a no-fly zone first, so it might take a while, but I'm pretty certain we can do this. Thank you, Tage."

"You're welcome, Dr. Donner," Tage replied. "It was Ms. Lane who gave me the idea. When she mentioned that the blanket might be blocking the sun's rays, I thought of the glass, too."

Lois' reminiscence was cut off several hours later by a knock at the door. She scrambled

upright to again sit on the side of his bed, smoothed her blouse, and called, "Come in," expecting Tage or Dr. Donner.

Much to her surprise, Lieutenant Sawyer walked in, followed by a uniformed soldier who took up a stance at the door. Maggie didn't say anything at first; her eyes went to Superman, and Lois saw the exhaustion and worry etched there. "Is he any better?" Sawyer asked.

"A little," Lois replied quietly. "We just don't know too much." Something was off, she could sense it. Maggie confirmed that impression by walking around the room slowly before speaking again.

"Lois ... we need you to give a statement about what happened on the yacht." Her voice was unusually low, and she didn't meet Lois' eyes when she spoke.

The black-haired woman frowned a little; Sawyer was tense and standoffish, like she had never been around Lois. Well, not since the beginning of their friendship, when the cop hadn't known if she could trust the reporter. "Maggie, I'd be more than willing to tell you what happened," Lois said.

Sawyer shook her head slightly. "I can't take your statement here, Lois. I can't take it at all... Anyway, I need you to come to the precinct."

"What? Maggie..." Lois let the sentence trail off, aware of their company. The anonymous soldier might appear to be gazing off into the middle distance, but he was certainly listening to every word.

Maggie was even less inclined to elaborate. Her gaze flicked from the soldier, to Lois, to Superman, and back to Lois. "It's important, Lois, trust me. I just... Come down to the precinct."

Even if Lois hadn't been a reporter, with finely-honed journalistic instincts to tell her when someone was hiding something, she would've known Maggie was holding out. Being less than forthright wasn't in the lieutenant's nature, and she was clearly uncomfortable with whatever she was concealing. Lois' nerves were frayed to the breaking point by everything she'd endured, Kal-El's condition, and her own recent examination of the most tumultuous period of her life. One of her closest friends keeping a secret from her - and keeping it badly - was more than she could take.

"Goddammit, Maggie, I will *not* take one step from here until you tell me what the hell is going on," she hissed furiously, rising from Kal-El's bedside and stalking toward Maggie. "I have dealt with enough bullshit the past few days; I don't need any more from you! My kids have been kidnapped, I've almost been killed, and *he's* in a coma. Don't you realize I just *can't* anymore? I've had enough! And I *will not leave him*, do you hear me? I won't!"

Strong hands grabbed hers, and eyes as blue as arctic ice bored into her own, finally silencing Lois' tirade. Meeting that look, Lois finally realized what was wrong with Sawyer: she was terrified.

Saying Goodbye

"Lois," Maggie said softly, still holding both her hands and her gaze. "Come with me. Please."

It was the 'please' that worked. Lois and Maggie weren't in the habit of asking much from each other. Sawyer was sworn to uphold the law, and Lois was inclined to break it on occasion in pursuit of truth; it was better if they didn't ask for favors. They had volunteered plenty for each other in the past, but the unspoken rule of their friendship was 'ask nothing'. Whatever Sawyer's reason for asking her to leave, it was both important enough to break that rule and frightening enough to have spooked Maggie. *Maggie*, one of the bravest women Lois knew, the only person who had ever ridden shotgun in Lois' car without clutching the doorframe in panic.

"All right," Lois said softly. The decision tore her heart out, and she turned to look at Kal-El. He still slumbered, unaware of their arguing, perhaps unaware of everything she'd told him. Lois didn't know whether to hope he'd heard her or not.

Maggie released her, and Lois turned away, walking to Kal-El's bedside. "I have to go," she murmured. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Hold on, Kal-El. Don't leave us again." She cut a defiant look at the soldier and at Maggie, hating the fact that this parting would have witnesses. Then Lois thought, *The hell with it*. She bent and kissed his cheek, whispering into his ear, "I love you, I've always loved you, I always will love you. Your twins need you. *I need you*. You have to come back, Kal-El."

It wasn't enough. Mere words couldn't express her feelings, the love and fear that twined together in her chest until her very heart felt muffled. Lois closed her eyes and kissed his mouth, softly, letting the press of her lips and the tear trickling down onto his face speak for her.

She pulled back, and glanced at the heart monitor hopefully. No change, and Lois felt like an idiot. *This isn't Sleeping Beauty, you moron; it's a damn coma*. Sighing, she said quietly, "It's not 'goodbye'. It's 'see you later'." With those words and a final squeeze of his hand, she turned from Kal-El and followed Maggie out of the room.

The soldier, still unnamed, escorted them silently to the rear entrance of the building. Lois felt her stomach get queasy at the idea of facing that pack of rabid reporters again, but at least she'd gotten the twins out with a minimum of fuss. She was already squaring her shoulders for the inevitable confrontation with her fellow journalists when Maggie asked, apropos of nothing, "You armed, Lois?"

It seemed an odd thing to ask as they approached the doors. Lois looked at her askance and replied, "No. Luthor took my damn gun, the sonofabitch."

Maggie turned sharply to look at her, a brief burst of triumphant elation on her face, and then she cut the expression off with difficulty. "Ah. Well. That's... that's a shame." They were at the door, and there was no time to elaborate. The soldier opened it for them both, and Lois saw to her relief that Sawyer's patrol car was parked right outside, only feet away.

Unfortunately, every reporter in Metropolis was packed into the tight space, trying to edge past the soldiers standing guard around the car. Flashbulbs instantly blinded Lois, and she had to rely on Maggie's hand on her elbow to guide her to the car. The noise was deafening in the enclosed garage, everyone trying to get Lois' attention, bellowing questions. *For the love of God, it's more peaceful at the zoo during alligator-feeding time!*

Maggie helped Lois into the front seat and closed the door, cutting off the worst of the noise. She went around to the driver's side and raised her hands for silence, getting it after a

moment. A forest of microphones turned toward her as she said, loudly and clearly, "Superman remains unconscious but in stable condition. Ms. Lane has graciously volunteered to assist us with our investigation of the incidents aboard the *Gertrude*." With that, she got into the car and quickly shut her door.

Not quickly enough to escape Toby Raines' incredulous shout of "Two sentences? *Two sentences?! You call that an update, Sawyer?*"

Maggie growled a few choice words under her breath as she carefully maneuvered the patrol car out of the garage. Photographers kept trying to get in front of it for a clearer shot, and the lieutenant murmured, "I hate it when they do that."

"So do I," Lois retorted. "Stupid. Dangerous. Inconsiderate..."

"Sometimes you just wanna run 'em over, don't you?" Maggie said, the corner of her mouth quirking up in a grin.

"Road pizza, with extra paparazzi," Lois said. The two women chuckled, finally feeling at ease with each other again. Of course, Lois still didn't know what the hell was going on, but the traffic situation in the city still hadn't been completely resolved, so they'd have plenty of time to talk about it.

"So, tell me what happened," Maggie said before Lois could figure out how to phrase her own question.

"I thought you couldn't take my statement," Lois countered.

Those pale blue eyes cut her a quick look before focusing on traffic again. "Lois. This isn't Lieutenant Margaret Sawyer of the Metropolis S.C.U. asking you for a statement. This is your friend Maggie wondering what happened yesterday, purely out of concern for your well-being. Are we clear on the difference?"

Her tone had an edge, and Lois sat back in the seat, staring. After a moment in which Sawyer refused to elaborate, the reporter finally said, "Well, in a nutshell, I got a voicemail from Luthor telling me exactly where he was. Clark was gone, Superman was gone, so I ditched my car and went after Luthor myself. Once I found the yacht, I snuck onboard and started looking for my kids. Ran into Luthor, and he threatened Jason to get me to give up the gun.

"After that, everything went to hell in a handbasket. Luthor locked Jason back up - he never let me *see* Kala - and decided to play a little cat-and-mouse with me. We scuffled, I broke one of his ribs, and he got his pet thug Riley to help him tie my hands and lock me up in the freakin' pantry. I was trying to get out when I saw Luthor and both twins leave on the helicopter."

The horror of that moment, of seeing her daughter's head whip around and locking gazes with Kala's terrified eyes, silenced Lois for several heartbeats. She bit her lip and continued, "Once the boss was gone, Riley wanted to play. He thinks of himself as a filmmaker - *snuff* films. He dragged me down to the gallery and left me on the floor while he got everything ready. By the time he turned back around, I'd used a broken bolt in the floor to cut the cable ties off my hands. I ran, he chased me, and I smacked him upside the head with a rock and tied him up so he couldn't bother me.

"Then I went after the other guy on board, Grant. He was in the wheelhouse. I surprised him, faking him into thinking I had a gun when all I had was Riley's damn police baton. Those frikkin' things *hurt*, by the way, Sawyer. I tied him up and got on the radio, got in touch with Richard. He'd just talked me into letting him rescue me when Lex came back."

Lois was gazing out the window, but seeing that room, seeing Luthor burst in and attack

her without a word. "I think Grant might've tried to warn me he was coming. Luthor jumped me, strangled me unconscious. I woke up handcuffed, in the helicopter. He used me for bait to get Superman closer, Maggie. He held my own gun to my head and practically pushed me out the door to get Superman close enough for an easy shot. The bastard had put kryptonite in my hollowpoints, and Superman fell into the ocean. I elbowed Lex and jumped after him.

"Richard dived at the helicopter until Lex's chicken pilot got them out of there. Richard and Lana rescued me and Superman, I pulled the bullet out, and Superman recovered enough to go remove the freakin' kryptonite *island* I didn't even know about until I saw him pick it up. Then Richard managed to get me to the hospital at the same time that Superman arrived. The rest you know."

Maggie nodded slowly. "Okay, that all fits... Did you leave anything out?"

Lois gave an exasperated sigh. "Well, yeah, I left out the part where Riley felt me up while he was searching me for weapons. And I left out Lex in the helicopter, telling me exactly how he planned to rape me and make me like it. Yeah, I left out a couple things, Maggie, mostly to keep you from having a coronary."

The lieutenant had winced, and then her lip curled in a snarl that didn't bode well for Luthor when he was finally captured. When she'd mastered her anger, she asked, "So you never fired your gun?"

Lois opened her mouth, and then remembered the mirror. The damned mirror. "Well, yeah. I shot into a mirror, actually. It had Luthor's reflection in it at the time, I thought it was him. Wound up giving myself away."

"So you fired a warning shot into a mirror?" Maggie asked.

"Warning shot my ass, I was trying to kill the sonofabitch," Lois retorted. "It was a full-length mirror, I couldn't tell, I thought it was Lex-"

Maggie reached over and gripped Lois' knee lightly, giving her another of those I-know-you're-smarter-than-this looks. "You fired a warning shot, Lois. Into a mirror, to let Luthor know you were serious. A *warning shot*." Her hand tightened, her eyes deadly serious.

"Okay, yeah, a warning shot," Lois muttered. "Whatever..."

Maggie's grip started to get painful, but Lois had the idea that this was tension, not for emphasis. "And that was the *only* time you fired your weapon on board the *Gertrude*?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Mags, you're hurting me here."

"Sorry." Sawyer relaxed and concentrated on her driving. "We didn't have this conversation."

"Fine," Lois sighed. "Maggie, what the *hell* is going on? You've been acting schizo since you walked into his hospital room. I want an explanation."

"Lois..."

"*Now*, Maggie." Lois leaned against the door and glared. All of a sudden she was exhausted again.

"You're a damn good actress, aren't you?"

"What the *hell*...? Okay, yes, I should've won an Oscar, not a Pulitzer. Maggie, *what the fuck*?"

"You need to be," Sawyer said, and her voice was still low and serious. "You'll need to look surprised when you hear this from Smith, or my integrity's as screwed as your chances in court. Lois, we found two men on that ship, both of them tied up. Both of them shot in the face

at point-blank range."

That was enough to whip her head around to face Maggie, absolutely thunderstruck. The utter incredulousness of her expression only doubled the lieutenant's confidence. For a full minute, Lois stayed silent as she digested what was said. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and shaky with anger as her eyes narrowed. "Let me guess, Luthor killed them with my gun. And I had motive, right?"

"The bullets match your Ladysmith," Maggie said quietly. "Smith found that wild shot you fired at the range last week for comparison. And yes, you and I practically joked about it the night of the Pulitzers. We also found partials of your fingerprints on the cable ties and the police baton. Smith's been building a case against you. Two counts of murder one."

"Great. Just fabulous," Lois snarled, wishing once again that she'd shot Luthor instead of his reflection. All their problems would've been solved... "So even though Luthor didn't get to fuck me, he *still* managed to fuck me over." She swore angrily, kicking the inside of the car door in frustration.

"Lois, it's going to be all right," Maggie said. "You didn't do it, and you don't have the weapon. All you have to do is tell the truth. The evidence is circumstantial. I'm sure you'll be cleared."

"*Now* you're sure," Lois said bitterly. "No wonder you were acting so weird in the room. You thought I'd done it, didn't you? You actually thought I'd kill two unarmed men when they were tied up and helpless."

Maggie glanced at her again. "No, Lois. You know me; you know I wouldn't let our friendship stand in the way of justice. If I believed you shot them, you'd be in the back seat, cuffed." She sighed. "But I have to admit I'm damned glad to *know* you didn't."

The twins hadn't wanted to go home and stay with Ella, so Richard brought them back to the office. A few more staff members had trickled in to work, and Perry was getting everything organized, barking orders and shepherding reporters around. Ella made herself and the twins reasonably comfortable in Lois' office, keeping out from underfoot while Richard swung back into the business of producing a major daily newspaper... with about half the staff and less than half the equipment they normally had available.

Kala and Jason both felt closer to their mother in her office, so they settled down and eventually fell asleep on her couch. Richard finally relaxed when he saw that, but his peace of mind couldn't last. "Thank God," Ron sighed as he walked into the bullpen. "Jason and Kala, they're okay?"

"Pretty much," Richard told him. "Lois, too."

"That's perfect," Ron replied. "I suppose I can tell my wife what's going on now?"

"What do you...?" Richard trailed off, then remembered that they'd kept Lucy in the dark because of her pregnancy. "Huh. That's going to be fun."

"Yeah, you know the Lane women," Ron said with a wry smile. "I think I'm going to see if I can talk Ella into telling her for me - Lucy's been absolutely livid since Ella had to leave the birthday party."

"You do that," Richard said. He watched Ron walk into Lois' office, and saw Ella's sympathetic look as he began explaining his situation. The twins didn't even blink, and that told Richard better than anything else how tired they really were.

Another voice demanded his attention. "Hey, Richard, did you hear the news?" Gil called to him.

"No. Good God, what *now*?" In spite of having caught only a few hours' sleep, Richard roused himself to deal with whatever else was happening.

"I just heard that Lois left S.T.A.R. Labs," Gil told him. "In a police car."

"*What?!*" Richard looked at him blankly for a long moment. "Gil, why...?"

"Something about the police investigation," Gil said.

"*What* police investigation? I've been a little busy the last few days, and city isn't exactly my beat, Gil!"

"Easy, man," the older reporter replied. "The Coast Guard brought in that yacht, the *Gertrude*, yesterday. There were two dead men on board, suspicion of homicide. Police are keeping mum, but rumor says they were shot to death."

Richard swallowed. "Really. I suppose the police want to ask Lois, since she was on board. She might know who killed them."

Gil nodded, seemingly satisfied, and muttered, "Lane gets *all* the damn exclusives," as he walked back to his desk. Richard just leaned back in his chair, his heart beating faster. Lois had a gun, and she'd threatened to kill Luthor more than once. If his thugs had threatened the kids, he didn't know what she was capable of. And the only way Richard could think of for Lois to leave Superman's side would be if she absolutely had to. If she'd been compelled... *You'd think she would call me ... if she can.*

Maggie paced outside the one-way mirror, staring into the interrogation room. Smith had gone about the interview all wrong - alienating Lois from his first words, making her hostile and uncooperative. He made her go over her story again and again, picking at the details, making it very clear not only that he suspected her of cold-blooded murder but also that he would enjoy charging her with the crime.

Fortunately, Lois had kept her cool. Exhausted and furious, she'd snapped at Smith a few times, but she hadn't completely lost her temper. Maggie worried that wouldn't last if he tried leaving Lois alone for an hour one more time, and then asked the exact same questions again. "He's totally screwing this up," she muttered under her breath.

The police commissioner, Bill Henderson, sighed. "You want a try, Sawyer?"

Maggie turned around and looked at him. "Sir?"

"Lieutenant, I know she's your friend," he said. "But I also know you're too good a cop to let her get away with this. If it was a little breaking and entering, or shooting someone in self-defense, you'd go to bat for her. But this is premeditated murder. If she did it, you wouldn't let her walk away from it."

"No, I wouldn't," Maggie replied. "But I also don't believe she did it, Commissioner."

Henderson nodded slightly without replying, looking into the interrogation room where Smith had started over again with his questions. The young officer looked down at his notes and said, "So this Riley brought you down to the gallery. And your hands were tied at that point?"

"Yes," Lois replied. "You can still see the marks on my wrists."

"He pushed you to the floor, and then what happened?"

Lois gritted her teeth, inhaling slowly before she answered. Her voice now had the flat, declamatory tone of someone about to lose patience completely. "I cut my arm on some kind of sheered-off bolt in the floor. Every time he turned his back on me, I started sawing the cable ties around my wrists against that bolt."

"What was he doing when he turned his back on you?" Smith asked.

Lois snorted contemptuously. "Checking on his cameras and laying out the 'tools of his trade', as he called them. He wasn't content to rape me, he wanted to torture me too - and film the whole thing. Sick bastard. Anyway, I finally broke the cable ties as he was checking on the fourth camera, and after that I was just waiting for a chance to get away..."

"What is it, Sawyer?" Henderson said.

Maggie had suddenly gone tense, her eyes widening. She grabbed the copy of the case file sitting on the table and started flipping through it rapidly. "How many cameras did she say there were?" the lieutenant asked urgently.

"Four," came the reply. "Sawyer?"

"There's only three mentioned in the report," Maggie said. "Three *broken* cameras. If Lois is right, if there's a fourth one that crime scene missed..."

"We might have our answer once and for all," the police commissioner said, grinning. He leaned forward and pressed the intercom button for the interrogation room. "Pardon me a moment, Smith. Ms. Lane, do you remember where the four cameras were located?"

For a moment, Lois seemed to draw a blank, looking toward the mirror in surprise. "Umm ... one was on the back of one of the couches. One was on the table with his stuff. He had one on the floor, too. The last one was up in Vanderworth's study..." Lois' brow knitted, frowning as she tried to remember. "It was on one of those shelves, stuck down in some kind of box. It was in view of the other cameras so he had to hide it. Production values." Lois couldn't help shuddering. Smith scowled, waiting for Henderson to say something else.

"Want me to go for it?" Maggie said to the commissioner.

He grinned a little at the eagerness of her tone. "Go, Sawyer. It's not your jurisdiction, but I know why you're on this case. If there's video, I want it yesterday." Pressing the intercom button again, Henderson added, "Smith, come out here for a moment."

The lieutenant had to rein in her delight as she hurried out of the room to call Crime Scene. Nothing felt as good as being able to prove Lois' innocence ... except for the dressing-down Smith would get from Henderson for his sloppy investigative work.

Within the hour, Maggie had tracked down the final camera. The three the crime scene department found earlier had been badly damaged, and it would take time to recover any of the data on their internal disks. But this camera had never been broken like the others, and it was a simple matter to pull the memory card and plug it into one of the precinct's computers.

Commissioner Henderson, Detective Smith, and Lieutenant Sawyer all watched the screen intently. The view was excellent, though the sound was very scratchy, and the scene played out exactly as Lois had said it did. Smith began to frown. Maggie clenched her fists as she saw Riley laying out his tools while Lois lay apparently helpless on the floor. She'd read the inventory of items recovered, but actually seeing this smiling man look at Lois while holding a pair of pruning shears... *It's a good thing the bastard is dead*, Maggie's mind growled, but she choked off the thought before it could cross the line ethically.

A few moments of conversation that they couldn't catch, and then Riley was stalking Lois with a knife. She suddenly leaped to her feet and went running, right toward the camera. He chased her, snarling, "Don't you run from me!" The scuffle happened close enough for them to hear Lois yelp when Riley's fist connected, to see him pause as he drew back for another blow. Lois' arm swung around and met his skull with a dull thud, and Riley dropped to the ground.

Lois' harsh panting was loud enough to be easily heard, but she didn't stop. Holding her side where Riley had hit her, she knelt beside him and reached into his pocket, pulling something out that she used to bind his wrists and ankles. They both were in perfect view of

the camera, and Maggie started to smile at Lois' swearing. *As long as she's cursing, she's okay*, the lieutenant thought.

On the screen, Lois walked over to Riley's duffel bag and came back with a police baton. Smith started rifling through the report, muttering something about contusions. Maggie and Henderson just watched the screen, trying to hear what was being said. The box the camera had been in had muffled all but the loudest sounds, but even without the words it was clear that Lois had threatened Riley while he tried to talk his way out of it. At last he'd said something desperate about a man named Grant, and then he was talking too fast about Luthor and an island. But the camera clearly showed Lois dropping the baton and walking away, leaving Riley tied up but alive.

"Told you she didn't do it," Maggie said triumphantly.

"Bullshit," Smith said, "it doesn't prove anything. She could've doubled back and capped him after she was sure he didn't lie to her."

Henderson ignored them and watched the rest of the video. Riley rolled around on the floor for a while, struggling against his plastic bonds. The police commissioner clicked on the fast-forward button, which made Riley's struggles look even more like a dying snake.

"She stood there cold as ice threatening the man!" Smith snapped.

"He just tried to torture and rape her!" Sawyer shot back. "Plus his boss has her kids! That shows a helluva lot of self-control, not kicking him in the groin a couple times!"

"Shut up," Henderson said, rewinding the film slowly. Detective and Lieutenant turned to look at the screen as a very familiar man entered the picture.

"Lex Luthor," Maggie said softly. She'd know that profile, that gait, anywhere. Although the side of his face was bloody - from fighting with Lois, she knew. That brought a smile to the lieutenant's face, even as she recognized the gun he was carrying. "That's Lois' Ladysmith."

Smith had finally shut up, scowling. Luthor found and destroyed the other three cameras before advancing on his erstwhile employee. Riley said something, Lex replied, and the next thing the police officers heard clearly was Riley crying out in pain as Lex kicked him. They exchanged a few more words before Lex started yelling about following orders and kicked Riley in the stomach. "There's the contusions," Maggie said.

The bound man rolled onto his side, coughing blood, and Lex smiled down at him. Even though they knew how Riley had died, it still shocked all three cops to see Lex aim the gun and fire from less than two feet away. The expression on his face never changed, and he simply turned and walked away while Riley's body spasmed.

After a long silence, Maggie said, "Well, she's cleared."

"Of *one* charge," Smith said bitterly.

Before they could start arguing again, Henderson cut in. "Hush. It's not logical to assume she killed the other guy. Yes, she *might've* shot him after she left this one, but that would mean her whole story's a lie, and Luthor got her gun back from her again. Her version makes sense. Let her go, Sawyer, but tell her to stay in town until forensics wraps up the case. We'll find enough evidence to corroborate her story once all the facts have been analyzed."

"Yes, sir," Maggie said, leaving Smith to brood.

Dr. Donner and Nurse Tage stood at Superman's bedside, looking up at the open skylight. The bright sunlight streaming down forced them to squint. "His pulse is definitely stronger," Tage observed.

"Mm-hmm," Donner replied. "A little faster than I'd like, but it has been ever since Ms.

Lane left. The EEG is showing bursts of increased activity, too. Oxygen levels are still good, though."

Tage considered, and finally said tentatively, "If he was conscious, I'd say he was agitated by her absence."

Donner nodded. "I was thinking the same. I'm actually very glad that she came, good to put a face with the name. I remember when she was covering all the stories on him..." He trailed off, thinking about the past.

After a few minutes, Tage sighed. "Dr. Donner, I don't think his condition will change anytime soon. But we might very well get sunburned if we stand here any longer."

"Right," the doctor said, focusing on the present again. "Let's go. We can monitor his vitals just as easily from the nurses' station." But before he left, he clasped his patient's shoulder kindly and murmured, "C'mon, kid. Wake up. Soon. We're all rooting for you."

Lois had just finished counting acoustical tiles in the ceiling for the twentieth time - and plotting her revenge on this jerk Smith - when Maggie walked in. The reporter glared, muttering, "What is this, good cop/bad cop? Everybody who's seen more than one episode of *N.Y.P.D. Blue* knows that trick."

"No, you're being released," Sawyer said, grinning. "We found that last camera. You're cleared in Riley's death."

"Thank *God*," Lois sighed, getting up. "Now I can get back to the hospital."

"Whoa, Lane," Maggie said sternly. "You're exhausted, you need to go home and get some rest."

"Screw that," Lois spat. "I'm tired of hearing that crap from everybody. I'm a big girl; I know when I need a nap and when I don't."

"Lois, you won't do him any good like this," the lieutenant argued, immediately striking at Lois' weakness: her vanity. "You look like a drowned rat, and you smell like seawater. When *was* the last time you had a shower, anyway? Not to mention the lovely matching Louis Vuitton you've got under each eye..."

"Stuff it, Sawyer," Lois growled. "You think you're the first one to tell me I look like hell? I've told my fiancé, my mother, and a four-star general to piss off for saying it, what makes you think I'll listen to *you*?"

"Because I can *make* you do something about it," Maggie shot back. "You've been cleared of Riley's murder, but not the other guy. Right now, you just have to stay in town while we investigate. Tick me off, and I'll put you under house arrest."

"That is such bullshit!" Lois snarled. "Dammit, Mags..."

"I'm driving you home, and you're going to get a shower, have something to eat, and go to sleep," Maggie said firmly. "Hell, *I'm* going home. I've been awake for two days straight. Quit arguing, you know I'm right."

Under other circumstances, Lois would've kept arguing. But she really was tired, and she realized she'd left her car unlocked at the docks. It had probably been stolen, leaving her with no transportation. Sighing angrily, she said, "*Fine*. I'll do it, but first thing tomorrow morning I'm going back to S.T.A.R. Labs, you hear me? Even if I have to get a cab to take me all the way there from Bakerline."

"Yes, ma'am," Sawyer said, chuckling. "Now be a good girl and come with me."

Lois followed her out of the precinct, glaring at Smith as they passed him. The position of the sun in the sky above her came as shock; the interrogation room had no windows or clocks,

and Lois was even more irritated to learn she'd lost most of the day. In spite of that, she didn't remember a thing after getting into the patrol car until Maggie shook her gently awake. "We're here," she said, parking in front of the house. Another patrol car pulled up behind them to keep watch; Luthor was still out there.

Groaning, Lois lifted her head from where she'd slumped against the window. "Thanks, Maggie. I just..."

"You're just so tired you can barely see straight." Maggie smiled at her and patted her shoulder. "Go on, Lois. I'll see you tomorrow."

"If anything happens with him, you damn well better call me," Lois added.

"Will do. I'll even call your fiancé and tell him where you are. Now scam before you pass out again."

Muttering agreement, Lois got out of the car and made her way slowly into the house, stifling a yawn. She managed to stay awake through a shower before collapsing in bed, and fell instantly into dreamless sleep.

The sunlight tracked across Kal-El's room, and his vital signs remained steady. His electroencephalogram showed periodic episodes of increased brain activity, but that was in line with a dream state, nothing indicating consciousness yet. The doctors and nurses gradually stopped taking notice of each brief spike in his brain waves.

Tage happened to be working a long shift, and she was the one standing at the nurses' station when the first troubling sign came through. The pretty nurse had been just about ready to go home when one of the monitors started beeping.

Superman's oxygen levels were falling. Tage frowned, picking up the phone to page Dr. Donner. But then his oxygen fell to zero, and the heart monitor flatlined. Tage gasped in horror as the EEG also went flat, adding its shrill alarm to the other two. She smacked the intercom button and called, "Dr. Donner, code blue in 501! *Code blue!* Crash cart to 501, code blue!" Then she raced down the hallway, almost knocking over another nurse and saying breathlessly, "501's coding!"

The corridor seemed endless, and Tage felt as if she were running in slow motion. At last she found the door, the two soldiers outside looking nervously at the door. The nurse hit it with her shoulder and barged in, skidding to a halt abruptly. Her gaze went immediately to the bed, and Tage gasped in utter shock.

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 chuckled 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 ruffled 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

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'œuvres. 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 scrabble 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*?"

Upon a Midnight Clear

The *Daily Planet* Christmas party was one of those events, the legend of which both preceded and exceeded it. All throughout the month of December, tales were told of Christmas parties past - Lois and Richard getting engaged, the spiked punch from seven years ago, the two interns who'd gotten into a brawl in the parking garage, Loueen ambushing Perry under the mistletoe, and the time the power had failed and the party was held by the light of thirty laptop computers.

This year was shaping up to be *very* interesting. Lois found Loueen by the punch bowl, looking annoyed. "What's wrong with you, Ms. Former Secretary?" the reporter asked. "Is the old man refusing to take his blood pressure meds?"

"No, I've got some miserably persistent stomach flu," Loueen grouched. "I'm trying to decide if the punch is good enough to drink now, knowing I'm gonna be sick off it later."

"Then why are you here?" Lois asked, pouring herself a glass of punch. One sip told her that it was heavily spiked; thankfully, she had taken a cab to the party, intending to drink if she felt like it and demand a flight home. "And no, it's not worth it."

"Thanks for the warning," Loueen sighed. "As for the virus, I've gotten over the worst symptoms. Now it's just the nausea. I'm living on water and club crackers."

"Great. The diet of fashion models. Beautiful. Thanks for sharing your germs."

"Seriously, though, the rest of the symptoms all went away about a week ago. Just the damn stomach, now." Loueen shook her head, eyeing the punch ruefully.

"Your immune system must be shot," Lois told her. "Get some vitamin C."

"From what, orange juice?" Loueen snarked.

"Pills, you twit," Lois growled. "Either that, or stay away from Perry. God knows the two of you are enough to make everyone *else* nauseous."

"Shut up, Lois," Loueen sighed. Then she smirked; just because she wasn't in the office as often since she'd married the boss didn't mean she had to give up harassing her rival for the Official Office Hot Chick title. "You're just jealous. I keep telling you, age means experience."

"No, trust me, I'm not." Lois smirked, remembering that week in Kal-El's apartment. *Anything that ends with having to replace a ripped mattress has got to be good.*

"Speaking of that, you can tell me the truth." Loueen crossed her arms and stared at Lois intently. "What's up with you and Kent? All I've heard for years is how he's your best friend, big teddy bear, no possible spark of romance. And now all of a sudden, you're smooching him in the office and telling everyone the kids are his. And my *nephew* believes this bull, too. What the hell, Lois?"

The raven-haired reporter rolled her eyes and heaved a sigh. "So I finally admitted I like the good guys. How come everyone acts like this is breaking some cardinal rule?"

Her friend gave her an incredulous look and dropped her voice. "Hello? There's only one good guy I've ever seen you go for, and he wears a cape. To be honest, a lot of people thought *he* was the twins' father, me and Perry included. And not that long ago, you were fishing his spandex-clad behind out of the ocean. So what gives?"

Lois blinked in shock. She'd never realized that *Perry* suspected the twins were Kal-El's. He had seemed to accept the story she'd spun... How many others had nodded politely and let her believe she'd convinced them? She stammered a bit as she replied, "Jeez, Loueen, I know you can both *count!* On top of that, he's not from this planet - what would make you think that'd be possible? And trust me, I know *exactly* who their father is. I just didn't want anyone to know... I mean, *Clark?* Who would've believed me? Even though they *both* look like him."

"Yeah, well, we both believe you now," Loueen said. "The whole one-weekend-stand story was way out of character for you. Not that you wouldn't give some randomly-chosen stranger the night of his life in revenge for the guy who screwed you over - I can *definitely* see you doing that - but that you'd let yourself get pregnant and then keep the kids."

"That's kinda harsh," Lois told her, crossing her arms. Thankfully no one else was in earshot.

"You can be pretty damn harsh when you want to," Loueen pointed out. "Nah, the old goat and I always knew the kids' father had to be someone you cared about. And there's no one on this planet you love more than Clark. Sure, you were obsessed with Superman, but Kent's your best pal, and as much as you've picked on him, you never let anyone *else* say one wrong word to him. It makes perfect sense to me."

Lois just shook her head slightly. "Yes, well..." Before she could finish her sentence, she caught sight of a very familiar blonde head moving through the crowd. "Dear God, I thought my sister would stay home. We'll be lucky if she doesn't drop this kid right here."

"If she *does* go into labor, she's just buying in to the family tradition of office drama," Loueen taunted.

"False labor," Lois corrected. She decided to make that her parting shot before moving off to intercept Lucy.

Her sister greeted her with the usual hug and dazzling smile. "Don't squeeze too hard, I'll pop like a tick," she said cheerfully.

"I believe it," Lois replied, stepping back to look at her. "What've you got in there, quadruplets? Or is it one kid and all the toys she'll need for the first year?"

"You're never gonna forgive me for that 'twins and a swingset' remark, are you?" Lucy asked genially. "No, this is one little girl - and probably a typewriter. None of the other three are showing any kind of journalistic bent, so Ron's been whispering to her that she wants to grow up to be a reporter like Daddy. He wants at least one to follow in his footsteps."

"Is that why you had a fourth? I thought you were going to stop at three." Lois flinched a little, wondering if the question was a little too abrupt - she'd been making snappy comebacks with Loueen, and she'd spoken as the words had occurred to her without thinking of how Lucy would take the comment.

Luckily, Lucy laughed. "No, she was a surprise. I'm thinking of taking a page out of my big sister's book and having a tubal ligation afterward, though. Ron and I are entirely too fertile."

"Yeah, well, you two are doing your part to make the next generation gorgeous," Lois replied with a grin. "I thought I had the monopoly on pretty kids, but yours are lovely, too. Must be a Lane thing."

"Well, you were always the stunning one when we were kids, so it's only fair that my children are striking. Not that the twins aren't totally adorable - that's one title I'll share with you." Lucy was sipping nonalcoholic punch, and she glanced at Lois' glass knowingly. "Drinking the high octane stuff, I see? Is Clark driving you home?"

"If he's lucky," Lois replied archly.

A familiar voice spoke at her elbow just then. "All three of us wore black? That's it, we have to start planning these things." The Lane girls turned to see Lana looking at them in amusement.

"First official meeting of the Matching Monograms Club is in session," Lucy said. "And I want it noted that of all of us, I have the best reason for wearing black. It's slimming, and my

dear sister keeps telling me I look like the broad side of a barn."

"Yes, well, black always looks good on a redhead," Lana told her with a small grin. "Lois, what's your excuse?"

"I'm in mourning for my sanity," the reporter deadpanned, making the other two chuckle.

"You're late," Lucy said. "You've been crazy as long as I've known you."

"Yeah, but getting roped into hosting the Lane Family Christmas is a special kind of madness," Lois retorted. "I can't believe you and Mom shanghaied me into it. Speaking of which, did you find those videos?"

"I dropped them off with Mom," Lucy replied. "Besides, if I had a house the size of yours, I wouldn't mind hosting every family gathering." She shrugged and added for Lana's benefit, "We're working on it."

"And if you had a kitchen like mine, you'd probably open a catering business from home," Lois said quickly, leading her sister off that topic slightly. "You know, Lana, if you can talk Richard into it, the two of you would be more than welcome to help me deal with my mad family. Plus Ben, Martha, and that godforsaken beagle."

"You know I would, but he promised his father." Lana shrugged, and then Lois saw her gaze track sideways, eyebrows going up. "Hmm. Well, I must say getting involved with you has been very good for Clark's wardrobe."

Lucy and Lois turned to see Clark walking in the door in a new charcoal-gray suit. For once in his life, the cut was flattering, and the Matching Monograms Club grinned in unison as he greeted Ron and Richard. "You know, we have some seriously good taste in men," Lucy opined.

"Amen to that," Lana replied, winking at Lois.

Lois smirked at both of them, whispering, "Just remember he's *mine*, cheerleader," as she headed over to Clark. Greeting both Ron and Richard, she stood on tiptoe to kiss Clark's cheek. "Hello, handsome. Fancy meeting you here."

Richard rolled his eyes. "Good Lord. C'mon, Ron, let's go find our girls before these two give us sugar-shock. Clark, I don't know what you drugged her with, but Lois has been positively *cute* ever since she got back with you."

"Yeah, I'd like to see you call me cute when I scoop your stories," Lois snapped affectionately. "Remember I can still out-drink and out-cuss you, Richard White."

"Oh, I've been cussed out by you," Richard replied, elbowing her shoulder lightly. "Not an experience anyone would forget. I'll grant you that, Lois. Clark, have fun." With that he and Ron left them, and Clark eased Lois away from the crowd to talk to her.

"You're late," she said, and added in a whisper, "Trouble?"

"Nothing major," he replied in the same low tone. A little louder, Clark said, "I got tied up in traffic. Did I miss anything?"

"Nope. Don't drink the punch, it's lethal." Lois linked her arm through his, aware of all the eyes in the crowd on them. She'd thought it would be a bit strange to be affectionate with Clark in public, but it actually felt oddly normal.

They circulated around the party, letting everyone see them together as yet more proof that the unthinkable had happened - Kent really *had* gotten the girl. Lois finally talked him into dancing with her when a slow song was playing, and though Clark had to step on her toes once to stay in character, this was the improved version of their waltz at the Pulitzers. "Maybe I ought to go request *Heart and Soul*," Lois teased him gently.

Clark smiled down at her, and then his expression became suddenly distant and

distracted. "Lois ... I've got to go," he whispered.

She groaned, dropping her head onto his chest. Even disappointed, her mind was racing, and she murmured very softly, "Take your cell phone out and look at it so people think you got called. I'll cover for you."

"Lois," he sighed, kissing her forehead as he obediently took the phone and glanced at its screen. Louder, he added, "Ma says the kids are refusing to go to bed - want me to handle it?"

"Please," she replied, proud of him for improvising on short notice, and then amused at herself. He *ought* to be good at inventing abrupt exits by now... "Hurry back, though?"

"Soon as I can," Clark promised, kissing her, and then he was gone.

Lois heaved a sigh, trying very hard not to be angry. She'd known things like this would happen, and she'd also known she would find it very upsetting. *This is what you get for falling in love with Superman*, she told herself sternly. The memory of his arms around her, that amazing smile, the warm look in those sapphire eyes, all of those things were worth inconveniences like this, however. Lois left the space cleared for a dance floor and readied herself for the first round of making excuses and waiting for news.

The first, but not the last.

Goodbyes were never easy, but Jason and Kala were relatively comfortable with letting Richard go to Florida for Christmas. He'd already left once and come back as promised, much sooner than expected, so though they were sad to see him leave they were also confident in his return. That confidence didn't make the parting any happier, however.

The morning they left, Richard and Lana went by the Riverside house for one last visit - and because the seaplane was docked there.

Lana dropped to one knee and hugged both twins tight. "You two be good while we're gone, all right? Listen to your mom."

"Yes, ma'am," they chorused, Kala adding, "Are you gonna bring us back presents from Florida?"

The redhead crossed her arms and gave Kala a serious look. "Is that why you're always so happy to see me, hmm? I buy you things?"

"Nuh-uh!" Kala said, looking hurt. "I *like* you!"

"Me too!" Jason added.

"Good," Lana said. "Just so you remember that presents are a *gift*, and it's not fair to expect people to get you something every time they go away. You two are *not* spoiled little brats, and I refuse to start spoiling you now." Both children nodded, and she relented a little. "Besides, I bought your Christmas presents in Milan. That's cooler than Florida because it's in a whole other country."

Identical beaming grins met her remark, and Jason and Kala both hugged her again. "Thank you, Miss Lana," Kala said.

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Lana told her, rumpling her raven curls. "I love you both, you know that?"

"Love you, too," Jason replied, and his sister echoed him.

Richard had been saying his own goodbyes: a firm handshake for Clark and a brief hug for Lois, smiling when she whispered that she *would* miss him. It wasn't until he pulled back to see her face that he saw a tell-tale glisten in her eyes that confirmed that that was the honest truth. Hugging him tight once more, Lois saved face by dashing the tears that lurked before they pulled away to share a grin. Another secret safe.

He turned to Jason and Kala, dropping to his knees so they could both hug him, while Lana got up and gave Clark a hug. Neither Richard nor the twins were eager to let go, holding each other close while their wordless murmurs of affection were all that the others could hear. It was the first time in three years that they would be apart on Christmas, and if it was hard for Lois to be without him, it was worse on the twins.

That somehow left Lois and Lana facing each other. After a moment, the redhead simply hugged Lois, saying warmly, "Take care of yourself, all right? Try not to get into any trouble while I'm gone."

Lois just chuckled, returning the hug easily. When they stepped back, she pointed at Clark with a grin. "Don't worry, if I *do* get in trouble, I have him."

Lana's eyebrows rose, and she smiled mischievously. "Really? Lois, sometimes *you* have to rescue *him*. And once in a great while, you need someone ordinary and practical like me to help the *both* of you."

"Yes, I remember who fished us out of the ocean and made sure I didn't die of hypothermia," Lois replied, but it was with honest gratitude, not the swift sarcasm Lana had expected. "And I wouldn't call you ordinary, either. Tell you what - I'll make you a deal, cheerleader. *I'll* promise to be sane and cautious and reasonable while you're in Florida, if *you* promise to go out and kick up your heels a little bit, okay? You can't be rational and responsible and level-headed *all* the time."

"I think I can manage that," Lana replied with a grin. The laughter in her eyes faded, replaced by something serious and a trifle surprising. "Because I've just realized I'm going to miss you this Christmas. *And* Clark and the twins." She paused while both women adjusted to that; neither of them tended to make friends this quickly. Lana had a great many friendly acquaintances, but few who were close to her heart, and most of Lois' relationships with other women were adversarial, at least in the beginning.

"We'll miss you, too," Lois said. She jerked her head in Richard's direction with a smirk. "And that son-of-a-gun over there who's too cute for his own good and *knows* it, the pest. Bring him back in one piece, if you can. Death by nagging mom and yapping dogs isn't the kind of obit he wants."

"I will," Lana said. Richard was still snuggling the twins, for once not reacting to Lois' teasing as he kissed Jason on the forehead and whispered something that made the boy smile. Lana glanced at Clark speculatively, and asked Lois, "Christmas in Smallville next year?"

"Sure," the reporter replied. "We'll paint the town red."

"Got to give the gossips something new every now and then," Lana said, and then Richard let go of the kids reluctantly. She smiled affectionately at them and added, "Don't let us rush you, darling. It's not as if we have to check our bags."

"Yeah, like I really want you and Lois trading quips all morning," Richard said. "Sooner or later you'll talk about *me*, and if you're gonna do that I'd like it to at least be far enough away that I don't have to hear you laughing."

"Then don't be such a joke," Lois retorted instantly, and all of them laughed as they made their way out to the lawn and the dock beyond.

Lois had been insanely busy ever since the Christmas party, her schedule twice as hectic with the usual glut of holiday news and Perry's continued demands of two editorials a week, especially now that she had garnered major attention not just with the Superman article, but when news broke of the return of her Pulitzer. Clark used that fact to his advantage, sneaking

a few extra gifts for the twins into the house and getting some last-minute shopping done for Lois herself. There had to be gift boxes she could *see* to take her mind off the main present, which had never left his pocket since he purchased it. *I'm basically terrified to let it out of my sight. It almost seems like it's not real. I mean, Clark Kent proposing to Lois Lane? No one at the office would believe I have the guts. Although I'm sure one or two of them would believe that even Superman is nervous about asking Lois to marry him...*

Thank God, with Lois, she's getting the whole package and she knows it. It's not just the dashing hero she loves, and I feel like a fool for never realizing how much she cared about Clark. He tucked the last of the twins' gifts into the back of the highest shelf of the linen closet, and grinned to himself. *That should just about do it. Now all I have to do is make it through this evening without letting her know what I plan to do ahead of time. This will not be easy.*

Sighing, he paused to listen to Lois' heartbeat; she was close to the house and her heart rate was picking up, which probably meant she was trying to slip in a last-minute gift of her own. Clark smirked in amusement, certain that nothing she had planned could top *his* little surprise, and trotted into the kitchen.

Kala and Jason were both standing atop chairs, 'helping' Ben mix cookie dough. Busying them with that task kept them from eyeing the other cookies cooling on racks atop the dining room table and from trying to snag a slice of the pumpkin bread or banana nut bread loaves currently occupying the counter. Martha watched them in amusement, stirring the large pot of beef bourguignon she had been slowly simmering for the past several hours.

"Ma, that smells incredible," Clark said, coming up behind her to enjoy the aroma.

"I'm still not letting you taste it," Martha teased gently, smiling up at him. She touched the tip of the wooden spoon she'd been stirring with and licked the drop of sauce off her fingertip, scowling. "Ben, honey, would you get me some of that black pepper? And Clark, if Lois has any, a splash of sherry would bring out the flavor."

"I don't know about sherry, but she might have something else," Clark offered, moving toward the liquor cabinet.

Ben patted Jason's shoulder and said, "Get down the baking powder and put this much in, all right, son? I'll be right back." He turned his back on the twins for only a moment while he took the black pepper to Martha. Jason reached into the cabinet in front of him and took down the box that said 'Baking' on the side, measuring out the proper amount and pouring it into the bowl proudly. Kala stuck her tongue out at him as he put the baking soda back. She wouldn't let him see her making faces, not after having gotten flour all over her dress earlier when her brother shoved her shoulder.

Clark offered Martha the choice of eighteen-year-old single-malt scotch or twenty-year-old cognac. She sniffed both liquors before pronouncing the cognac the better match, and poured a small amount into the beef bourguignon. With a little black pepper stirred in, she tasted it again and pronounced it perfect.

"We did it," Jason told Ben with a huge grin. "What's next?"

"Let me see," he said, reading the recipe. "Kala, sweetheart, take that flour sifter there - the thing with the screen on the bottom and the handle on the side - and hold it over the bowl.."

Clark's cell phone rang, distracting him from his pleasant contemplation of his children's culinary education. "Hello, Lois," he said into the receiver.

"I'm just now about to turn into the driveway, thanks to the snow bank out on Holden

Drive that no one seems to be too worried about. That idiot mayor of ours..." she said with a sigh. "And you'd think that people in Metropolis would know how to drive in this weather. It took me twice as long as usual to get through mid-town. And don't peek in any packages I bring in, all right? None of it's for *you*. I got started on your present a month ago and it's safely packed away in a lead-lined box, Mr. X-Ray Eyes." The smile in her voice was clear, that little hint of a juicy secret that was hers alone. Seemed he wasn't the only one taking pains to hide a 'perfect gift'. "I just had to find something for Ben and your mom. *Anyway*, come open the door for me, please? I've got to park in the freakin' driveway until we get the garage door fixed and I'll be a snow figure before I get in the door if I don't get some help."

"Gladly, love," Clark said, aware that he was smiling at the sound of her voice in spite of her crabby tone. "Dinner's almost ready. I'm getting the door now." He hung up the phone and opened the front door just as Lois parked the Audi. The falling snow was already whitening her trench coat's shoulder and her hat as she quickly popped the trunk to gather her purchases.

The reporter hurried to the door, cursing under her breath at the weather, the traffic, and the large packages she was carrying. Seeing how much she had, Clark was tempted to help her, but knew it would just irritate her at this point. It was easy to see from her expression that it had been a long day, as Thursdays usually were. As she would be out through Monday, she had been driving herself mad making sure that every article was prepared to go to press the next morning, as well as clearing her work schedule for the rest of the week. And knowing Lois, since Perry was still on his enforced five o'clock leave-time, she was the last one out of the building. He, with the rest of his department, had been gone by five; he had finally left after the third time she had told him to go home.

The moment she stepped inside, however, Lois froze, her eyes going wide.

First of all, it was *warm*, almost balmy compared to the frigid wind outside. Secondly, the entire house was permeated with good smells, and her mouth started to water with anticipation. "Wow," Lois said softly, letting loose a long and exhausted sigh. "My God, I'm hungry! I mean, I'm two hours late getting home and all, but..."

Clark chuckled, taking the packages from her and setting them on the table, and then started helping her out of her coat. "It's the cold," he said absently. "Dinner will warm you up. Not as well as I could, but..."

Lois gave him a tired smile as she tossed her hat onto the coat rack. "Hugging me would help," she said, giving her head a brisk shake to dislodge the snow caught in the ends of her raven curls before holding her arms out. He laughed softly, pulling her into his embrace and letting his warmth soak into her. With another sigh, this one of contentment, Lois rested her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes, making herself forget about everything except this, the holiday, and the absolutely luscious smell coming from the vicinity of her usually-empty kitchen.

"Mommy's home!" Kala called, sounding a little affronted. She'd been told not to eavesdrop while Ben was around, and she had been so preoccupied with cookies that she'd just then heard Lois.

The next thing Lois heard was the thumping of little feet - whoever thought children pitter-pattered had never heard *her* twins on a wood floor. The reporter had no time to pull back from Clark, so Kala and Jason just hugged them both. "No peeking in the bags," Lois said quickly, raising the bags above their heads.

"Mommy, is Santa really comin' tonight?" Jason asked, clinging to her knee.

"Yes, sweetie," she replied, hearing Clark chuckle and wondering how many times *he'd*

been asked that. "So you two have to be on your very best behavior. Not only is it Christmas Eve, but we have company."

"They have been very good," Clark reported. "They've even been helping Ben and Ma bake."

"Huh. Maybe they inherited my only culinary skill," she quipped. "Hey, darlings, let Mommy put the shopping down, okay? Then I'll have hugs for both of you."

They finally did, and she managed to escape to the master bedroom while Martha enlisted the twins to set the table. Lois reached into the smallest bag with a fond smile and drew out Clark's main gift. She'd mostly gone shopping for Ben and Martha today, but this present was finally ready just in time and she'd had to pick it up. Looking down at the professionally-mastered DVD in her hands, Lois sighed and thought, *God, I hope he likes this. I hope it means as much to him as I think it will...*

Downstairs, Kala looked up at her father and whispered, "Didja ask her yet?"

"Not yet," Clark murmured in reply. "Later tonight. *Don't* give her any hints, okay?"

"We won't," Jason whispered, giggling. "I just wanna see Mommy's face when she sees her present."

Dinner that evening was a success, right up until dessert. Nothing would satisfy the twins except that Daddy should try the cookies they baked, and Clark bit into one expecting his mother's delicious chocolate-chip recipe. He paused, a faraway look on his face, and then quickly ate the rest of that first cookie as Kala and Jason stared up at him. "Wow, you guys," he said. "Those are so good, we're gonna save the whole batch for Santa."

The twins were ecstatic, and only Lois saw the look on Clark's face the moment they were distracted. She couldn't help chuckling, but none of the adults could even begin to discuss what had gone wrong in the baking. Not with Kala's hearing, and not considering that this was the first batch of cookies the twins had made all by themselves. "I'm sorry," Ben managed to whisper to Clark.

"It's all right," he replied, rubbing his belly with a wince. *Thankfully I have a stomach of steel, too, or I'd probably be sick right now. Tastes like baking soda.*

Several hours later, the twins were in bed (having asked their father *again* when he planned to propose), and their presents were set up in the living room after a last-minute rush to put their bicycles together. Now Kal-El's heart was racing. He'd lured Lois outside with a spurious story about some gift he'd forgotten; it hadn't been easy to keep up the ruse in the face of her clear reluctance and even clearer annoyance with him. Now she was going to the car, and he stopped her by calling her name.

But not in the nervous voice she associated with Clark; not even in the mellow tone he used when it was just them. Now he called her in that deeper, richer timbre, the one he only used when he wore *this* suit, and Kal-El was gratified by the startled look on her face when she whirled around. "As fast as you drive, I can fly faster. Come here, love."

Her expression flowed from surprise to sardonic amusement, one fine dark brow rising as she came toward him. "And you're going to go shopping in the uniform?" Lois asked lightly.

Kal-El smiled at her; he could hear the quickening of her heart when she'd seen him, and he knew how much the sight of him in uniform still affected her. *It's one thing to know the man you love is a superhero, and another to be reminded of it. I guess even the imperturbable Lois Lane can be impressed.* Wrapping his cape around her, he replied teasingly, "Who said we were going shopping?"

"But you said..." Her outraged expression was adorable, and he couldn't help chuckling fondly at her. Lois just glared at him even as she cuddled closer to his warm body. "Fine. Where are we going to pick up this present you forgot, wise guy?"

Snow was drifting down onto her hair; she'd forgotten a hat. Kal-El kissed her forehead and murmured, "You'll see." He was holding her so close that Lois seemed not to notice the fact that they were already rising, and he kept their ascent gentle so she wouldn't feel it.

"Okay, be cute, keep secrets..." Lois said, trying to sound annoyed and failing while she was in his arms. She moved as if to step away, and realized for the first time that her feet were no longer touching the ground. Kal-El chuckled again as she gasped and clung to him, her lovely hazel eyes going wide as she stared down at the house below them. "Very funny," Lois muttered, and he felt her forcing herself to relax. "What next, you pretend to drop me as an excuse to hold me tighter?"

Now he spun them in a gentle spiral, smirking. This familiar banter was easing the knot of tension in his belly, and he actually managed to stop thinking about what he planned to ask her. "Do I *need* an excuse?" Kal-El whispered, giving her a knowing, wicked smile.

Lois' eyes widened; she always got flustered when he flirted while in uniform, and it always amused him. But she could no more admit to that wide-eyed romantic silliness than she could miss a deadline, so Lois swatted his shoulder and growled, "You're just determined to be a wiseacre tonight, aren't you?"

He could hear the hint of strain in her voice as she tried to sound irritable, and Kal-El relented, kissing her forehead. "Love you, too, honey."

She huffed at the nickname, but rested her head against his chest, and Kal-El sighed in pure contentment. They rose into colder, purer air that offered an astounding view. Beneath their feet were the snow-laden clouds, smoothed into fantastic shapes by the wind. Above them, seemingly just out of reach, was the inky night sky, spangled with a million stars. Everything else had vanished, seeming to leave the two of them alone with each other at last. Lois looked at the secluded beauty around her and gasped in amazement, her breath frosting.

Kal-El had spent the last week worrying and planning and fretting over how to propose. It had to be romantic, but not so much that Lois started to feel as if she was being patronized. The proposal had to be unique, had to refer to the history between them, and had to encompass all of who he was. At last, he'd decided to bring her up here. No other man on earth could carry her in his arms to these heights. No one else could look into those beautiful hazel eyes and see only starlight reflected in them.

Starlight, and a sense of awe that few would believe of the cynical reporter. "My God," Lois whispered, still peering around her. It was very cold, though, and she tucked her forehead under his chin, huddling close to his warmth. "It's so beautiful."

"This is my gift to you," Kal-El told her, and he spoke in the smooth, slightly formal cadences she had once heard him use in the Fortress, speaking to his father. "The custom of this planet is for a man to give diamonds to a woman he loves. But you, my love, have never liked those stones. I give you the stars instead, whose fire burns like your spirit, shining across miles and years, and whose beauty comes close to your own."

He smiled as she looked up at him, her expression softening as she returned the smile. "Since when are you poetic, hmm?" Lois asked mischievously.

"Since you inspired me to be," Kal-El replied, perfectly honest.

That made Lois smile even more. "I love you," she murmured, hugging him tightly and leaning her head against his chest again.

"I love you, too," he replied, and for a long moment they hung there in silence, sharing warmth and beauty and an embrace that seemed meant to be. Kal-El wondered what Lois was thinking. Did she know he'd brought her up here for something more than stargazing? Or was she so caught up in the moment that her keen journalistic mind had finally stopped racing, letting her simply enjoy the company and the wondrous sight?

"We can't stay up here forever, looking at the stars together," he murmured, kissing her hair again. "I want you to have something to remind you of my love when we come back down to earth. Because I always love you, no matter where we are or what I'm doing or *who* I have to be at the moment."

Lois' eyebrow rose, and he felt the warmth of her cheek even through his uniform - was she *blushing*? "What is *with* you tonight?" she asked with a breathless chuckle. "Not that you aren't usually romantic. But tonight..."

She trailed off, and Kal-El took a deep breath. He hadn't wanted her to guess what he had planned, but he hadn't expected her to be quite so in the dark. Lois had no idea what he was about to ask, and there was no more time to plan and hope. This was the perfect moment, now or never, the most frightening thing he'd ever done in his life... "Lois Lane, will you marry me?"

That dark hair flew as she whipped her head up, staring at him wide-eyed. Lois, who made her living with words, was shocked speechless by that softly-spoken question.

Kala breathed shallowly, her eyes squeezed shut, and all of her mind and will focused above her. *Far* above her, further away than she'd ever tried to hear before, but she could stick pick out her parents' familiar voices from all of the other sounds around her.

The most distracting sound was Jason's quick heartbeat and noisy breath. At least he'd stopped fidgeting - the soft thumps from his heels against the side of the bed sounded like a giant's footfalls to her when she was straining her hearing this much.

The wait was suddenly too much to Jason. "What're they sayin'?" he whispered urgently.

"Shut up! I can't hear 'em!" Kala hissed angrily. Boys were so *stupid*... She redoubled her concentration on her parents. Distantly, she hoped that after this she'd be able to tune out everything she was hearing. And then she heard her father's voice, rich and clear. "He just asked her!" she whispered excitedly, holding her breath as she listened for her mother's answer.

Lois stared at him for so long that Kal-El began to worry again. He *knew* how she felt about marriage; it was foolish to even ask. Now he'd put her in the position of having to say yes and hope to prolong the engagement indefinitely, or having to refuse him...

She started to tremble, and when she spoke her voice was shaky. "Kal-El, if ... if this is about the twins... I... You don't..."

He blinked, seeing the panicked look in her eyes. That wasn't 'no'; it sounded more like 'please tell me this is real'. Or even 'please tell me you're not just trying to make an honest woman of me'. Before she could stammer out anything else, Kal-El said, "Lois. This is not about the twins. This is about you and me. I've always loved you, and I meant to ask you this a long time ago. That night in the Fortress, as a matter of fact."

Lois actually blushed slightly. "Kal-El..."

Silencing her with a gentle kiss, he continued, "I'm not asking because of our children, or to make our mothers happy, or anything like that. I'm asking you to marry me because I love

you, I want to be with you forever, and I want everyone else to know it, too."

Her eyes had gone so wide with shock and wonder that she looked almost frightened, peering up at him. But Lois still didn't answer, just bit her lip as she looked searchingly into his face. "Lois?" he asked, hoping for an answer to the proposal.

"Tell me we're awake?" she whispered. Starlight glittered on the tears swimming in her eyes. But not tears of sorrow.

Kal-El chuckled and kissed her again. This was the side of his beloved that almost no one ever saw - Lois unsure of herself, afraid to trust in what appeared to be a dream come true. All too often, her dreams had turned into nightmares. "Lois... Yes, you're awake. This is real. I want you to marry me - I've wanted that for years. Will you?"

With that, he brought out the ring, deftly opening the little black velvet box. That seemed to be enough to convince her of the reality of what was happening. Lois' hand flew to her mouth, stifling a gasp as the large emerald reflected the starry sky above them. The two diamonds on each side, and the diamond chips surrounding the main stones, sparkled even in the faint light, all of it supported by the elegant Victorian scrollwork setting.

Lois' hazel eyes flicked back and forth between the emerald and his face, her expression still overwhelmed. She looked as if she was fighting her emotions, trying not to burst into beleaguered tears. Finally she closed her eyes, taking a deep breath to compose herself, and gave a small nod of her head.

"Is that a yes?" Kal-El asked gently. He'd never seen Lois this uncertain of anything; she was clearly torn between wanting to say yes and the fear that fate would never let her have this.

She blinked up at him, biting her lip, and then broke into a smile. Lois chuckled, some of her usual certainty coming back into her expression even as a tear ran down her cheek. "Yes," she whispered, and sniffled as she flung her arms around his neck. "Yes, I'll marry you. Yes. Oh my God..."

He kissed her hair, hugging her tightly with one arm around her waist. The other hand was still holding the ring. For several long moments they simply hovered there in each other's arms. Every time Lois tried to pull back and look at him, she would start laughing, and Kal-El couldn't stop chuckling at the way Lois blushed when she looked at him. Finally, still avoiding his eyes, she took the ring gently out of the box and met his gaze at last despite her uncertainty. Slowly, she slipped the emerald ring on her finger even as her cheeks blazed.

"I love you," he murmured, and his warm smile made her blush even more. "And you said yes. I hope you realize you won't be able to get out of this now. We *will* get married."

"Unless you decide to leave the planet," Lois muttered, hiding her face. "You made your point - no more terminal engagements."

"I have no reason to leave again," Kal-El told her. "Everything I ever wanted, everything I need, is here."

"Hopeless romantic," Lois teased, smirking up at him.

"It takes one to know one," he replied, and kissed her again.

Lois sighed in contentment. "Besides, this was the right way to ask me. You gave me time to answer - no pressure, no guilt, no cheering witnesses. This was just between you and me, as it should be."

"No witnesses?" Kal-El chuckled. "Lois, we're directly over the house. And the kids are still awake - although if they're still awake when Santa comes by, he won't leave them any presents." He smiled slightly, and whispered to Lois, "They're scrambling into bed now."

Lois was still staring in shock. "The twins know?"

He grinned mischievously. "They helped me pick the ring. Over a week ago, as a matter of fact."

"I'd accuse you of making my kids devious, but they kept both of us from finding out for a month that they knew you were their father *and* knew you were Superman." Lois tried to look cross, but she was far too delighted, the corners of her mouth curving up.

"They must get that from both of us," Kal-El replied. As he spoke, he began flying again, leveling them both out as they moved through the cold air.

"And where exactly are you taking me in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve?" Lois asked archly, cuddling close to his warm side.

"I have one more present for you." He smiled again, his sapphire eyes twinkling.

"Do I get a hint?"

His expression was positively wicked now. "This gift is one you have to unwrap ... well out of Kala's hearing."

Lois gasped when she caught his meaning. "I thought we were going to behave..."

Kal-El turned to look at her, his grin broadening. "This engagement calls for a celebration, don't you think? Besides, I have something planned."

"Good thing we got all the gifts wrapped, huh?" Lois replied, a fey gleam in her eyes.

"She said yes," Kala told her brother. "*Finally*. First she had to say a lot of stuff about how she didn't want him marryin' her for us."

"What does that mean?" Jason asked, his brow furrowed.

"I dunno," Kala replied. "Grownups are weird."

The twins thought about it in silence for a while, growing more and more sleepy. The excitement of Mommy and Daddy getting engaged was over for now, and the long, busy day was beginning to get the better of them.

"Where d'ya think Mommy and Daddy are going?" Kala finally asked, yawning.

"Gonna help Santa deliver presents," Jason replied. "Duh. How could Santa get to *every* house in one night without Daddy?"

"Oh," Kala said. "Guess that's why they wanted us in bed."

"Uh-huh." Having expressed the utter surety of his belief, Jason rolled over and buried his head under his pillow. His voice was muffled as he said, "Night, Kala."

His sister was already mostly asleep, but she managed to murmur, "Night, Jason."

Tidings of Great Joy

A strange, low grunt woke Kala from her sleep. She bolted upright, her heart racing, and listened as hard as she could. Her keen ears catalogued everything in the house. In this room, four sets of breath and heartbeat: her own, Jason's just a few feet away, Gazeera's slower heart where the lizard drowsed in his cage, and Captain Jack's quicker pulse in his cage by her bed. Just up the hall, Grandma slept soundly, her heart beating slow and steady. In the next room were Mister Ben and a quicker, slightly unsteady beat that took Kala a moment to identify: Barkley.

She listened to the entire house and heard no other living thing, then cautiously extended her reach. No reindeer prancing on the roof, no quick, merry beat of Santa's heart as he touched down. No Mommy or Daddy either, but she'd heard them going away somewhere. Daddy must have taken Mommy with him to help Santa - it seemed as though Jason was right for once. "Mommy must be really excited," Kala sighed into the quiet of the room, using her own voice to try to scare away the boojums. "She's gonna get married, *and* she gets to see Santa Claus."

The weird noise didn't repeat itself, and Kala couldn't identify it. She was fairly sure it had come from inside the house, though. Sometimes Daddy Richard had told her that noises in the night were just the house itself settling, and that seemed as likely an explanation as anything else. Sighing in contentment, Kala burrowed back down under her covers and let her amazing hearing fade...

...only to be disturbed by the same low grunting sound, repeated twice and getting louder. It sounded like it was coming from the hallway, but as Kala trained her hearing in that direction, she caught only a loud thump that silenced the creepy grunting and made her sit bolt upright in bed with terrified eyes. And just to make it worse, there was nothing else after that - no new heartbeats or breathing sounds in the house.

Completely spooked now, Kala scrambled out of bed to make a beeline for the one next to her. Glancing at the door to their room worriedly over her shoulder, she attempted to wake her brother. "Jason!" she hissed softly, leaning into his face. "Get up! Somethin' made a noise!"

Jason, however, had no interest in her worries. "You're dreamin'," he managed sleepily, swatting at her. "Go back t' sleep, big baby."

She shook his shoulder roughly, then pulled on his pillow when he ignored her. "No I'm not! I'm awake, Jason, and there's somethin' in here making noises! I heard it! You gotta wake up!"

Jason's blue eyes opened slightly, to glare at her in disgust before looking out into their bedroom. That petulant look didn't change as he listened. Usually either Gazeera or Captain Jack moved around in the night, but not even that caught his attention as he stared into the dimly-lit darkness. "I didn't hear anythin'," he growled, going to close his eyes again.

"*I did!*" Kala whispered urgently, shaking him again. "I mean it! An' I can hear better than anybody 'cept Daddy!" After a moment, Jason's blue eyes opened again and Kala tugged his arm. "Jason, *come on!*"

"All right," Jason groaned, flinging back his covers and sliding out of bed. His hair was sticking up everywhere, and he rubbed at his eyes, his mouth set in a sleepy pout. "Better really be somethin'. If we miss out on presents 'cause you made us both get up..."

Both twins froze, and Jason came awake all at once. They'd seen a lot of holiday movies recently, but there was only one with a child waking up to strange noises in the house on Christmas Eve. "The Grinch," both twins breathed, eyes going wide. "But he only comes *after*

Santa," Kala added. Then the implication struck her, and her mouth dropped open in dawning horror.

"If it's th' Grinch, we better have a way t' stop him," Jason whispered back. "Or he'll take them! We gotta save the presents, Kala." His sister looked at him worriedly, then nodded.

As they rushed downstairs to form a plan to protect their presents from the thieving Grinch, trying to keep quiet, neither of them considered for a moment that the sounds might have a perfectly explainable origin. Say, an elderly beagle starting to bark in his dreams, and his owner throwing a shoe against the wall to silence him before he could start howling and wake Martha.

Kal-El woke slowly, curled around Lois in the circular bed at the Fortress. The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was Lois' hand resting on his chest and the emerald ring sparkling on her finger in the dim light - the only thing she was wearing at the moment. Smiling, he kissed her forehead and chuckled as she grumbled at him sleepily before nuzzling her face into his shoulder again.

But the ring reminded him of the other reason he had brought her here tonight. So far, Kal-El had not told his father exactly what had happened almost seven years ago, when the Fortress had been first been discovered by Luthor and then destroyed by Kal-El himself. The last time they'd talked, Jor-El had been intent on finding out where his relationship with his son stood, trying to relive more than a decade's worth of conversations between them. They simply hadn't gotten around to Lois, the loss of Kal-El's powers, and the arrival of the three Kryptonian criminals.

Now Kal-El got out of bed, gently disentangling himself from her arms, and dressed himself in the spare clothes he'd always kept there. Just as he turned to go, Lois rolled over into the warm hollow where he'd lain, cracking one eyelid open to stare at him. Just barely awake, she murmured fuzzily, "Where're you going?"

"Hush, love," he replied. "I'll be back soon. Sleep."

Blinking, the reporter seemed to consider his answer before she lifted her head and asked, "Kiss?" Once he obliged her, gladly, she curled back under the covers with a happy sound and promptly resumed her sleep.

That left him to go into the main room and face Jor-El. Taking a deep breath, Kal-El placed the father crystal into the central slot of the console, and watched Jor-El's face appear in midair. "My son," Jor-El said, and pride warmed his voice.

"Father," Kal-El replied. "I have come to tell you more about the past."

Jor-El nodded. "Please continue, Kal-El."

"It is a tale with much darkness, Father," Kal-El cautioned. "Folly, treachery, deceit, and danger." He had already decided not to accuse Jor-El of lying about the supposedly permanent loss of his powers; he would simply tell the story, and let his father come to his own conclusions.

Kal-El's voice never rose or wavered as he reported the plain facts of what had happened back then, concluding with General Zod, Non, and Ursa in maximum-security prison facilities and himself returning to his usual duties as Superman. "I believed that I must give up the woman I loved to protect the world I also loved," he said. "And I did so. I erased her memories of our time together, in an effort to spare her grief, and not longer after, I left the planet. Scientists had discovered what appeared to be Krypton itself, whole and undamaged."

"Krypton was destroyed," Jor-El said softly. "The earthquakes had begun even as I laid

the last crystals into your ship. My son, if there was any chance of our planet surviving, of being able to raise you on your homeworld..."

"The planet had cracked in half, Father," Kal-El informed him. "The scientists had seen the side that *looked* undamaged, but the other side was a jagged ruin. And all of the crystal had become radioactive with the death of the red sun Rao. Those crystals were green instead of clear, and the radiation from them nearly killed me. Kryptonite - for that is what the deadly substance is called now - is fortunately very rare on earth. After years of exposure to a yellow sun, it is the only substance that can harm me. But the planet that I might have once called home had become one gigantic mass of this radioactive crystal. I was fortunate to escape with my life."

Jor-El was driven speechless by that, unable to respond. That the world he loved and had tried to save had nearly been the death of his own son...

"I was able to make my way back to Earth and safety," Kal-El continued. "But on returning, I found that much had changed in my absence. All things changed but one - my love for Lois Lane."

"My son, this attachment you feel for the human..."

For the first time in his life, Kal-El cut his father off mid-sentence. "It is an emotion more powerful than any other I have felt, Father. And when I faced my old enemy Lex Luthor again, this time on an *island* made entirely of kryptonite - made with *Kryptonian* technology, stolen from this very Fortress - it was my love for Lois that aided me. Duty gave me courage to face Luthor, but love gave me strength to survive the encounter. And then Lois herself literally saved my life, rescuing me from death in the ocean at the risk of her own life. Father, I cannot and will not turn away from her."

"Again you would defy me? Did you learn nothing from your prior mistake, my son?" Jor-El spoke with an edge of worry in his voice.

"Father, I love her," and the warning was clear in Kal-El's tone. "And I will *not* be denied again."

"Kal-El, when you once before spurned your duty for her ..."

Once again, he didn't get to finish the sentence. "Why can I not have both?" Kal-El interrupted him. "The woman I love and the mission I am sworn to fulfill?"

"The world needs you," Jor-El's disembodied head scolded. "Will you turn your back on them yet again?"

"They need me, but I need *her*," Kal-El argued. "How can you deny me this, Father, when even you were married? Your marriage didn't interfere with your calling, and neither should mine. It is through loving her that I come to love all of humanity even more."

"You are not one of them," Jor-El replied. "Loving a mortal will not make you mortal, either. Even if you sacrifice your powers, you can never truly be one of them. Your Kryptonian heritage will always set you apart."

"You are wrong," Kal-El retorted, the first time he had ever spoken those words to Jor-El. And he spoke with conviction, unaware that Lois had woken up and was watching the confrontation. "I can never forget where I have come from or the legacy you bequeathed to me, but this is my world, Father. *This* is my home, and *these* are my people."

He sighed heavily, looking down, then turned resolute eyes to his father's visage. "I am not asking your permission, Father. I am telling you, as one grown man to another. Lois is the woman I love..." He took a deep breath, and added, "She is also the mother of my children. When I left the planet in search of Krypton, Lois was already with child. Because of my great

folly in leaving her, I missed the first six years of my children's lives. But now the legacy of Krypton lives on in my son and daughter, and I as their father must guide them. I will make Lois my wife and raise our twins, who will carry Krypton's heritage after I am gone. This is my will."

Jor-El's expression seemed caught between surprise, distaste, and anger. "You cannot..." he began, and then the hologram flickered. "Not one of them ... not..."

Kal-El winced as his father's image vanished. Apparently he had just exceeded the limits of the artificial intelligence programmed into the crystals. Sadly, he started to turn away, his heart aching for some kind of resolution. Could his father not accept that, being raised as a human, he would want the same things humans wanted: a wife, a family, people who loved him for himself and not for his wondrous powers?

"My son."

He whirled around to see the hologram of Lara in place of Jor-El. "Mother," he whispered, shocked. He had seen her image in the teaching crystals, but never programmed into the artificial intelligence.

"Your father does not know I am recording this," she said, and her voice was slightly rushed. "He has great plans for you, but he is a man of logic and science. Perhaps he has not thought enough about the state of your heart." She paused, and glanced away, then back. "Very well. He has considered that you may think yourself in love with one of these humans, and he has devised a plan to discourage you. But I am your mother, and I think this idea will fail. If you are seeing this recording ... it has already failed. You have lost your powers once, and regained them. Perhaps you have learned that the effects of our sun are not permanent, and can be reversed by high-intensity exposure to a power source derived from the rays of a yellow sun. Most importantly, you have come here again to question your father about this woman you love. All of those conditions had to be met for this recording to be accessed."

"If the human you love has been with you through these trials and remains at your side, then your relationship can stand the many tests you will face together. It will not be easy to balance the needs of the world against the demands of your heart, but your love is strong enough to defy your father's will. It shall be strong enough to endure all else. And there is one more thing..."

The image flickered. "So you have spoken of children. My grandchildren, whose dear faces I will never see, whose voices I will never hear. Know that they may inherit your great powers, my son, and see to it that they also inherit your mission, your responsibilities." She sighed, and the smile she gave her son was heartbreakingly beautiful. "Through you, Kal-El, our glory lives on in your new home. Upon you and your family, I bestow a mother's blessing of love. Love is the key that unlocks so many doors, my son. Cherish it..."

Lara faded, but just before her holographic projection disappeared, she turned her head to glance up and to her left. Kal-El followed her gaze, and saw Lois standing there above them, one hand pressed to her lips as she watched. In the last instant before her image disappeared, his mother's blue eyes seemed to be locked on the hazel pair he adored. And it was clear that Lois was just as effected as he was.

For a moment, neither could speak; this was so far from anything they ever expected to hear. Kal-El was struck speechless by the sight of her there, her ruffled hair, wearing only his uniform shirt, most especially when she smiled at him and shrugged a little guiltily. All he wanted was to take her in his arms and tell her he loved her, forever and ever...

But despite the solemnity of the moment, he heard someone stirring back at the Riverside

house. The twins were drifting toward wakefulness; they had been up during the night, Kal-El knew, and from the sounds they'd made, they had gone down to peer at their presents. That he could live with, as long as they didn't *open* anything, and he had fallen asleep listening for the sound of crinkling wrapping paper.

While he was listening to the twins, Lois said in a soft yet matter-of-fact tone, "So you went ahead and told him."

"Yes," Kal-El replied, floating up to the ledge on which she stood. "He has to know. And I hope he'll get used to the idea, although I'm glad my mother approves." Lois smiled, and he kissed her before she could ask anything else. For a long moment, neither spoke, only held on to each other tightly. As he reluctantly pulled back to look down at her, he added, "We can talk on the way home - the twins are going to wake up soon."

"You can hear ..." she started to say, then rolled her eyes without finishing her sentence. "Well, duh, Lane. Of course he can. Damn! What time is it? They usually sleep in until seven!" Lois turned away to start back toward the other room, already muttering, "Where are my clothes?"

Kal-El chuckled softly at her. "We have a little time," he said, following her. "Their heartbeats are just a little faster, not all the way up to fully conscious speed." He caught the sleeve of his own uniform before she had gone more than two steps and pulled Lois into his arms, kissing her quickly. "I love you, beauty."

"And I love you," she replied with a soft smile, clinging to him for a long, breathless moment. "So what are we waiting for?"

"Lois, I need my shirt." He glanced meaningfully down at the blue uniform emblazoned with the s-shield.

She arched an eyebrow, looked down, then looked up again with a smug smile. "Sounds like a personal problem."

Ben had slept soundly, waking only slightly to shush Barkley some time in the wee hours. So when the full-throated baying of the old hound shattered the predawn silence, Ben nearly fell out of bed, his heart thumping crazily.

Barkley howled at the bedroom door, all his fur standing on end, his neck stretched out stiffly as the power of his voice shook his elderly frame. "Barkley! Hush!" Ben called, hurriedly getting out of bed and rushing over to his dog. Faintly from next door, he heard Martha exclaim something in mingled surprise and disgust. He picked up Barkley and shushed him roughly.

Some kind of commotion was going on downstairs, and that seemed to be what had woken Barkley. Leaving the beagle in his room, Ben pulled a robe over his pajamas and headed out to see what the matter was. He met Martha in the hallway and both of them came downstairs to see Clark carrying a sleepy but protesting Kala. "But, Daddy, we're awake now!" the little girl pleaded.

"No presents before dawn," her father responded, trying to keep his tone stern.

How familiar that sounded. Martha couldn't resist shooting him a fond grin. "She gets that from you, you know. I remember you once set all the clocks ahead and tried to convince us the *sun* was late."

Looking abashed, Clark's face showed it when he replied, "Well, I was really hoping for a pony that year."

Lois followed him, carrying a rather snuggly Jason. He didn't even bother to hide his

yawn. "Don't blame my daughter. I've seen this sort of thing far too many times not to suspect who was the ringleader. *Your son* put her up to this, I'll bet." Lois glanced down at her armful of sleepy little boy. Jason looked properly woebegone under the indirect chastisement, ducking his little face under her chin to avoid further persecution.

"But what happened?" Martha asked, reaching out to smooth Kala's dark hair. "I was asleep until that idiotic mongrel started yowling."

Clark looked down at both children. "Someone apparently thought the Grinch had come to steal their presents. We went outside for a bit and walked back into a trap. They'd hung their jingle-bell wreath on a piece of string across the doorway, and when I set it off they jumped for me. *Someone* had the idea that they had to protect their gifts. Now these two are going back to bed until it's time to open presents."

"I heard a *noise*," Kala complained, already starting to pout. "It wasn't you an' it wasn't reindeers so it had t' be the Grinch. He prolly knew you an' Mommy were off ... weren't here, so we had t' protect everybody's presents."

"With a frying pan," Lois sighed. "You could've hurt someone, Kala. You're lucky your father's not all banged up."

"She didn't hit me that hard," Clark added, squeezing Kala's hand to keep her from saying anything in front of Ben.

Kala, however, was more preoccupied with the fact that she had just attacked her father with a frying pan. "I didn't mean t' hit Daddy!" she wailed, sniffing. "Jason said if th' Grinch came in we hadta get 'im! An' ... an' I heard the bells ring so I went t' hit the Grinch an' it ... it was *Daddy!*"

"It's all right," Clark soothed, hugging her as he kissed her temple. "Munchkin, I know you didn't mean to hit me. It's okay."

"Come on, sweethearts," Martha said softly, stroking both of their backs in calming circles. "Your father's right. You should go back to bed for a while and let us all wake up. I'm sure your parents are fully awake in spite of the hour," she added with a shrewd glance at Lois' still-rumpled hair. "But Ben and I still need to wake up a bit more."

With that, Lois and Clark took the twins upstairs, while Martha and Ben headed down to get coffee and breakfast started. Kala and Jason were still sleepy enough that they got back into their beds with only token protests - until Lois stroked her son's unruly hair, and he glimpsed the ring out of the corner of his eye. "Kala!" he said excitedly. "Kala! She's wearin' the ring! She said yes!"

"Told you," came the grumpy mutter from Kala's bed, snuggling her cheek into her pillow. She had to fight a yawn before she could add, "Mommy's *smart*."

That made Clark laugh softly. "See, honey? Agreeing to marry me just proves your brilliance."

"And last night proves why I agreed to marry you," Lois said with an arched eyebrow as she watched her daughter stretch out and drift off. Jason finally settled, falling back asleep with a wide grin on his face, and his mother headed out with a last fond glance at her babies before closing the door.

"That's not the only reason," Clark whispered, kissing the top of Lois' head as she passed him.

"No, it isn't," Lois said seriously, pausing to lean against him and let him hug her tightly. "You're also a pretty good cook. And I would never have gotten those freakin' bikes put together without you."

"I see," Clark replied against her hair. "So you keep me around as a lover and a domestic servant?"

"Pretty much," Lois teased, tilting her head back to smile at him. "Makes you wonder why *you* keep *me* around, doesn't it?"

She had expected some sweetly romantic answer, or some teasing about Clark's fondness for surly caffeine addicts. Instead he grinned and replied, "Broodmare, mostly. The House of El must go on..."

Lois yelped and swatted him. "Oh, really? Just for that, you big jerk, I'm going to go get a shower. *You* can make my breakfast. See if you get another night like the last one anytime soon..."

"Not until we're married, I won't," Clark replied softly. At Lois' startled look, he only smiled and kissed her forehead. "We were trying to behave anyway..."

"You were the one who started that last night, not me," Lois said a tad defensively, pulling away slightly to look up at him.

Clark only smiled at her. "Yes, well, last night was a special occasion. Lois, if we're going to do this, let's do it right. No more indefinite engagements - let's set a date and go through with this. And until we're married... Well, we survived being apart for six years; we should be all right for a few months of me not sleeping over. Right?"

Lois looked up at him dubiously, but she knew that his scrupulously moral heart was still bothered by the fact that the twins had been born out of wedlock. She finally gave a dramatic sigh and muttered, "Sometimes I hate you, Boy Scout."

"I love you, too," he replied, kissing her forehead.

After the twins came down four times in two hours, each time insisting that they were wide awake (even while they yawned) and they'd been waiting for *hours* to open their gifts, the adults finally relented. Kala and Jason, whooping with delight, dived on the presents - a larger pile of loot than ever before, thanks to the newly-extended family. Ben and Martha were there to witness it, but it was clear to Lois at least that Ben had not quite recovered from being prematurely wakened by Barkley.

The matching bicycles were a huge favorite and the first gifts to be examined, but the lure of unopened boxes soon drew Kala and Jason away from the biggest gifts. The next presents unwrapped were from Martha, and the twins squealed in delighted surprise at the tiny matching sweaters for Gazeera and Captain Jack.

"No, don't bring the animals down here to try them on," Lois cautioned. The mere thought was enough to break her out in a cold sweat. "Save the sweaters until after you're done."

Sighing, Jason picked up the next box, a very small one. "Mommy, for you," he said, crossing the floor on his knees to hand it over. Lois blinked; someone had done something very elegant with silver paper and pricey ribbon. While she contemplated the small box and the unfamiliar script on the tag, Jason tore open the bigger box it had been sitting on. "Yay! A puzzle!" he cried, tearing off the rest of the paper to expose the front of the box and the picture.

"All right!" Clark quickly said, the very instant the paper fell away. "Daddy Richard got you a Superman puzzle. Awesome, Jason."

The little boy's blue eyes met his father's, brightened by the shared secret. Lois, however, caught Martha's glance and rolled her eyes with a sigh. "Richard is such a fanboy," she sighed, opening her own present.

A pair of earrings and a matching pendant lay nestled in white velvet, made from silver so delicately worked that it looked less like jewelry than like the *gleam* of jewelry, made briefly solid. "Wow," Clark said, impressed.

Thinking quickly, Lois turned the box over and grinned. Exactly as she had thought... "My investigative reporting skills strike again," she said. "Made in Milan. Remind me to actually write Lana a thank-you note."

Everyone wanted to see the jewelry, except Kala. She had wormed her way under the tree itself, her eyes fixed on a large box in the back. It looked almost big enough to be the karaoke machine she wanted so badly... To her disappointment, the card read *Jason*. Pushing that box out to her brother, she picked up the next one, rather smaller. That was hers, and she didn't bother coming out from under the tree to open it. She did, however, notice that the tag showed it was from Mommy.

Kala actually shrieked when she saw the iPod. Only a few other girls at school had one and they were all older. "Oh, thank you, Mommy!" she yelled, scrambling out from under the tree and jumping into Lois' lap. Amidst the shower of kisses and hugs, Lois could hear her exclaiming, "Thank you, thank you, thankyouthankyouthankyou!"

Martha and Ben couldn't help laughing as Kala covered her mother in enthusiastic gratitude, Lois managing somewhere in between to reply, "You're welcome, baby." In the meantime, Clark opened one of his gifts, chuckling at the cologne Lois had bought him. "CK One," he said, shaking his head. "Lois, you're something else."

Shortly after, Kala dived back onto the floor, and she and Jason were tearing open gifts in a frenzy of glee. While the kids exclaimed over each present, Clark quietly handed Martha and Ben several of their gifts to open, and got a couple more of the ones for himself and Lois. The adults were mostly quiet in their appreciation and gratitude, watching the kids with smiles of delight.

It took almost an hour to open all the gifts. Everyone came away with new clothes as well as more frivolous gifts; Clark couldn't help laughing at the *four* new suits Lois had gotten him, and Lois rolled her eyes when she saw the L. Lang label on the red blouse - but that didn't stop her from running upstairs to try it on. Kala had found her big gift, the iPod, early, but Jason waited until the end to open the big box from Daddy Richard. When it revealed a remote-controlled Godzilla almost Jason's own height, his excited yell was nearly as high-pitched as Kala's.

At last, it seemed the gifting was over, and both twins lay blissfully passed out on the carpet amid their spoils. Only then did Lois touch Clark's arm with a fond smile and say, "I have one more gift for you."

"Oh?" Clark asked curiously, looking even more bewildered when Lois handed him an unmarked black DVD case. "What's this?"

"You'll see," she said gently, a warm light in her eyes. "Go on up to my office and play it there."

Clark gave her a dubious look, which made her smile all the more, but did as she asked. Was this something he couldn't watch in front of his mother? What on earth could it be?

Sitting down at Lois' desk upstairs, he booted up her laptop and logged in with her password, which was still A-R-T-I-C. He slipped the plain DVD into the computer's drive, and sat back to wait.

The first image on the screen froze him in his seat, eyes wide, his breath caught somewhere in his chest. Two infants lay in the same crib, one with a few wisps of blond hair,

the other with a surprising thatch of black curls. *The twins*, Clark thought, his heart aching for what he'd missed.

Kala was obviously asleep, but Jason was awake and cooing at the camera, waving his tiny hands and kicking his feet. Lucy cooed right back at him; from the sound, she was the one holding the camera. "Who's a big boy, then?" she asked, and Jason gabbled. "Who loves his Aunt Lucy?"

From just offscreen, he heard what could only be Ella comment, "Lucy, he loves everyone. He loved the nurse who gave him that shot yesterday. That is the *happiest* baby on the face of the earth."

"Yeah, makes me wonder if he's mine," Lucy teased, reaching in the crib to tickle him. Jason had only laughed, smiling hugely as he grabbed Lucy's finger.

Clark gasped. He had known they were little by the easy way they shared a crib, but seeing Lucy's hand in the shot gave him a better idea of the scale. Jason and Kala had been born *tiny*, so small it seemed a miracle that they even existed. He didn't have much time to wonder at that, though, because his son got excited enough to wave his free hand around wildly, and bopped his sister on the head.

Before Kala even opened her eyes, she opened her tiny rosebud mouth and mewled. Her face screwed up, and she let loose with a high wail that seemed impossible from something so minute. "Oh, crap," Lucy hissed. "Kala, Kala, little Kala, hush, baby, it's okay. See, it's all right, he didn't hurt you..."

Kala's face was starting to turn red, and her crying got louder by the second. Jason was trying to look at her, but he hadn't mastered the art of turning over, and could only squirm.

Offscreen, Clark heard a haggard but well-loved voice call out from just beyond the camera's view. "Oh dear God, give her to me before she wakes the whole building," a voice that could only be Lois sighed grumpily.

"You need your rest," Ella began. She had already picked up Kala and was rocking her, but the little girl was still crying, and still getting louder.

"And I won't get it with my very own fire siren going off," he could hear Lois retort before her mother could go any further. "Give her here, Momma. Since you two woke her up with that damn camera, at least let me get her back to sleep so *I* can sleep."

Clark felt a moment's pain, wishing he had been there to help Lois - his absence was one of the reasons for her surliness. As Ella moved offscreen carrying Kala, Lucy kept the camera on Jason, tickling his toes to distract him. "Hush there, little boy," she whispered. "Your sister's doing all the yelling for both of you."

In the background, Kala's fretful wails slowed and suddenly got quieter, and Clark heard Lois speaking to her. "Oh, I know, *I know*. It's just awful, isn't it? But it's okay now, little one. It's okay, my Kala. My Kala Josephine." She almost sang the names, and the crying stopped, peace descending on the little family.

For a moment. Lucy had taken the camera and come up behind Lois; all Clark could see of her was the back of her head and her shoulder. She'd let her hair grow out, and the raven waves tumbled partway down her back. As Lucy carefully eased around the side of the chair, Lois kept crooning to her daughter.

The camera showed Lois in profile first, that face he loved so well drawn by fatigue and seclusion. Clark felt his heart seize again, the agony of knowing this had happened while he floated through space toward the remains of a planet that could never again be home. He had never seen Lois look that weary and heartsore, and he loathed himself for having abandoned

her.

But in the next moment, Lucy took another step, and Clark saw Lois' face more from the front. She was smiling down at the baby in her arms, a tired smile to be sure, but one full of tender adoration. Clark felt tears well up in his eyes to see that wondrous expression on Lois' face as she whispered to their daughter, and he silently thanked her for letting him see this alone. He didn't have to worry about what anyone thought of his reactions, he could just try to weather the storm of emotions.

Lois had opened her blouse and tucked Kala mostly inside it, and the little girl was now busily nursing. Her suckling was audible on the tape, and Lucy couldn't help chuckling. That made Lois look up and yelp with surprise at the nearness of the recorder, the protective look in her eyes clear. "Lucy! *Knock it off!* What the hell are you trying to film here? Move that damn thing!" The reporter twisted to the side, trying to hide from the camera.

Lucy laughed out loud. "Chill out, Lois! Nursing is perfectly natural. Besides, I thought you were the woman with no modesty whatsoever?"

"About as natural as me cramming that camera somewhere that'll make it difficult for you and Ron to have any more kids," Lois snapped, eyes blazing now. "The kids are barely two weeks old and they're already dodging paparazzi? Get lost, Lucinda! My daughter is trying to eat!"

"Mom!"

"Lucy, leave her be," Ella said firmly. "If she doesn't want to be filmed nursing, then quit bothering her. Come over here and film Jason, he loves the attention."

Lucy sighed dramatically, but the camera swung away from Lois as Lucy headed back over to the crib, which Ella was leaning over as she played with Jason's toes. He watched her tickle him with an air of utter absorption, just discovering his own feet. The little boy kicked and reached, but he was still too uncoordinated to grab hold of his foot to look at it. "This one's going to wind up chewing his own toes like you did, Lucy," Ella proclaimed, smiling down at her grandson.

"I never chewed my toes!" Lucy exclaimed from beyond view, while Lois laughed nastily in the background.

"Yes, you did," Ella informed her. "Once you could get your foot in your mouth, you'd rather suck your toes than your thumb. We had to keep socks on you for about a month to break you of it."

Lois was actually wheezing laughter by then. "Oh man, Lucy, and you've never *stopped* sticking your foot in your mouth since! Priceless!"

"Bite me, big sis," he heard Lucy retort, trying to sound regal and aloof.

Unfortunately, Lois' laughter had jostled little Kala, and the baby started to whimper. She was quickly winding up to her siren impression, and Clark heard Lois muttering, "Oh, no, you don't, baby girl. Here, you can't eat and scream. Go on, I know you're hungry..."

Jason, however, had heard his sister wail, and seemed to realize she wasn't beside him anymore. His face took on an expression of horrified shock, and he opened his mouth to cry out once.

"She's okay, my big boy," Ella hastened to murmur, rubbing his belly. "Oh, Jason, *Jason*. You don't have to cry, your sister's fine, she's just trying to get attention..."

Jason howled. He was louder than Kala had been, and Clark heard Lois saying, "For the love of God, you got him wound up too! Bring him over here and quit harassing my child! I swear, you two were supposed to be *helping* me, not wrecking the only decent rest I've gotten

in the last month by making the kids fussy. Bring him here, *now*."

Ella did the honors, Lucy filming over her shoulder as she carried the little boy to his mother. "It's okay, sweet boy. Mommy's here. Yes, Mommy's here and they'll leave you alone. Hush, Jason," Clark heard Lois coo to him. She quickly got him settled under her shirt as well, and once he had his sister beside him and dinner in front of him, he quieted down to nurse. Lucy had wisely chosen a camera angle that was a little less revealing this time, but Lois still glared up at her warningly.

After several moments, the reporter sighed heavily. "Dammit. Look at me," Lois' voice was tired again, almost resigned. "Ever since I was sixteen years old, I wanted to win a Pulitzer Prize. And now look - my greatest life achievement so far is nursing both twins simultaneously. I'm just a damn vending machine."

General Lane's widow was not interested in putting up with such fatalistic self-deprecation. "Well, would you rather give them up for adoption?" she asked, crossing her arms and staring at Lois.

Lois looked absolutely taken aback, her eyes suddenly wide. She seemed just as shocked as he himself was by Ella's words. But Clark could see the stubborn way her jaw tightened, her chin went up. "*Mother!* Don't you *ever* say such a thing again! I swear, if I hadn't just gotten them both quiet, I'd get up from this chair and..."

"Well, you keep going on about how much trouble they are," Ella replied in an almost offhanded way.

"And they *are* trouble," Lois growled, the look on her face positively irate. Clark knew her well enough to know that tone meant she was readying herself for a battle royale. "I never wanted kids, I was never particularly *good* with kids, and now I have two. One's fussy, they're both delicate, and I have no goddamned idea what I'm doing half the time! Not to mention my career's been derailed. But these are *my babies*, and I don't care whether they understand what you're saying or not, don't you *dare* ever even *mention* giving them up again. Don't even hint at it. I won't have them thinking they're not wanted, because they *are*. I wouldn't trade either of them for the world."

Lucy had kept the camera still and her mouth shut during the tirade, and she had both Ella and Lois in the frame. She captured Ella's slow smile. "That's my girl," she said quietly. "Lois, I know you're worried, but everything's going to work out. You're going to be a wonderful mother."

"And a wonderful vending machine," Lucy added with a chuckle.

"Shut up, you toe-sucking broodmare," Lois growled at her, and the image started to fade along with Lucy's indignant yelp.

Clark clicked on the pause button, rubbing his eyes. Wonder, delight, sympathy, guilt, longing, and laughter warred within him. *I should've been here*, he thought to himself fiercely. *She should never have had to face that alone...*

But the gift wasn't intended to make him feel guilty on Christmas Day, and Clark forced himself to get past that to the wonder of seeing the twins as babies. So young, and their personalities were already evident: Jason the cheerful and inquisitive one, Kala the cranky drama queen. And Lois - he had only ever seen the one photograph of Lois while she was pregnant. Seeing her like this, even as careworn as she had appeared, was a revelation. A certain radiance clung to Lois, the beauty of a new mother bonding with her children, and the sight made him want to go downstairs and hug her. The twins, too - he wanted to snuggle them and hold them and never let them go again. He could go downstairs now...

Taking a deep breath, Clark decided to watch the rest of the DVD first. When he pressed play, the next scene came up, and the twins were older. Now Ella held the camera, calling to Jason as he crawled across the carpet toward her. Right behind him was Kala, occasionally grabbing his feet as she crawled. Clark just watched through a haze of wistfulness; most of the clips were only a few minutes long, but his avid gaze captured every nuance as the twins got older. All the milestones were on film: first steps, first haircut, first tooth, and first words.

Clark had to laugh when Kala looked up and clearly said, "Mama!" for the first time. Not just because of the dazzling smile on her face when she said it, but also because of the way Jason turned to look at her wide-eyed. A moment later, he looked up at Lois and repeated it; both children speaking that all-important first word on the same day had brought tears to Lois' eyes. Ella, who had been filming the twins in the bath when Kala unexpectedly decided to say the first word, set the camera down abruptly to go shower her daughter and grandchildren with hugs and kisses.

He got to see their birthdays, several outings, all of the clips arranged chronologically. The videos stopped with the twins' arrival in Metropolis, meeting their cousins for the first time, and when Clark turned the computer off he was momentarily overwhelmed by a wave of longing. *Why stop there?* he wondered. There had to be videos of the twins past their third birthday... And then the answer came to him. *Richard*.

Instead of being upset, Clark found himself touched by the gesture. Of course, at some point he would want to see whatever videos existed; he and Richard were coworkers already and were becoming friends, after all. Sighing, he composed himself after the emotional roller coaster of the DVD, and headed downstairs.

Lois was in the kitchen, brewing another pot of coffee, and Clark simply hugged her without a word. Nothing needed to be said - she turned in his arms, kissed him, and let him hold her as long as he liked.

"I love you," he murmured. "Thank you so much, Lois."

Nuzzling his cheek, she whispered back, "I love you, too." The somber tone wasn't one she could stand for long, so Lois drew back slightly with a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "So, did you get a kick out of that first clip? At the extra special bonus of nursing twins? I damn near killed Lucy."

Clark laughed, hugging her tightly. "Lois, I was watching the love of my life and my infant children, not ogling your chest."

"That's why I love you," she sighed, cuddling into his embrace.

"I ogled your chest enough last night ... and did a lot more than look..."

Lois pulled back to frown up at him, swatting his shoulder. "Clark! Don't make me tell your mother."

That night, when Lois *should* have been sneaking downstairs to eat up the last of the pumpkin pie, she found herself munching on donuts from a vending machine instead. "What a day," she sighed to herself, leaning back in the waiting room chair.

Lucy, Ron, and their three kids had come over with Ella, which woke the twins and incited a huge romp in the snow outside. Clark and Lois had played just like kids themselves, making snow angels and helping the five children build snowmen while Ella, Martha, and Lucy cooked. Ron and Ben, it turned out, were both baseball fans, and spent most of the afternoon companionably arguing the merits of each major league team.

There were more presents to open as well, gifts from and for the Troupes and Ella. And a

surprise as well; Lois had sensibly worn gloves outside, and only when she took them off to open packages did Lucy notice her ring. The reporter had seen Clark wince as everyone crowded around her with congratulations; last night, before falling asleep, she had told him she wanted to take a little time in letting their mothers know they were engaged.

So much for that brilliant plan, Lois thought, sipping Mountain Dew to wash down the donuts. Martha, Ella, and Lucy had all grabbed her hand, talking excitedly. She'd seen, out of the corner of her eye, Ron hug Clark and slap him on the back. Probably welcoming him into the family.

They had also heard from Richard just before dinner; he had sounded tired but happy, and after hearing about the twins' Christmas, had rather vaguely promised that he was bringing them back an extra-special present. Lois kept the conversations short, partly because of the hint of exhaustion in Richard's voice, and partly so as not to strain the twins' hastily-given promise not to tell Daddy Richard about Daddy Clark and Mommy getting engaged. Lois wanted to break the news to him herself, gently.

The chattering about the wedding continued through dinner, the two mothers already discussing gowns and cakes and party favors. But when Lois bemoaned her fate one time too many, Martha and Ben had tried to take some of the spotlight off of her - by announcing *their* intention to get married. On Valentine's Day, which made it one less date to remember.

Lois chuckled softly at the memory of Clark's expression. 'Horrified shock' described it, or perhaps simply 'dumbfounded'. She had grabbed his hand under the table and squeezed, forcing him to remember that he *liked* Ben, and that he and the older man had come to something of a truce while she and the twins were in Smallville.

He still looked startled, but he managed to congratulate his mother and her boyfriend in an almost natural tone. The rest of dinner had gone very well, a hint of the future; the Lanes, Kents, and Troupes all at one table, enjoying each other's company and some truly splendid food.

Afterward, when Lois and Clark were trying to steal a moment to cuddle in the kitchen while everyone else had dessert, Lucy had chosen to display her impeccable Lane timing by going into labor. That was how Lois had wound up here at the hospital with her sister, her mother, her brother-in-law, and her newborn niece, Michelle. Clark, Martha, and Ben were taking care of the five kids back at the Riverside house, and Lois had stepped out of the maternity room to grab something to eat. Driving here over icy roads and then holding her sister's hand through the labor had left her feeling drained and in need of sugar and caffeine, which had led her to the tiny break room and limited assortment of vending machine food.

She made her way back to the room only to find Lucy and Michelle asleep, and Ron nodding off in a chair by the bed. Only Ella was awake, and she smiled warmly at her oldest. "I think you and I ought to head out, sweetheart," she whispered.

"Yeah," Lois yawned. "I hope Clark and Ben and Martha got everyone to sleep."

"I'm sure they did," Ella replied. "Come on, baby girl. I'll drive you home and take Lucy's van back to my house."

"Momma, I don't like you driving that late," Lois protested as Ella slid an arm around her waist and guided her out the door. "You can stay over with me. We'll find room."

"That's probably a better idea," Ella admitted as they walked down the hallway. She turned to her daughter with a smile and said, "Well, this has certainly been a Christmas to remember..."

"It's been one helluva year," Lois replied, thinking back to this time last year. She had

been newly engaged to Richard and still occasionally staring at the sky, though she would never have admitted it. Now, she and Clark were engaged, Richard was in Florida trying to woo Lana and appease his mother, and the group of people the twins called family had expanded significantly. Looking back on everything, Lois added decisively, "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"That's my girl," Ella told her.

Auld Lang Syne

Lois chuckled softly to herself as Perry ranted. Not even on the Monday after Christmas would he let up on the Monday Morning Massacres. Several junior reporters were wide-eyed, and one intern was literally shaking. *They'll get over it*, Lois thought disdainfully. *We all did. If you can't handle a little pressure, journalism is not the career for you, my friend. And your editor yelling in your face is nothing compared to, oh, interviewing convicted serial killers. Toughen up, kids.*

She caught Clark's eye and smiled. As usual, he was standing, while she had quickly nabbed one of the seats around the conference table. Only the most senior reporters dared to take a seat during the Massacres; they were closer to Perry and thus more likely to get singled out. Lois, of course, had figured out ten years ago that Perry was actually quite fond of her, and his bellowing wasn't a real threat. Also, no sane reporter ever tried to *answer* him.

"Freizon, why didn't the twenty-car pileup on the Douglas Interchange get covered for more than ten lines?" Perry barked at Bill, who merely shrugged. "Troupe, I realize your wife was in labor, but *how* could you let the Christmas Day bombing in Iraq pass you by?" Perry had snarled that at his usual tone and volume, then softened his voice just a trifle to add, "Congratulations, by the way." Ron just nodded, trying not smile, as Perry turned around and snapped, "Lane, why the hell are you chewing a pen and not taking notes?"

"I missed breakfast," she deadpanned, smirking.

"You don't eat breakfast," Perry shot back. "You might be assistant editor, but dammit, you'll pay attention in meetings!"

"Yes, Chief," Lois replied with a staged yawn.

Perry sighed heavily. He and Lois - as well as several senior reporters - knew that he'd yelled at her for the same thing for several years. Lois still only took notes when she felt like it, and she had *never* forgotten anything from the meetings. Still grinning mischievously, Lois leaned back in her chair and sipped her coffee. As soon as Perry turned away to harangue someone else, Lois turned to glance at Clark, giving him a sly little grin.

"Any questions?" Perry said at last.

To everyone's surprise, Jimmy spoke up. He'd been standing at the other side of the conference table from Lois, and when she leaned back in her seat his eyes had narrowed. "Sure, Chief," the photographer said. "What's that on Ms. Lane's finger?"

Ron burst out laughing as everyone else turned to look. Lois realized only then that she'd been holding the coffee mug in her left hand, the pen in her right. All that morning, she'd worn the engagement ring backwards, with the stone toward her palm, and hidden her hands as much as possible. But the emerald had clinked uncomfortably against the mug's handle, and Lois had subconsciously turned the ring back around during the meeting.

Now every reporter in the place leaned forward to stare. "Well I'll be damned," Perry said. "Kent! You call that an engagement ring? That's no diamond."

"Yes, sir," Clark replied calmly, and Perry had to look at him askance for the complete lack of stuttering nervousness in his voice. "Lois and I are getting married."

"Eventually," someone wisecracked from the back of the room.

"Hey, Clark," Bill chuckled. "Is that kryptonite?"

The entire room erupted in laughter, as Clark looked embarrassed and Lois grinned, winking at him. Once the roar died down a bit, Lois stood up. "I will have you pack of jackals know that he actually talked me into a spring wedding," she said, daring them to laugh. "I wanted fall, but *oh no*, the sooner the better. Not like the kids aren't already six years old..."

"Smart man," Ron muttered, elbowing Clark fondly. "Don't let her get away."

"I won't," Clark replied. "Not this time."

Lois caught that, and laughed, her eyes blazing with amusement and good humor. In the midst of everyone talking at once and trying to see the ring, Perry's phone rang, and he irritably pointed at Jimmy to go answer it. "This is not a goddamned circus," the Editor-in-Chief barked. "You can all irritate Lane on her own time. Worse than a bunch of gossipy old women, I swear..."

"Chief, it's your wife," Jimmy called across the bullpen.

Perry sighed dramatically. "For the love of God, tell her as often as she bitched about my girlfriends calling me at work when she was my secretary, *she* calls me more than *all* of them ever did!" Jimmy bit his lip as he went back into Perry's office to relay that. The Chief continued to his assembled reporters, "What do you think this is, the *Star*? Sit down and shut up! We were having a meeting here before Lane had to flash her rock around the place!"

He got something close to silence, only to have Jimmy interrupt again. "Uh, Chief? She says it's important."

"She *always* says it's important," Perry bellowed back. "Last time it was what kind of air freshener to buy. Tell her if the house isn't on fire and no one's bleeding or dead, it can damn well wait!" Once again, Jimmy sighed and trudged back into Perry's office.

"So have you guys set a date?" someone asked, taking advantage of Perry's momentary distraction.

"No, our mothers are doing that," Lois replied, rolling her eyes. "They've been waiting so long to marry off their firstborns, I'll be lucky if I get to pick my own dress."

More laughter at her remark, but it died away as Jimmy came out into the bullpen again. His face was white with shock, and his eyes were wide. "Uh, C-Chief?" he stammered. "You *really* wanna take this call."

"What the hell's the matter now?" Perry growled. Olsen opened his mouth but hesitated, and the Editor-in-Chief snapped, "Out with it!"

"She's pregnant!" Jimmy yelped, wincing.

Perry's jaw dropped. Absolute silence descended on the newsroom, with most of the men looking at Perry in admiration, and several of the women staring in horror. The first to recover was Lois, who roared with laughter, slapping both palms down on the table. "*Holy shit!*" she cried, wheezing. "Old man, I didn't know you had it in you!"

Several coarse comments were whispered in the back of the crowd at that, but at last Perry recovered his wits enough to speak. "I'm gonna shoot our mailman," he snarled, and stalked to his office.

Two days before the New Year, Richard arrived back in Metropolis, tanned and immensely pleased with himself. He came up to the *Daily Planet* on his first day back, just to visit - he would come in to actually *work* the next day. Greeting everyone with a broad grin, the sight of him was enough to bring Lois and Perry out of their offices. "I see Florida was good to you," Perry grumbled, while Lois just grinned.

Richard hugged his uncle and his ex before replying, "Actually, I wasn't in Florida for more than a day."

"Then where the hell *have* you been?" Lois asked, surprised.

"The Bahamas," Richard said, his eyes alight with mischief.

"*Richard!*" Lois exclaimed. "The whole *point* of you missing Christmas this year was so

you could see your father! And then you went to the islands instead?!"

He ushered them both into Perry's office before answering her - Richard had learned his lesson regarding the office rumor mill. Once the door closed behind them, he explained, "No, see, I went home and saw Dad, and we spent most of the first day together. Problem was, while he and I were out having father-son time, Mom had gotten suspicious because I was staying at the hotel instead of the house."

"Anybody sane would stay at a hotel," Perry interjected. "Those damn dogs of hers are a curse on mankind. Miserable little rats."

"Well, Mom was suspicious enough that she snooped around the hotel," Richard continued. "And she found out I'd checked in with a woman who definitely *wasn't* Lois. Now, I haven't actually talked to my parents about everything that's gone on the last month or so, so she jumped to conclusions. And it was one hell of a jump."

"Oh?" Lois asked, one eyebrow going up.

"The same one your mother came to when she first met Lana, only Mom was nowhere near as polite as Ella," Richard said, taking a deep breath. "When I walked in the door, Mom was waiting for me. I don't remember her *exact* words, but it was something along the lines of 'I can see why that Lane woman would drive you to stray - Lord knows she's the meanest-tempered shrew I've ever met - but I do *not* appreciate you bringing your light-skirted friends home with you, Richard James White.' And she went on to tell me that I was supposed to be coming home to spend time with the family, so on and so forth, et cetera, and she didn't appreciate being used as a convenient cover-story for my cheating."

Lois' jaw had dropped. She had never liked Sylvia, but if the woman had been in front of her just then, she would've dropped all semblance of propriety and *punched* her in the face. How dare she even *suggest*...

Perry was fuming just as much as Lois, his eyes flashing in anger and his brow furrowed. Before he could work up a scathing bellow of fury, Richard continued, "Mom had just managed to insult Lois and Lana in the same breath, and I wasn't gonna stand for that. So I looked at her for a minute, turned to my father, thanked Dad for a lovely day, and told him I was sorry, but I wasn't going to listen to that kind of trash talk about two women I love. And I also told him - not Mom - who Lana is, and that she was exactly the kind of woman he always wanted me to meet and settle down with. The kind of woman I still figured I wasn't worthy of, but I intended to do my best to live up to her standards."

"Atta boy," Perry said. "I feel sorry for Theo, but..."

"He's coming up to Metropolis next year," Richard said. "Without Mom. As for her, it turns out she's actually quite a fan of some of Lana's clothing, so she was properly humiliated. I didn't wait for an apology, though - Lana and I checked out of our hotel and went to the Bahamas. After a couple days on the beach, I was almost ready to forgive my mother."

"Well, sounds like you had an interesting vacation," Lois said, trying to find a way to segue gently into the news about herself and Clark.

Unfortunately, Perry was standing beside her, and he rarely broke things gently. "Almost as interesting as staying here," the editor-in-chief said casually. "Lois and Clark got engaged on Christmas Eve..."

That was the moment that Clark walked in, presumably coming by to welcome Richard back. The International editor just stared at him, and then turned a look of open-mouthed shock toward Lois. "Thanks, Perry," she grumbled. "Richard, I was trying to find some polite way to tell you..."

He looked at Clark instead, and cut off Lois' attempt to salvage the situation. "Dammit, Clark, you copycat! Why'd you have to go and get engaged on Christmas Eve just like me?!" With so much surprise in his tone, it was hard to tell whether he was exasperated or amused.

"Hey, wiseguy," Lois snapped, getting defensive. "You and I got engaged at the office Christmas party, the week *before* Christmas..."

"I'm not talking about *you*," Richard replied quickly, making a shooing-off gesture in her direction. "Lana and I got engaged Christmas Eve. C'mon Clark, pick something original for the wedding date, okay?"

Perry groaned, and even though Richard was clearly chuckling, Clark was too flustered to reply. Lois' sharp eyes had noticed a thin line of white around Richard's left ring finger, though, and she called him on it. "I see you must've gotten jewelry for Christmas, Richard. Or are they giving out engagement rings to men now?"

He sighed and rolled his eyes, reaching into his pocket. "Well, Lois, I was trying to find some polite way to tell you..." The ring he took out and placed back on his hand was a simple gold band. "We got married Christmas Day," Richard announced. "At least I can't forget my anniversary."

Now it was Lois' turn to stare thunderstruck. "You crazy sonofa..."

"Congratulations," Perry said, slapping his nephew on the back. "I've still got you beat."

"You do?" Richard asked.

"You're gonna have a cousin," Perry told him, grinning.

Confused, Richard looked at Lois doubtfully, and she swatted him. "Not *me*, you idiot. We haven't been back together that long, and I *can't*, remember? You bitched about the surgery for *days* when you found out. *God*. No, blame *him*, your psychotic uncle. Loueen's knocked up."

"*Lois*," Clark scolded, scandalized by her word choice.

"Well? That's exactly how she phrased it to me." The raven-haired reporter folded her arms and glared.

Richard was just staring at Perry. "You're *how* old and just now getting around to having kids? Jeez, Uncle Perry! I mean, Lois practically counts as yours, but..."

"Be glad she's not mine," the Editor-in-Chief replied. "If she was, she'd be your cousin, and that would've made the last three years illegal. In this state, anyway."

Lois and Richard exchanged a dubious look, then they both burst out laughing. "Yeah, well, now that I'm married and you're about to be - watch her, Clark, don't let her pull the indefinite engagement trick on you," Richard warned, turning back to Lois after the aside to Clark, "I guess I can call you my cousin. But I'm probably the only guy I know who has an aunt younger than his wife - and now I'm gonna have a cousin younger than my kids."

"I guess you and Lana will have to do something about that, then, huh?" Lois teased. "Where is she, anyway? Lounging at the Centennial?"

"Waiting in the car," Richard said.

Lois had to fight a smile. Typical Lana. Don't face conflict; hide from it. "Oh, hiding from me?"

"Being polite," Richard corrected. "All right, then. All gossip aside, Uncle Perry, Clark, tell me how things have been going in International while I was gone."

While the three men started talking business, Lois quietly excused herself. But she didn't head back to her office like they expected - she went to the elevators and then the garage. Richard's parking spot was right next to hers, and she strolled up to the Saab with a little smile

on her lips.

The redhead in the passenger seat was reading the newspaper and didn't hear Lois approaching, so the reporter rapped on the half-open window, letting the emerald in her engagement ring strike the glass. Lana startled, looking up wide-eyed, and Lois just grinned and held up her left hand. "I'm not gonna kill you, cheerleader, so get the hell out of the car," she said, half-affectionately and half irritated. "It takes a good ten minutes just to get to the office from the garage to the office, and you *know* Richard's gonna be gossiping with the boys half the morning. There's no sense in you hiding down here all that time."

Lana just sighed as she opened the door. "I wasn't sure how you'd react. It seemed like a wonderful idea at the time, and I don't regret it in the slightest, but..."

"So you eloped with my ex," Lois said. "Yeah, I was a little pissed off at first, but Richard's not mine anymore. And I'm more than happy with the man I have."

"I'm glad," Lana replied. "I wouldn't stand for Clark being with someone who doesn't love him with all her heart." Her tone held a hint of steel at those words, but she softened it with a smile. "Don't worry. I have no intention of telling anyone that fearless reporter Lois Lane is an absolutely moony-eyed romantic at heart."

Lois gave a snort of laughter. "Yeah, right," she muttered reaching in to catch Lana's hand and drag her out if necessary. "Nobody'd believe you."

"Very true," Lana said, letting herself be helped out of the car as if it were her own idea. "Still friends?"

"Are you still alive? Obviously the answer's yes." They both chuckled at that, heading for the elevators companionably.

"So, how's everyone taking the news about you and Clark?" Lana asked.

Lois' smile was pure devilry. "One of the perks of working for the *Planet* is that you get a certain amount of free advertising space each quarter. A bunch of the guys pooled their ad space together and ran a quarter-page photo of me and Clark, with the word 'Congratulations' above it."

"How sweet," Lana said, giving her an amused look. "Jimmy Olsen took the photograph, right?"

"Of course," Lois replied with a grin. "It was a recent one - from the Christmas party, in fact. I didn't know he'd taken it. You ought to ask him, he's probably got a few of you and Richard together. Anyway, it's all romantic and lovely and classy - until you look at the very fine print at the bottom of the shot. It's got our names, but instead of saying something like 'Engaged,' it says 'About Darned Time.' I guess they have a point."

Lana laughed out loud. "Only you, Lois."

Lois heard her cell phone chirp for the millionth time that day and smiled. All the family and friends had her number, and most of them had been sending her voicemails and text messages during the day, trying to coordinate tonight's New Year's Eve party at her house this evening. This time, it was probably Clark, letting her know that he was getting ready to take the twins to the Fortress and would be back in time to help her set up. They had quarreled slightly over it, but after several whispered reassurances, Lois relented in the end despite her misgivings. No matter how much she distrusted Jor-El, Kala and Jason still deserved to see the Fortress and their grandfather. To understand who they were. And to begin to learn about their legacy. She had to admit that he was right on that.

The subject line read, "Should old acquaintance be forgot?" Not Clark, then. Someone

else, probably one of the friends she hadn't heard from in a while - Cat Grant, maybe. Already grinning in anticipation of the blonde news anchor's hilarious messages, Lois opened the text message.

This old acquaintance has not forgotten your phone # - or who fathered your kids. Come to 42 St station if you want your little secrets to remain secret. Alone - the alien isn't invited.

She felt her heart stop, gazing down at that screen. The chill of *deja vu* roared through her. Oh God, not again...

Luthor.

Kal-El landed lightly within the Fortress of Solitude, setting Kala and Jason down beside him. These days, the Fortress was no longer as accessible as it had once been; he had activated several of the security features in spite of his qualms. A human who trespassed here now would find himself rendered unconscious by a force field and flung into a cell in the lower levels. Kal-El had always left those devices off in the past, judging it unlikely that any random wanderer would find this place. Now, though, there was a very slight possibility of someone who meant no harm being injured by the force field, but he considering that an acceptable risk in light of the fact that Luthor *knew* where the Fortress was - and it had regenerated itself once, so there was no point in destroying it again. No, he had to use other means of protecting its secrets, even if those methods meant he had to fly carefully in via the interlocking crystals that made up the roof.

Besides, if he had razed the Fortress, he wouldn't be able to see the looks of wonder on his children's faces right now. Both twins, having been full of questions and excitement during the flight up, had fallen silent and somber as their eyes took in their surroundings. They could seem to decide how they felt about what they were seeing. Jason stared around him, his jaw hanging open in awe, while Kala craned her head back to peer up at the interlaced crystals above her. "Wow," the little girl said wonderingly, a trifle louder than she meant to as a small smile curved her lips.

Both flinched as the whispery echoes of Kala's word revibrated. Never in their short lives had they ever seen anything quite like the shelter that loomed before them, never been in an open space quite this large, bigger than a convention center and several stories tall. The scale dwarfed them all, even Kal-El, and inspired a cathedral hush. His interest captured, Jason took a few tentative steps as if to explore, marveling at the geometric arrangement of the crystals. *Curiosity overwhelming fear; I wonder who he gets that from?* Kal-El smiled slightly at his son...

"Hello!"

The sound came suddenly, yelled, just to his right. It was obvious when he looked that Kala had shouted, finally succumbing to temptation. She was looking out across the chasm below the platform as if testing the length in her mind. Her eyes widened as her voice echoed back to her, multiplied and resonating strangely among the crystals.

"Kala!" her father called sharply, only adding to the echoes, while Jason giggled. Kala could only stare around her, awestruck by the layers of sound, before she glanced up at her father with a guilty smile and a shrug of her little shoulders.

Sighing, Kal-El shook his head affectionately. This wasn't exactly what he had expected when he had pushed for this trip alone with them. Then again, how could he have known their reactions? At first, he'd been worried that the twins would fear the Fortress. After all, the only Kryptonian architecture they'd ever seen was Lex's damned island, and that had been an exact

copy of this. Although now that the Fortress was fully functional again, it was warmly lit, the antithesis of Luthor's creation.

Instead of being frightened, Kala and Jason were curious and excited, as their giggling at the echo proved. "All right, you two," Kal-El said gently. "Do you want to see your grandfather?"

The twins turned to look at each other at that, both grinning. "Really?" Jason asked as he looked up at his father, wide-eyed and a little confused. "But you said..."

"Not in person," Kal-El told him, shepherding them gently toward the console with its array of information crystal now intact. "It's like a movie, but instead of being on a screen the image floats in midair. And he can talk to you."

"Cool!" the twins chorused.

At the 42nd street subway terminal, Lois waited and wished for a cigarette. Her nerves were strung so tightly she almost screamed whenever a passerby bumped into her, but she had to control her fear. *Had* to. If she let herself get so wound up that her heart raced, Kal-El might hear and decide to cut short the twins' introduction to Jor-El to come down here and see what was going on. And Superman's presence just now would *not* be welcome.

You are a total idiot for meeting Lex alone and on his terms, part of her mind hissed. What if he decides to kill you right away? Just put a bullet in your head and be done with it? You couldn't stop him if he did.

A colder voice in the back of her head whispered, *Lex would never just shoot you. He wouldn't make it that easy. No, if he's hinting around about secrets and demanding to see you, he wants exactly what he says he wants: a deal.* That was one thing she didn't have to fear. Lex had no intention of killing her when he would much rather let Lois live and watch her - and his nemesis - suffer from whatever diabolical plan he'd dreamed up now. He was too sadistic for a simple assassination.

Every facet of her personality agreed on one thing: *Too bad the bastard didn't get himself killed over the last couple months.*

At least she had been able to get away with a minimum of fuss. Kal-El was busy with Jason and Kala at the Fortress; she had resisted that idea at first, but as it turned out, that saved her from having to explain her whereabouts. And it kept all three of them well out of harm's way. Oh, sure, this probably wasn't the *smartest* thing she had ever done; a wiser woman would have kept Kal-El on standby. But Luthor had kryptonite and the will to use it, and he wouldn't have called Lois here if he didn't have some plan set up in case Superman did arrive. Lex was never that unprepared, as Lois had learned the last time they crossed paths.

Just then, her cell phone rang. "Lois Lane," she answered sharply.

"Hello, Lois," Lex purred. "And are you at 42nd Street?"

"Yes," she ground out. "Where the hell are you?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out, Lois," he replied. Lois gritted her teeth; he was plainly enjoying this, and she had no intention of making it more fun for him by getting openly frustrated.

"Fine, Lex," she sighed instead. "What is this, a scavenger hunt? You wanted to see me. How am I supposed to find you?"

"Head downstairs and take the uptown line," he replied. "Get off at the Cleveland station and call this number back." With that he broke the connection, and Lois muttered a few choice

words as she hurried down the steps to comply. Precious time was wasting, and she couldn't risk Kal-El coming down here. She *couldn't*.

Barely twenty minutes later, she used her caller ID to call Luthor back. "I'm here," she said, trying to keep down the tension in her voice.

"Very good," he replied. "Now, you know where the temporary storage lockers are? Head over there. I'll hold - you wouldn't be tracing this call, would you?"

"Of course not," Lois snapped. "You probably stole the phone anyway."

"Very smart," he commented.

Silence reigned until Lois reached the lockers; it was the kind of place that made her nervous. Half-deserted and poorly lit, these tiny storage units were rarely used anymore.

"Okay, Luthor, here I am," she said into the phone. "Where are you?"

"First, a question. Do you happen to have a gun on you? In that purse perhaps, or concealed under your jacket?"

Lois' blood ran cold, and she whirled around, staring wide-eyed. The sonofabitch could *see* her! But where *was* he? Nowhere in her vision - and not knowing exactly where he was made her more uneasy than facing him. His voice chuckled in her ear. "Don't try to spoil the surprise, Lois. You'll see me when I want you to. Now, are you armed, or aren't you?"

"You've got my gun, or don't you remember?" she replied, letting anger burn away fear. "You shot two men at point-blank range with it. Two *helpless*, tied-up men. Somehow I'm not surprised you'd shoot someone in the face when they couldn't even raise a hand against you."

"They both let you get the drop on them," Lex replied. "They'd outlived their usefulness, and I think we both agree that they knew too much to be allowed to live. Besides, tell me you weren't tempted to pay Riley back, just a little, for all he'd done to others and all he meant to do to you. I understand his signature move was branding his initials on a woman's breast with a lit cigarette. Quite stupid, to use his *real* initials."

Lois couldn't help shuddering. "Yeah, he was a charmer. Just the kind I'd expect you to make friends with. Let's get on with this, Luthor. How could I be armed if *you* have my gun?"

"You have another by now, Lois. Don't try to fool me - I know you. Put the purse and your coat in a storage locker. Do it now. And if you have another pistol or a knife in your boot, I suggest you leave that as well."

The reporter had no choice but to comply. She *was* carrying her new Ladysmith in her purse, and she *did* have a weighted blackjack in the pocket of her coat. No knives in her boots, though. With that done, hastily, she picked up the phone again and locked the locker. "All right, Lex, it's done. Come on, enough bullshit. Cut the cat and mouse."

"Last instruction," he said. "Go to the platform for the red line and wait for the next train." With that, he hung up the phone, and Lois swore under her breath.

The next train was already whistling in the distance, and a sizable number of commuters were waiting for it. Lois elbowed her way to the front, wondering where Lex wanted her to get off this time. If her cell phone didn't work while the train was moving, would he just call the whole thing off? Or...

Doors opened in front of her, a flood of passengers getting off as others tried to get on. For a moment, the crowd was in flux, and Lois had to fight to keep her feet. In spite of being in the front of the crowd, it looked like she might not get on this train.

And then a man stepped off, just after the last of the disembarking passengers, and caught her around the waist as easily and naturally as if he'd been planning it for days. Lois looked up, startled, and recognized Luthor's cruel, mocking smile.

Just a little while later, the twins weren't quite as excited. "Father, this is my son, Jason, and my daughter, Kala." The little boy gazed up at the image looming above him, barely listening to Daddy. When the giant floating head had first appeared, he and Kala had jumped back, saucer-eyed with shock. The expression on the face wasn't particularly friendly, either, and that made Kala gasp and duck behind Daddy.

Jason, however, didn't shrink back as Daddy introduced the white-haired man. "Jason, Kala, this is my father, Jor-El. Your grandfather."

"Welcome, Jason and Kala of the House of El." The voice seemed to come from everywhere, smooth and very formal. Jason felt more than saw Kala, who was now peering around Daddy's hip, flinch again; with the echoes in here, his voice was also rather loud.

Usually, his sister was the first to investigate any new thing; Jason had held back from trying the echo earlier, knowing that she wouldn't resist shouting. But since she was afraid now - and he couldn't blame her, since Jor-El did look a lot like the Wizard of Oz, just a big glowy head floating around - Jason had to be the bold one. He took a step forward, craning his head back to meet his grandfather's gaze. "You're from Kryp-tin, like in Mommy's story," he stated, trying to make his small voice just as grave.

"Yes," Jor-El replied, his tone not changing. "I, and your father Kal-El, are Kryptonians."

"You two are Kryptonians also," Kal-El informed them, stroking Kala's hair. "Half, at least, since Mommy's from Earth."

Kala had edged out to stand in front of her father and was stealing nervous glances at Jor-El. "Daddy?" she finally whispered, looking up at him with a expression that was obviously worried. "When we get old, are we all gonna turn into big floaty heads like him? Even Mommy?"

"No, sweetheart," Kal-El chuckled, then looked to his father's image. "Father, they are not accustomed to this holographic projection. Would you be so gracious as to assume human size?"

"Of course, my son." With that, the floating head vanished, replaced by a slightly-flickering image of the same white-haired man, but now he stood about Daddy's height, wearing strange reflective white robes. Jason, however, grinned. "Neat! How do you do that?"

Pure shock froze her, and Lex's arm around her waist pulled her out of the crowd and back toward the maintenance areas. After those few seconds of utter astonishment, though, Lois' heart started to race. She'd never expected him to *touch* her, and his nearness was vile - and terrifying. But the pounding of her heart reminded her that Kal-El could *not* find out about this. She had agreed to meet Luthor to keep him and the twins safe, and having him show up here would be the end of that. Lois forced herself to breathe deeply, even as she grabbed Luthor's wrist. "Take your hands off me," she growled.

"Hush, now," Lex replied, just as softly, not releasing her. "I'm not kidnapping you, so there's no point in letting yourself get upset. I just don't want to be overheard. Imagine the shock and outrage if Clark found out you were down here."

Ice trailed down her spine and frosted her skin, but she didn't let that show. "What the *hell* are you talking about? Clark's a damn good reporter, but if I can shake Superman, I can keep Smallville off my tail."

They were in a shadowed alcove now, and Lex halted, taking a slight step back to observe her. To Lois' horror, he smiled. "You're good. You're *very* good. How many years

have you had to lie about this, Lois? If I didn't know better, I'd almost believe you myself."

She made herself roll her eyes and sigh. "What cracked-brain maniacal notion has bitten you now, Luthor?"

His smile broadened. "Clark Kent. Kal-El. There's a certain similarity even to the sound of both names. Did you *really* think I wouldn't catch on?"

Lois kept her breathing deep and even, although she wanted very badly to hyperventilate. Or to scream and fling herself at Luthor with teeth and nails, if necessary. *Everything was going so well*, she thought, *just when I thought we'd broken that curse, here it is again. Every time it looks as if he and I will have a happy ending, something comes along and blows it up in my face.* But aloud, she simply said, "You're smoking something, Lex. Clark would laugh himself senseless if I ever suggested it - and Superman, noble as he is, would probably be a little insulted."

"Lois, Lois, Lois," Lex sighed, shaking his head. "Come now. I know better, and you know it. Kal-El is the twins' father. Why on earth would meek and mild Clark Kent marry you and claim them as his own, unless they *were*?"

"To protect them from assholes like you," Lois replied swiftly. "People have *always* had suspicions about Jason and Kala. But with all of us claiming Clark as their father, maybe fewer megalomaniacs will try coming after us."

Lex nodded. "I see. Clark is so humble and so charitable that he will not only raise another man's - excuse me, an *alien's* bastards, he's also going to sit mildly at home watching the kids while you cuckold him with said alien? *No one* is that meek."

This was the one thing Lois and Clark hadn't discussed, and they should've seen it coming. Ella had known that Superman was the twins' father, and she hadn't accepted the polite fiction about Clark - she'd had to learn the secret in order to help them keep it from everyone else. But Lex also knew the truth, and he had come to a sinister conclusion. Lois hated herself for missing that shot at him on the yacht - if only she'd been able to kill him then...

"Besides, your friends at the paper were so kind as to run an ad celebrating your engagement," Lex said, smirking now. "And this Clark Kent looked very familiar to me, even with those silly glasses and that dreadful suit. I ran that picture through a sophisticated scanning program that can recognize facial features - the next thing in security measures."

He paused, looking deeply into her eyes and savoring the dawning despair he found there. "And there are so many photographs of Superman in the world, Lois. It was *easy* to match them. Ninety-nine percent probability. Congratulation, Lois. Your dream finally came true - Superman agreed to marry you."

She could tell he wasn't bluffing - he was gloating far too much. But even so, she wouldn't come right out and agree with him. "What do you want?" Lois hissed through clenched teeth.

"I have the results of that computer scan," Lex told her softly. "And I have copies of your children's birth certificates, showing the blank line next to *Father*. Now, if the story you're spinning for everyone else is true, a simple blood test would prove that Clark Kent is the twins' father. But since he's Superman, he can't even *take* a blood test. You can't get a needle into his veins unless it's made of kryptonite. So the mere *suspicion* created by publishing those documents would be enough to ruin your happy little family. The general public would go mad."

"What makes you think they'd care?" she retorted, flinging the words into his face from inches away. Their low voices and the roar of the trains necessitated a much closer

conversational distance than she would've liked.

"If they wouldn't care, then you'd just marry him openly," Lex replied. "You'd probably do something ridiculous such as say your vows in midair. And besides, if you openly admit that you're the alien's lover, and that those children are his, every enemy he's ever made will strike at you *and* them."

That struck too close to home, and silenced Lois' protests. Lex bored in. "Not to mention, if he admits to being a deadbeat dad, it rather tarnishes his image - *and yours*. So much for objective reporting, hmm? You were sleeping with your subject and you have the half-breed bastards to prove it."

The point struck home, and Lois couldn't help the tiniest wince. She had always striven to keep her Superman stories unbiased in spite of her personal feelings, but if it became widely known that she had *children* by him, every word she'd ever typed would be called into question. Like the editorial she had just turned in...

Luthor continued, "That's another thing - you think bigots in this country get upset when two people of different races marry? Wait until you see what they think of two people from different *galaxies*. No one will trust him again, now that's he's revealed his intention to breed his dead race back into life with the help of an earthling too smitten to care that he's an alien."

"It wasn't like that," she hissed.

"No one will believe you," Lex said, almost gently. "You're a reporter, you *know* what rumor and half-truth can do. People will believe the worst; they always do. Furthermore, if you tell the world that their father is Superman *now*, it'll be revealed that the hero has been lurking amongst them disguised as Clark Kent. Even those who can tolerate your interspecies union will never trust him for that. Their fearful minds will invent all sorts of reasons for the subterfuge, and the world will never accept him as blindly as it has up until now."

He was right; Lois felt her throat tighten. She had fought to remain unaffected, but that ploy no longer worked. Despair settled on her, and she bit her lip as she realized that Luthor had her trapped - again. She couldn't allow the secret to be revealed; any price was worth protecting Kal-El and the twins. "What do you want?" she asked again, her voice almost breaking.

Lex came closer, taking hold of her shoulders and leaning in to whisper into her ear. "I can destroy you, Lois Lane, and everything you love. Your beloved boss would have a heart attack, literally, if he found out the truth, and where would that leave his pretty young wife and the child they're expecting, hmm? The truth would force Martha Kent into hiding, and your twins would miss their Grandma, wouldn't they?"

She was striving to hold back tears now, trying to control her breathing so Kal-El wouldn't hear. But Lex's cold voice kept on pouring poison into her ear, soft as a lover's endearments. "And your ex, that hotshot pilot - he and his new wife would be in trouble, too. She knew Clark in high school, and they helped rescue you both. Some - such as his former superiors in the Air Force - would say it's their duty to share what they know with the government. And I'm sure the government would be *very* interested in hearing about those kids. What a disgrace to your mother, the General's widow, that she betrayed her country's interest to protect a couple of hybrids. Why, your whole family would be embroiled in the scandal - even Lucy and the new baby."

The mention of her sister - her innocent sister, who didn't even *know* the damned secret - broke the spell holding her. Lois put one hand up to his chest and shoved, her hatred of Lex burning hotly. Tears still glittered on her cheeks, but her eyes were hard and bright with fury

now. "Tell me what you want, you sadistic sonofabitch," Lois growled, and the rage had completely drowned the terror and despair. "Tell me and we deal, or I'll bring it all down around your ears right now. One scream and he'll be at my side, and if I tell him what you told me he *might* just lose his temper and vaporize you. No loss for the world."

"You're the killer, not him," Lex said just as flatly.

"After the things you just threatened, it doesn't matter," she replied scathingly. "If I scream for him now you'll die one way or another. Sure, you'd have the satisfaction of ruining me, but the police have a copy of Riley's film. There were *four* cameras, and they've got a very clear image of you shooting a bound, unarmed man in the face." She bared her teeth in a savage grin. "So if Kal-El doesn't fry you, Old Sparky down at Stryker's Island *will*. And I guarantee you I'll be there to cheer."

He took it calmly, watching her eyes. "So. Mutually assured destruction, that's what this is. If you call him, I'll go down - but not without ruining you. And that's no fun for anyone, now is it?" Lex paused for only the briefest second, just long enough to return her feral smile. "This is what I want: leave me alone. Don't try to find me; don't help the police track me down. Stay out of my life and out of my way completely. And don't set your caped hubby on my trail, either. If anything happens to me, your secret's out."

Lois nodded gravely, not quite trusting herself to speak. Lex continued, "In return, I'll leave your little family alone. I'll pull back the watchers I have following the Kents, the Whites, the Troupes, and even the Langs and the Hubbards. You can stop looking over your shoulder, wondering when I'll appear. That's no way to have your twins grow up, now, is it? Besides, I have other interests now, and I'm going to be far too busy to pursue vengeance. So we have a ceasefire, essentially. Will you agree to that, Ms. Lane?"

"Yes," Lois replied, her tone deadly calm. "But I want one more thing. Forget about Katherine. Let her go; she'll never bother either of us again. After what you did to Eve Teschmacher - don't think I didn't find out about that - I don't trust you not to hunt Katherine down. Bad enough you left Eve to the polar bears..."

Wrath flashed in his eyes like summer lightning, brief and unpredictable, and then it was gone again, leaving his gaze as impenetrable as a snake's. "As you wish. Kitty can continue her sad little life without further interference from me. Now, do we have a bargain?"

"Yes." This time Lois didn't hesitate or demur. Forgoing vengeance was a small enough price to pay for her family's safety. Infinitesimal, really.

Lex looked at her and nodded. "Very well," he said quietly.

Without warning, he lunged at her, pinning her to the rough brick wall behind her. Lois gasped, and Lex's mouth was on hers, a greedy rapacious kiss that stole her breath and turned her stomach. For one second she was too shocked and too disgusted to fight him, and he wound one hand into the hair at the nape of her neck.

Then Lois returned to her senses, feeling more violated than she had ever imagined possible. She bit down savagely on his lip and shoved, spitting his own blood back into his face. "How *dare* you!" she snarled.

Luthor tightened his grip on her hair, forcing her head back so she had to meet his eyes. "Consider the bargain sealed," he told her. "And remember this: I could have asked for so much more. What *wouldn't* you give to protect them, Lois?"

The thought was so revolting that Lois had to shove him, hard, and he stumbled away from her. Lex wiped the blood from his lips and laughed. "Goodbye, Lois," he said, a cruel mocking gleam in his eyes. "You know I've never hesitated to lie - but you have no choice but

to trust me now. Make the first move, and you're guaranteed to fail. Still, you've bought those you hold dear some peace until I go back on my word. A dozen years? A score? I may just decide to leave you alone for good. Think on that, when revenge grows tempting."

With those words he stepped out of the little alcove and was gone. Lois didn't even try to follow him, shaking with rage and fear and nausea. She spat again and scrubbed at her mouth, thinking coldly, *If you come back, we'll be waiting. I may have made a deal with the devil, but if he tries to renege, he'll learn the meaning of 'hell hath no fury.'*

After leaving the subway, Lois had gone back to the *Planet* and sat in her parked car for a long time, thinking about the last two hours. Trying to push away the sick and angry feeling in her gut at the secret she was going to have to keep. What other choice did she have? Could she tell Kal-El the truth? That she had bought their freedom with Lex's? That she had been forced to make the choice he couldn't have?

*You did what you had to do to protect those you love. No one can fault you for that, the General's Daughter growled at her. Stop being a twit. Luthor's gone; it's done. Live your life now. You've paid your price. Now **let it go**. It's the only thing you **can** do.*

Finally, disgusted with herself, she had rubbed away her tears of misgiving and started the Audi. Her mind racing, she forced herself to lock those dark memories away in her heart as the vehicle roared through the snowy twilight through town and out toward Bakerline. She would be late getting home, later than expected, but would still have enough time to get ready for the New Year's Eve party. If Kal-El and the twins had made it home by then. After that confrontation, the thought of her family made her ache with longing. If ever she didn't feel up to being social, it was now. But they couldn't know; couldn't suspect...

The moment she opened the door, Lois heard Kala come racing up the hall as always, and she had barely dropped her keys before the little girl leaped at her for a hug. "Mommy! We got to meet our other grandpa and he's a giant floatin' head sometimes!"

The barrier she had built around herself in the car, protecting herself from what she had done in the growing darkness, shattered as she held her daughter to her. Startled laughter kept the fear and tension at bay at last. "Yeah, I thought that was kind of weird myself," Lois said, rumpling the child's curls as Jason and Clark arrived. Her smile grew brighter as they moved toward her. Funny how she had been so scared of their going up there earlier. Kala having nestled in against her shoulder, Lois kissed her temple and asked, "Did you have fun?"

"Yeah!" Jason said as he hugged her as well, hanging onto her waist like a monkey. He raised his chin on her hip to look up at her as he continued, "I got to learn all about hollow-grams an' makin' pictures with light. Jor-El is really really smart."

Her sense of humor starting to return, Lois quirked a grin down at her little boy. "Oh, really?"

"But he kinda talks funny," Kala added against her mother's shoulder. She picked her hair up to give her father a speculative look and then continued, "Daddy does too, up there. Is that how Creep-tonians talk to each other?"

How could she dwell on dread at a moment like this? Still hugging both kids, Lois finally arched an eyebrow and looked over at Clark. The lure was just too irresistible. "Wait, how *who* talk to each other?" she asked in false misunderstanding, making Clark roll his eyes.

"Creep-tonians," Kala replied importantly, sitting up in her mother's arms to explain. "Daddy says me and Jason are Creep-tonians just like him. Are we gonna talk funny when we get bigger?"

Before Lois could say anything else, Clark interrupted. "Kryptonians, sweetheart. From Krypton. And eventually you'll learn Kryptonese so you can talk to Jor-El a little easier."

"Oh," Kala said gravely, and hugged her mother again before changing the topic slightly. "I like Daddy's Fortress. It's pretty, like an ice palace."

Another smirk aimed at Kal-El, the day's poison draining away more moment by moment. "Me, too."

"And we got to see the roar - the oror - Daddy, what's it called?" Jason said.

"Aurora Borealis," Clark supplied, smiling faintly.

Lois looked at them with honest surprise. Well, that was a great extra bonus for the munchkins. "Really? Wow, that's lucky," she said, slipping Kala down to the floor as they started out of the foyer and into the living room. Immediately the twins grabbed her hands to walk on either side. "I never got to see the Northern Lights from the Fortress."

"You've been to the Fortress, too, Mommy?" Jason asked, impressed. "Wow."

Lois' eyes sparkled with mirth. "Only twice, baby. And the first time I went up was a *very* special occasion. You know, Daddy doesn't take just *anyone* up there. But," - she grinned over her shoulder at Kal-El, who was following behind - "Mommy still never got a light show."

"I'll make sure you get the chance," Clark told her. The twins finally released Lois to run to the bag of supplies for the party on the couch, and she went into Clark's arms gladly, hugging him tight. She pressed her face against his shoulder to hide the release of tension she felt at being safely home.

And then Clark himself nearly undid her relief. "You're late," he murmured against her hair. "And whoever made you angry at work, I hope you didn't strangle them. You were mad enough to."

"I didn't," Lois whispered, biting back the sudden wave of terror and regret that washed over her. "We worked something out. Glad to be home, though."

"Glad you're here," he replied, pulling back slightly.

Lois couldn't quite hide the haunted look in her eyes, and to cover it she kissed him hungrily. Clark, though surprised by the intensity, held her close and thoroughly enjoyed it. When she finally pulled away - after making him very grateful for his lungs of steel - she looked up at him and whispered, "You know I love you more than anything else, right?"

His handsome face took on a quizzical expression. "What brought that on?"

It took Lois a moment to think of something plausible, but she smiled and shrugged. "New Year's resolution to tell you more often."

Clark just grinned. "Wait 'til see what *I've* resolved to do more often. Early spring, right?"

The twins, bored by Mommy and Daddy making kissy-faces, were nosing around the decorations for the party later that night. "Mommy! When do we get to throw the confetti?" Kala called.

Lois laughed and rubbed her nose against Clark's. "Second week of April, you pushy sonofagun. And I'll hold you to that resolution, now that our little lady of super-eavesdropping has music to distract her."

In the living room, Jason had picked up a noisemaker and blown into it, making his sister yelp. In seconds, the twins were embroiled in one of their perennial squabbles, Kala chasing Jason while he blew the noisemaker in between taunts. Lois just glanced toward them, leaning against Clark with his arms still around her waist. *This is why you did it, Lois. Why you would have done anything he had asked. Because anything was worth it for this*, she thought gratefully as Clark kissed her hair.

Old, Borrowed, Blue

Three months 'til...

The realtor was one of those women who smile constantly, no matter what her clients do or say, and by the fourth apartment Lois was beginning to worry about her. *Has she overdosed on antidepressants? Or is she just a serial killer trying to cover her deeply maladjusted psyche? My God, not even Clark is this chipper.*

"And this next one is very cozy," she said with a grin that bared too many teeth. "It has a lovely view..."

"Whoa," Lois said. "We've got two growing kids and two adults who are used to having their own offices. I'm looking more for spacious than cozy."

The briefest flicker of consternation passed over the woman's features, and then she smiled anew. "Well, if you really want spacious, there is one other apartment just a few blocks from here. I wasn't going to show it to you, because it's a penthouse, and you said you have small children, but..."

"We've lived on the riverside for two years," Lois interjected, worrying both about the cost of a penthouse and the fact that she could *not* remember this woman's name. "I'm sure they'd be safe... We ought to look at the penthouse, anyway." *And if it's a penthouse, that gives Kal-El a convenient landing space.*

"Of course," the woman chirped, still with the manic grin. "It's not far, if you'd like to walk. I always say walking is very healthful..."

Lois quickly learned that the realtor, in addition to being bubbly and nerve-scrapingly cheerful, had no sense of distance. 'A few blocks' turned out to be more like ten, through Metropolis street traffic, and in spite of her shorter height, the realtor walked faster than Lois. *I will kill Clark for recommending her to me, she thought. 'She's very sweet, ' he says. She's a freakin' psycho, is more like it.*

But further musings in that direction were cut off when Lois recognized her old neighborhood. "Where exactly are we headed?" she asked, hustling to keep up.

"Reeve Plaza," the realtor replied, and Lois actually skidded to a halt.

"Seriously?" the reporter asked, which made the other woman turn and look at her bemusedly. "I mean, you're not kidding. The penthouse at Reeve Plaza Apartments?"

"Well, yes," she replied. "Is something wrong?"

Lois didn't reply, looking up at the sky silently. Her old apartment was on the market *now*... It had to be a sign. She looked back down, forcing herself to approach this objectively, and heaved a sigh. "Let's go look."

Fifteen minutes later, Lois stood in her old living room, looking out the French doors onto her terrace. She even recognized some of the same plants in the planters out there. The rest of the apartment had been remodeled and enlarged, but what she'd jokingly called Superman's landing strip was still the same.

"This is the combined living room and dining area," her realtor said. "Through this door here is the master suite..." Lois followed her, feeling as though she was in some strange dream. There used to be a mirrored wall there, and behind it had been her cramped study. Now it had been expanded into a master suite that included a full bath, and the bedroom would easily hold that king-sized bed.

The tour continued through the kitchen, still as small as ever, and down the hall past to what used to be the master bedroom. It looked as though the landlord had converted his storage space and added it to this apartment's square footage; there were two rooms on the

same floor as the rest of the penthouse, and one more above it. "The last tenant was using this room as a home gym," the realtor continued as Lois eyed it with visions of her future home office in mind. "The two rooms below were a study and a guest bedroom. They both have closets and plenty of windows..." *Perfect for the twins' bedrooms, when they decide to separate*, Lois thought.

Heedless of the realtor's voice, Lois headed back downstairs, drifting through the rooms in a haze of nostalgia. She'd eaten standing up in this kitchen and sat staring out of these doors when she was single, and now she was contemplating the place in the context of her husband and their kids.

"Of course the terrace is a wonderful feature," the realtor said when Lois stepped outside, but the reporter wasn't listening. She went straight to the edge and peered over, feeling the breeze whip her hair back and sting her eyes. Turning, she caught a glimpse of the *same* damn patio table, and heard a voice in her mind say *Good evening, Miss Lane*.

Lois interrupted the woman's prattle to say, "I'll take it." *To hell with the cost, as long as it's not completely ridiculous we'll manage it somehow. This is the home we're supposed to have, this is where I'm supposed to be. Back where it all began.*

"I take the afternoon off to go apartment-hunting, and I run into a major story on the way to get my kids," Lois muttered under her breath, elbowing her way through the journalists gathered on the courthouse steps. Kal-El grinned slightly; he could hear her easily over the roar of the crowd. He hovered slightly above the top step; for some reason, even reporters tended to stand back a bit when he was in the air, and he preferred not to be mobbed just now.

Still, they were lobbing questions at him, microphones thrust toward his face. Kal-El raised one hand slightly and got an approximation of silence. "Ladies and gentlemen of the press," he said in that voice they all knew so well, and continued with his prepared speech about the reconstruction efforts. Metropolis wasn't back to its old self, three months after the disastrous day of blackouts, earthquakes, and fires, but the major portion of the rebuilding was complete. And today, after much effort, he had finally stabilized the crack in the seafloor caused by Luthor's island.

After his statement, and the typical question and answer sessions with the press, everyone expected Superman to simply nod, wave, and fly off, as he always had. He, however, had other plans, and even though his heart gave a little twinge at what he was about to do, it was necessary.

"There's one more thing," Kal-El said casually, seeking a certain pair of hazel eyes in the crowd. He smiled, and it wasn't his usual flirtatious grin; this was a much more sober expression than any journalist had seen on his face when dealing with Lois. "If I may, I'd like to take this opportunity to offer Ms. Lane and Mr. Kent my sincerest congratulations on their engagement."

The shocked look on her face cut through him like kryptonite; Kal-El *hadn't* warned her at all. He couldn't. The old rumors had started up again, and even in the *Planet* bullpen there was a certain amount of whispering about Lois and Superman. Some people still believed Clark was a fool for getting engaged to a woman who clearly loved someone else - someone for whom Clark was supposedly no competition. That had to stop before someone noticed the resemblance between Clark and Superman, and this public and unexpected breakup was the only way he could end the whispers.

Lois blinked at him as every other reporter turned to stare at her. She rallied quickly,

shaking off the stunned look and giving him an approximation of her usual jaunty smile. "Thank you, Superman," she replied, just as casually. "I'll be sure to tell Clark you did."

"You're very welcome, Ms. Lane." He inclined his head to her slightly, and with that rather formal gesture he took to the skies.

Behind him, Lois left the press conference abruptly, whispering under her breath, "Kal-El, I'm gonna *kill* you for doing that to me!" She was walking fast, and he heard her choke back a sob.

Worried, Kal-El tracked her from above, and when Lois ducked down an alley several blocks from the courthouse, he quickly touched down and went to her, dressed as Clark this time. "Lois?"

His favorite tough-as-nails reporter was leaning up against the rough brick wall, trying to smother her weeping. Wordlessly, Clark went to her and wrapped her in his arms, kissing her hair and whispering how much he loved her.

At last, she pushed her hair back and looked up at him with reddened eyes. "You probably think I've lost my mind," she said, sniffing.

"Not you," he replied, gently stroking the tears away from her cheeks. "Lois, I'm sorry to spring that on you. We said we needed to put an end to all the gossip, you know, and I thought if I warned you, your reaction might not be genuine enough to convince the press..."

That made her laugh, if a little brokenly. "Yeah, well, you got a genuine reaction outta me, hero," she said, her voice bleak.

Then the full impact struck him as well, and Kal-El could only hold her tight and rest his forehead against hers. It was *ridiculous* to feel his heart breaking, when he was going to marry this woman and be with her and their *children* forever after, but a part of him grieved for the end of Metropolis' favorite romantic fairy tale. The hero and his chronicler had broken up - Lois and Superman were over. No more public flirtation, no more sly in-jokes in front of other reporters, no more flying where anyone could see them... This was the end of an era, and he couldn't help mourning it even while he yearned for the next step.

"You know the truth," he whispered into her ear. "You know you won the man *and* the hero. And this way we can be together without worrying about Luthor or someone else like him..."

Just the mention of the criminal's name made Lois' heart skip a beat. "Quit trying to be rational," she pleaded, pressing her face against his neck. "Just ... do me a favor? Shut up and hold me."

Chuckling, he did so, letting the steady beat of his great heart sooth her until her tears stopped. "Two things to think about," he murmured as he tilted her face up for a kiss.

"Mmm?" Lois replied, still seeming a bit distracted.

"One, we only have to be that... distant with each other in public, and only for a while. Once people get used to you being married, we can stop being so darned professional. And two, you *know* Superman will never take up with another woman. Which does a lot for your reputation, Ms. Lane. Speaking of tough acts to follow..."

That made her smile even through the last of her tears, and she swatted him on the shoulder affectionately. "Cute, Mr. Kent. Very cute. Well, since you so fortuitously showed up, you can walk me to my car while I tell you about our new apartment."

His eyebrows went up. "Oh, so you did find one," he said. "I assume you're fairly certain I'll like it if you're already calling it ours." He'd secretly envied the house on Riverside Drive, and longed to live in a big house in the suburbs. Some place where the twins could have a big

yard to play in...

"Very sure," Lois said, grinning wickedly. "I already paid the security deposit."

"You *what?!'*" That was *awfully* presumptuous of her, and while he admired her boldness, this was to be *his* home too. Didn't he even get a say?

But she turned those mischievous eyes on him, full of devilish good humor, and said, "Wait 'til you *see* it. That's all I ask. Tell you what: if you don't like it, I'll forfeit the deposit. It's *perfect* though. You just have to see it..."

Two months 'til...

"*Not* white. Absolutely not. No way. We've already had this discussion. Forget it," Lois insisted, pitching the bridal magazine back across the table at her sister. Ella Lane and Martha Kent both sighed in disappointment; Richard, Ron, and Clark were all trying to look helpful while actually staying out of the discussion as much as possible. Lana just leaned back in her chair and let the Lane girls fight it out. Honorary sibling and Matching Monograms Club notwithstanding, the dress argument was really none of her business. She'd been helping with wedding plans, which just happened to be on the agenda for the family meeting.

"But Lois-" Lucy pleaded.

"*No*. Maybe you failed to notice, but two of the kids playing in the living room are *mine*. I don't exactly qualify for a white wedding dress anymore, Lucy!"

Clark chuckled softly, knowing this argument could last awhile. *Somehow I don't think this family meeting is going to go quite as smoothly as the last.*

Speaking of the last family gathering, a couple weeks ago... *That* had been interesting, even though it had only been himself, Lois, Lana, Richard, and the twins. They'd gotten together mostly at Richard's request - he'd had an announcement to make. A rather shocking announcement, in fact. Clark remembered perfectly his own feeling of astonishment when Richard told them he would be resigning from the *Daily Planet*. His expression must have mirrored the disbelief and guilt on Lois' face, because Richard had grinned at him, slapped his shoulder, and said, "And guess who I'm suggesting to take my place?"

"Richard, you *know* I can't take on that much responsibility in addition to my duties..." Clark had begun to protest, but the International Editor had a response for that already.

"Actually, it'll be *easier*. You know International isn't the seething cauldron of controversy and backbiting that City is. You and Ron practically ran it while Lana and I were in Italy and the Bahamas, and nothing exploded. Besides, if you're the boss of the department and you have a handful of really good folks like Ron backing you up, you can disappear *any time you need to*. Perry knows full well I wasn't at that desk eight hours a day, and as long as the work gets done, he'll let you do the same."

Clark grinned slightly to remember it; Perry had thought the idea of letting him have International was brilliant. Several staffers disagreed, but to their very great shock Clark had delivered a serious, even-toned lecture that left them feeling as though they were back in grade school and had just misbehaved in front of the principal. No longer being just one of the reporters was very odd, but there was at least one spot of familiarity: in spite of having backed him up at that lecture to his department, Lois was still as competitive as ever. Now they were

fighting over whose department got which stories instead of which one of them personally covered a given story, but it was the same principle. And Clark had won even more respect from his staff for standing up to Lois. He'd never so much as raised his voice to anyone, but he didn't back down from her now that they were engaged. Not even her most profanity-laced tirades fazed him when he had a point.

Of course, satisfying as the results had been, there was an unpleasant reason why Richard was leaving his uncle's paper, and he had admitted it only reluctantly. "You two are trying to be polite," he'd said, and continued with a grin for Lana, "and God knows I am the most *happily* married man on the face of the earth..."

Lois had cut in to finish the sentence when he couldn't seem to find the words. "It bugs you, seeing us together."

Richard had sighed and sat back in his chair. They'd held that particular family conference here at the Riverside house, over Clark's famous secret-recipe pasta sauce, and Richard had laid down his fork in surrender. "Yeah. It bothers me a lot, in fact. I kept telling myself not to let it, that this is the best way for everybody, but... It sucks seeing you with someone else."

"You're not exactly alone in that," Lois had pointed out gently. "That doesn't mean I want you to run off. It's just... It's not easy. We haven't gotten adjusted to the new status quo yet."

"And Clark's probably more secure than I am," Lana had added, just as diplomatically, "but I can't say I'm thrilled to have Richard working with the woman he meant to marry. I *know* I'm being a jealous shrew, and I *know* I have nothing to fear, but you're right - I haven't quite gotten my mind around it yet. And none of that is *your* fault, Lois."

Lois just snorted. "Right. I'm gonna go get some coffee." She had stood to leave, but Clark knew her well enough to realize that she *was* blaming herself, and caught her arm.

"Lana's right, it's *not* your fault," he'd told her then. "It's circumstances, and they have a way of being very inconvenient."

He'd let her go, and when she came back with coffee for all of them, Lois was a little more on an even keel. "Okay, so, what are you doing if you leave the *Planet*?"

Richard had just sighed. "Well, I'm thinking of job-hunting in Gotham. I've got enough in my savings that I can be picky in looking for a new job, and I think my wife will let me crash at her place in the meantime." Another grin between him and Lana - they really were entirely too sweet sometimes, and Lois had made retching noises until she got Richard's attention again. "Now, about the twins," he said, giving Clark a significant look. "Gotham's only about two hours by seaplane - twenty minutes by super-flight. So we can still work out the weekends and holidays thing like we planned. I know they're not gonna *like* me being that far away, but they'll adjust, too. Once they realize I'm not gone forever it should be okay."

The memory brought a sigh from Clark. Jason and Kala had *not* been understanding; they'd gotten very surly during what was now known as the Brat Phase. It had been so stressful for him, to hear them arguing with Lois over the smallest things, and even worse, after they fought, to listen to the twins sobbing in their room and Lois sniffing in hers. That seemed to be *mostly* over now; Jason and Kala were seeing a psychiatrist to deal with all the rapid changes in their lives, as well as the nightmares that still lingered from being kidnapped.

Clark wasn't particularly delighted by the doctor Lois had chosen: her ex, Elliot Marrin. But Lois did have a point - if the twins accidentally let Clark's identity slip to Elliot, Lois had enough incriminating photos from their relationship to buy his silence. Clark didn't exactly approve of her potentially blackmailing the man, but he didn't want to discuss it too deeply

with Lois. He also remembered Elliot far too well from the days when he and Lois had been dating. Luckily for everyone, Elliot had been very professional with the kids, and their sessions with him seemed to be helping a lot.

After Richard's entirely too optimistic pronouncement, though, Lois had simply thrown her hands in the air. "Fine," she'd said. "But you know Clark and I can't keep this house. We were gonna sell it, but *when*? The housing market's down..."

Lucy yanked Clark's attention out of his memories and back to the present moment. "I don't *care* if it's traditional in China. You're not Chinese, Lois! You are *not* gonna wear a red wedding dress!"

"Amen," Martha said dryly, echoed by Ella.

"Keep it up and I'll wear black," Lois said poisonously, glaring at both moms. "Clark likes me well enough in black..."

"Not getting into this discussion," Clark said quickly. "Not at all. I don't care what color the dress is, as long as Lois is in it. That's all I want. I was lucky she agreed to marry me; I'm not pushing my luck any further. You guys fight it out amongst yourselves."

Lucy just sighed theatrically. "*Fine*. You can just be hard-headed - I'm going to go make snacks in *my* kitchen."

That made Clark grin again; at least one of the recent changes in their lives had been unequivocally for the better. The final decision on the Riverside house had been to let Ron and Lucy take over the payments. With the new baby, they needed the extra space, and within a few weeks the home had gone from being the house full of unpleasant ghosts of the past, to Lucy's own personal kingdom. With different furniture, a fence around the yard, and the Troupes' personalities stamped into every surface, even Clark felt comfortable here now.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You house-proud little broodmare," Lois called after her affectionately. She found herself, however, facing stern looks from both Ella and Martha. "Look, you two, this is *my* wedding. I told you I don't give a damn about all the fiddly little details - you can pick cocktail napkins to your hearts' delight - but I'm not budging on the dress. *Not white*. And *not* frilly. Just go ahead and scrap any ideas you've been cherishing about taffeta and chiffon and ruffled sleeves. Forget it."

"Lois, do you think you could compromise a *little*?" Ella asked in that so-polite voice that automatically raised her daughter's hackles.

"No," Lois retorted. "And the Army-trained hostage-negotiator voice won't make me. I already let you swindle me into a big wedding instead of something small and private, I agreed to have a memory candle for the General, and I backed down on the colors, too."

"Red and black are *not* wedding colors," Martha said archly.

"Which is why I threw white in there," Lois replied. "With silver accents. Lovely, and it all matches. And *nobody* can screw up black, white, and red."

The coffee finished brewing, and Lucy brought the entire pot in to pour refills for everyone. Ella had flipped the bridal magazine open to a very classic, traditional wedding dress, something with seed pearls and ribbons and several skirts. Lois saw her look down and snapped, "No. No way. Not even if you were boiling me in oil. That dress looks more like a freakin' cake than a bridal gown - I'd be too worried someone would wander up with a knife and cut a slice out of my ... butt."

Ron and Richard both cracked up, trying to smother their laughter and not succeeding. This particular discussion was seriously pushing the 'no swearing in the Troupe house' rule, for Lois at least.

She glared, pointing at Richard. "Shut up, Mr. I-got-married-on-a-beach. *You* got out of all this nonsense. Clark, why couldn't we elope?"

"That'd be copying," he said, smiling. "Besides, then you'd have to be married and settled down sooner."

"Good point," Lois said to him, and added with a glare, "I hate you. You're getting entirely too much amusement out of this."

"Well, Lois, it's a nice change to see you *not* completely determined, with everything planned out ahead of time," Clark told her gently. "Although I think the rest of you might have to concede defeat on the dress - Lois is the one who has to wear it. She should be able to pick what she wants."

"And you're not gonna stuff me in that monstrosity," Lois added, snatching the magazine back and rifling through it. "The Thanksgiving turkey has more dignity than that woman has in that dress. It's got a freakin' *bustle*. Do I *look* like I'd wear a bustle? *Ever*? No. Now, hook me up with something modern and sleek like..."

"Oh no," Ella and Martha said in unison, glancing at the page she had open. Martha continued, "Good heavens, Lois, you can't even tell it's a wedding dress!"

"Why, because it doesn't look like some psychotic designer - we love you, Lana - vomited tulle all over it?" Lois slapped the open page, while Lana just chuckled. The redhead had taken a small sketchpad out of her purse several minutes ago, and was basically ignoring them all.

Lucy leaned over her sister's shoulder and laughed. "No, Lois. It doesn't look like a bridal gown because it shows too much leg - and too much cleavage. Every single man in the place would be trying to steal you!"

"They can *try*," Clark said softly, giving Lois a secretive grin. "It wouldn't be any different from a normal day at the office."

"I love you," Lois purred.

"Lois, you are *not* wearing something that could pass for a cocktail dress..." Ella began, and her daughter rolled her eyes.

"Momma, keep it up, and I'll find myself an ivory sundress and wear *that* to my own wedding," Lois replied hotly. "And when everyone asks, I'll tell them *you* drove me nuts."

"Copycat," Lana murmured, then leaned across the table and held her sketchpad in front of Lois. "What about something like that?"

Lois had already opened her mouth to make a sarcastic comment along the lines of, *if you're not gonna help me fight this battle, stay out of it*. But the dress Lana had quickly sketched silenced her, and Lois leaned back in her chair to regard it. "We've got this lovely Venetian lace, in ivory," Lana said. "I could tailor the bodice so it would have those clean lines you like in the modern stuff, but leave the train long and lacy for a more classic look. Not a lot of flowery little details to clutter it up - the lace, backed by satin, would be decoration enough. And a train like that will make you look taller, too, even if you can't flash a lot of leg." Lana grinned. "There's always the tossing of the garter if you want to show off your legs. It would take about a month or so to make, and you can't gain *or* lose more than two pounds if you want it strapless, but I think you'd be happy. And it is *your* wedding." The last was said with an arch glance at the moms.

"*Strapless*?" Martha said, wincing.

"Nuh-uh, the designer hath spoken," Lois said quickly. "And she's unofficially been the wedding planner, too. The bride agrees, so it's a done deal. Lana, go ahead and show them the sketch of *my* wedding dress."

Chuckling, the redhead handed the sketch around to the moms, sitting back with a smile. "Yes, well, you needed someone to keep the details straight and run interference between all interested parties," Lana said. "I'm actually having fun helping you plan your wedding - considering *I* eloped to the Bahamas and wound up getting married barefoot on the beach." She arched one eyebrow at her husband with the last remark.

"I didn't hear any complaints at the time, *Mrs. White*," Richard said, smirking. When she only grinned at him, he reached for the sketchbook - and Lois pitched a napkin at him.

"Hey! Lucy, snag that from him" Lois said quickly. "None of you guys get to see the dress before the wedding."

"What? Why not?" Richard gave her a quizzical look as Lucy swiped the sketch and made appreciative noises.

"Because you'd tell Clark, and I want it to be a surprise," Lois said, giving Clark a sly grin that said, *Don't you dare use the x-ray vision to take a peek, hero.*

Clark just chuckled. "I'm still surprised that you're going to marry me, Lois."

"And you think *Richard and Lana* are too cute for words," Ron said, sipping his coffee to hide his smile.

Lana cleared her throat quietly. "Well, since I've just been *officially* named the wedding planner regardless of how much in love I am with my husband, let's get organized, shall we? Lois, Clark, how's the guest list coming?"

Nearly identical sighs answered her, while Ella and Martha grinned to see their kids taken to task. Soon, everyone at the table found themselves involved in the discussion. Some of the broader details had been decided already - the wedding colors, the venue for the wedding and the reception, and Kala and Jason as flower girl and ring bearer. But to Lois' evident dismay, a great deal remained to be done.

"Bridesmaids," Lana said some time later, while Ron and Richard were outside keeping the five older kids entertained. Ella was holding Michelle, who had decided that she liked Nana's white hair and kept trying to play with it. "Are you going to have a maid of honor, or have several bridesmaids?"

"Well, I *would* pick Lucy, but she got herself married off first," Lois said.

"Excuse me for having found true love and being smart enough to know it for what it was," her sister teased.

"Actually, a couple of friends and I swore years and years ago that we'd be each other's bridesmaids," Lois admitted. "At the time, it didn't look like any of us would ever get married... I already asked them when I told them Clark and I were engaged. But I still want Lucy to be a bridesmaid, even if she is a brat."

"Okay," Lana said, ignoring the blonde sticking her tongue out at Lois. "How many bridesmaids is that, total? And Clark, think about best man versus having an equal number of groomsmen."

"Three," Lois answered. "Lucy, Cat, and Tobie. I *told* you we thought none of us were ever gonna get married. Loueen will be more than six months pregnant on my wedding date, and she said she doesn't want to be the pregnant bridesmaid in the lineup. So it's just three, unless..."

When the reporter trailed off, Lana just smiled and shook her head. "The wedding planner doesn't get involved in the ceremony, Lois. I'll be backstage making sure the caterers are doing their job and the right music is playing. Now, Clark..."

"Well," he said, pushing his glasses up. "My two closest friends are Jimmy and Ron. I

guess we can go with groomsmen instead of a best man, because I don't want it to seem as if one of them is more important than the other."

"Great, but we need a third for symmetry," Lana said. "Is there anyone you can think of...?"

"I don't think Richard would," Clark replied, "and he's about the only other man I know that well..."

"I might have an idea," Lois said, eyeing Martha speculatively. "Clark, we do have a mutual friend who could be talked into a tux... And who would give us perfect symmetry, considering who the bridesmaids are..."

At first Clark misinterpreted her glance at Ma. *She's not talking about Ben*, he thought, frowning slightly. *Who the bridesmaids are...? Oh!* "You think Lieutenant Sawyer would?"

"I actually asked her about being a bridesmaid, since Tobie is, but she refused point-blank to wear a bridesmaid's dress." Lois transferred that intense hazel gaze to Martha, and said flatly, "Maggie Sawyer and Tobie Raines are a couple. Even if Maggie doesn't wind up one of the groomsmen - and I think she'd find it hilarious - I hope you won't object to the two of them dancing at our wedding."

"Just what kind of narrow-minded backwoods hick do you take me for, Lois?" Martha replied in the same bland tone, smiling faintly at Lois' discomfiture.

Lois dropped her face into her hands and sighed. "Martha... I don't know *what's* normal for Kansas, all right? There are still places where people freak out about that."

"No worse than they 'freak out' about unwed couples with six-year-old twins, or interracial couples, for that matter," Martha replied easily.

"I'm trying to be polite," Lois ground out. "Which, *you* ought to know, I'm not necessarily good at. Or used to."

Martha reached across the table to pat her hand. "Lois, what other people do with their lives and their loves is no business of mine. 'Judge not lest ye be judged.' I was only ever upset about the twins because my son is their father. And since he's finally making an honest woman of you..."

"Speaking of honest women," Lois replied, "has everyone in town quit talking about Ben Hubbard and the widow Kent now that you two tied the knot?"

Clark groaned. He and Lois had attended the ceremony just last weekend. Seeing Ben marry his mother had made him quite uncomfortable, but he'd gotten over it. Now if only Lois and Ma would stop heckling each other...

"Wait a minute," Lana said, heading off any more bickering between Martha and Lois. "This is the same Lieutenant Sawyer who got you into the treatment area at Metropolis General, right?"

"Right," Lois said, trying to give Lana a significant look.

The redhead caught her meaning. "I'm already a fan. Any policewoman smart enough to recognize that you're the most knowledgeable person regarding certain superheroes... I didn't realize you two knew each other, though. You must have friends in odd places all over the city."

"Yeah, the guest list includes the custodial staff at the *Planet*, the bartender at Dooley's, and a U.S. Senator," Lois said. To their disbelieving looks, she added, "For once I cleared someone's reputation instead of exposing a scandal - go figure."

One month 'til...

"I feel like I'm back at prom," Ron joked as the groomsmen headed into After Hours Formalwear to buy their tuxedos.

"What's a prom?" Jason asked, tagging along at his uncle's heels.

"A big dance for high school kids," Richard replied. "You have to dress up to impress your girlfriend."

The little boy looked up at him worriedly. "Is *everything* about growin' up really about girls?"

"Only for Richard," Clark muttered. The remark provoked laughter from the guys and a heavy sigh from Maggie.

Lana waited for the laughter to die down before turning an utterly wicked smile on Richard. "I have no objections to your obsession with women, love," she purred, and had the satisfaction of making Richard blush.

Jason didn't get any of that, so he sighed and rolled his eyes like his mother, provoking still more amusement.

A clerk came up to them quickly, and Lana turned her considerable charm on the young woman. "We've got an April wedding, and this is the groom, the groomsmen, and the ring bearer," she said, indicating Clark, Ron, Jimmy, Maggie, and Jason all following her. Then she elbowed Richard slightly and added, "Plus one friend of the family who needs a new suit for the wedding. Now, for the groom's party, I need something both classic and contemporary. Oh, and notch lapel, because quite frankly I loathe shawl lapels and I'm none too fond of peaked. And the groom will have a vest and necktie instead of a bow tie as well."

Jimmy gave her a quizzical look and whispered under his breath to Ron, "What the heck is she talking about? I didn't know buying a suit was this hard!"

"I have no idea, man, just roll with it," Ron muttered. "She's the designer and the wedding planner, we're just here for the measurements."

Richard, who heard that, snickered. Not that he knew half of what Lana was saying, either. *If this pretty young thing is going to be our customer service person, I bet Olsen leaps out of his skin when she measures his inseam. Poor kid.*

Lana and the young woman were communicating in designer-speak, and the rest just let themselves be carried along bemusedly to be measured and to try on tuxedos. Jason, the smallest and first fitted, quickly got bored and tried to wander off, so Richard kept him company as he browsed among the displays. That meant he did miss the look on Jimmy's face when the girl measured him, and the rest managed not to snicker.

Clark had to actually stand up straight, and the clerk's eyes widened when she saw his height. "Hmm, you're really tall," she said appreciatively. "We do carry big & tall sizes, but I think you might need some tailoring for the best fit. And of course, a tux has to be adjusted for a woman. We offer tailoring..."

"That's fine," Lana interrupted her. "I'll take care of it."

When she finally found *the* tuxedo, none of them could deny it. It had a faint pinstripe that made Clark grin to think of Lois' beloved pin-stripe suit, and in spite of the fact that it was sized for a heavier man, it still hung well. "Perfect," Lana said simply, and the red vest and tie she found matched both it and Lois' chosen color scheme. The rest of the party was easy to suit, and Richard came back just as Lana picked out a suit for him as well. "Hey, don't I even get to look at my clothes anymore?"

"No, darling," Lana replied. "Trust me, you'll like it." Then her gaze dropped to Jason and her eyes widened. "My goodness, Jason, where did you find that hat?"

"Isn't it great?" Jason beamed from under a wide-brimmed black fedora.

"That has got to be the biggest pimp hat I have ever seen in my life," Ron said, and Jimmy looked askance at Clark. After all, the mild-mannered reporter had once worn a gray fedora almost daily... Even Maggie was charmed, Jason's enthusiasm too infectious for her to keep worrying about taking a long lunch break.

Lana just stared at her husband, unamused. "Richard, sweetheart? *This* is why you don't choose your own clothing anymore."

"What? It's cute on him," Richard said. "Not like I'd wear it or anything..."

She ignored him and turned to look at Jason, currently showing off his hat to Clark. "I used to have one like that, son," Clark was saying. "But I don't think your mother will like it."

"But I like my hat!" Jason said. "It's *cool*."

Richard sighed heavily. "Oh well, we can't upset the bride. She might shoot us all. C'mon, Jason, give me the hat and I'll put it back." Jason pouted, but the moment Lana turned her attention back to the suits, Richard winked at him. At that he surrendered the hat, which Richard handed over to their clerk while mouthing 'Hold this for me' behind his wife's back. The young woman just grinned with amusement.

All that was left was picking out shoes, and with that dispatched the group headed up to the counter. Their salesclerk was smiling even more as she scanned their purchases; she worked on commission, and this represented a substantial amount.

Before anyone else could even open their wallet, Lana had handed the young woman her credit card. "All on the same order, please," Lana said, and with a smile at the boys she added, "I get frequent flier miles."

"Of course, Mrs. ..." The girl glanced at the card for the name, and her eyes went comically wide. "Lang? Lana Lang, as in *L. Lang*? Oh, wow ... what an honor..."

The rest of the group tried not to snort laughter, Richard especially, but Lana just reached across the counter and took the girl's hand gently. "Now, don't," she said gently. "I'm no different from you, except I design the clothes and you sell them. We work in the same industry, remember?"

"Yes, but you're ... you're..." the salesclerk stammered.

"Rich, famous, and gorgeous," Richard supplied, still chuckling.

"And you're biased," Lana said. "Ignore my boy-toy. I'm just another customer."

Richard's indignant squawk at that remark made the girl laugh and regain her composure, and they finished the transaction and headed out of the store with him still grumbling. "You don't have to go and call me your boy-toy in front of every single fangirl you meet, Lana."

"Oh, please, Richard," she sighed. "That *was* how you introduced yourself to my seamstresses, remember?"

"Yeah, but I'm your husband now," he griped, and then stopped suddenly. "See, you just ticked me off so much I forgot something." With that he darted back inside, only to return moments later with Jason's hat.

The little boy, who had cast pleading looks at him while Lana paid for their purchases, had started pouting the moment they left the store. Now he jumped up to hug Richard, who let him wear the hat to their car. Lana groaned in horror. "Oh, no, Richard. No. Lois is going to kill us all."

"Nope, only Richard," Clark said, slapping his former rival on the back and making him stagger only a little. Opening the car door for Jason, who practically bounced into the back seat, he added, "When Lois asks where he got that hat, *you* get to tell her, Richard."

"Fine," he replied, still grinning at Jason's gleeful smile. Richard glanced around to see who was in earshot before continuing. Everyone had somewhere to be in the middle of the day, and Ron and Jimmy were waiting to give Clark a ride back to work. Maggie, the most pressed for time, had simply waved and called goodbye, her squad car already disappearing out of the lot. Safe enough for what he meant to say. "Hey, Clark. If the girl in there went nuts over Lana, what do you think she would've done if she knew whose inseam she *really* just measured? Faint, probably."

"Richard," Lana sighed, as Clark looked slightly horrified. "I swear to you, anyone who works in the fashion industry for more than a month no longer notices where their hands are on you. It's really not sexy when you've done it forty times before your first coffee break, and every single man claims he wants his trousers cut extra deep regardless of whether he actually needs it."

"Oh, I think she'd notice if she knew," Richard said salaciously. "There are days when I'm very glad I'm not you, Clark. The temptation would be terrible ... and besides, I happen to prefer my wife to yours."

"I know, Richard," Clark said, shaking his head. "I remember what you said about having too much fun with my x-ray vision, so for the sake of humanity, I'm glad you're not me. And now I'm going back to work."

Richard got into the car, still chuckling, and Lana swatted his shoulder. "Ow! What?"

"*Why* do you have to be so ... so...?" She trailed off, glaring at him.

"Devilishly handsome?" Richard suggested, and Lana sighed in annoyance.

"Devilish, anyway," she muttered, glancing into the backseat. "Is your seat belt buckled, Jason? Then let's get you back to school so I can tell your dad what I think of him." Richard snickered at that, and Lana gave him a tight-lipped, annoyed smile. "I might even use a few of Lois' driving words."

"Ooooooh!" Jason called out in a singsong voice. "Daddy's in *trouble!*"

Two weeks 'til...

Clark woke with his face buried in Lois' hair, the pair of them still tangled together the way they'd finally fallen asleep last night, lying on their sides like a pair of spoons, the top of Lois' head under his chin.

Last night... He sighed gustily. At the company party - really Perry's birthday party, but no one admitted it - Lois had intimidated Grizzly Lombard into paying up on the bet he'd made years ago with Jimmy. Unfortunately, she did it by dressing very, very provocatively when she went to confront the sportswriter, and Clark had been just as affected as everyone else. She had also had a few drinks, which led him to bring her back to her apartment, and one thing had led to another...

So much for not fooling around before the wedding, he thought. With a slight smiling of remembrance, he amended, *Well, no fooling around past a certain point. We've never stopped riling each other up, it's just that we weren't going to go this far. But then Lois had to come to the office party looking like a million bucks and acting like she owned the heart of every man there...*

No, it's not her fault. I started it. And she even tried to remind me that we'd said we wouldn't until we were married. But she looked so tempting and I wanted her so much - wanted to remind her and myself who she belongs to after that nonsense with Lombard - and it's been three months since we... In her sleep, Lois cuddled back against him with a soft groan,

and Clark just chuckled at himself. *I may have failed to prove that true love waits ... but oh, what a failure.*

On that note, he had to get out of bed before he wound up breaking their promise *again*. Her warm, soft curves pressed against him and inspired tempting ideas. Gently, he tried to disengage from her, which made Lois whimper in her sleep and try to cling to his arm around her waist. Clark tried to be careful, but in the end, Lois wound up practically falling over onto her face.

That woke her up. "Where'r you goin'?" she muttered, her eyes only half open and her hair falling forward over her face as she sat up to stare at him.

"Lois," he sighed, starting to get dressed. "I can't stay. We said..."

"Yeah, we said, but we broke that pretty well last night," Lois grumbled. "Three times, as I remember. Heck of a way to break in the new apartment." That made her smile wickedly, but the serious look on his face brought her back to the topic at hand. "Look, Kal-El, the only time I get *good* sleep is when you're here with me. C'mon, it's only two more weeks, and I *miss* you."

"Lois..."

That gentle tone seemed to irritate her, and Lois huffed at him, falling backward onto the bed and crossing her arms. "Fine. Go, then."

"Don't," he said, sitting beside her and resting his hand on her shoulder. "Lois, please don't. You know how I feel about this. I mean, I fully intended to marry you the first time around, and look what happened..."

"That was before we sent out two hundred invitations," Lois snapped. "It's a fact now - we've already got the license, I'm *not* going to turn up pregnant, and your mom can damn well get over it if you're worried about *her* being disappointed! This is supposed to be *our* apartment, this is where the famous interview began, and this is where *we* began. And all of the history here just makes me miss you more." Under her breath, she added, "Now I remember why I sold the damn thing - there are too many memories of you, and not enough *you*."

Ah, yes. That had been another reason why he couldn't make himself hold back last night - this apartment. This was where he'd daydreamed of revealing his identity, and this was where he had sometimes, in the middle of the lonely night, imagined finally making love with her.

"Lois, listen," he said quietly. "It's none of those reasons. The whole reason I wanted to wait until we're married was out of respect for the relationship itself. What we have together ... it's something special. And I wanted it to *stay* special."

She looked up at him, her brow knitting slightly. "I think I get what you're saying," Lois murmured, and then her hazel eyes filled with that look of determination that he knew so well. "If that's what's bothering you, then, I've got the cure. Finish getting dressed; we're going out."

With that vague pronouncement, Lois got out of bed and headed for the shower. Clark could only watch her, perplexed. What on earth did she have in mind?

One week 'til...

Lois woke up with a groan, her head throbbing and her mouth dry. She could smell strong coffee somewhere nearby, and she blearily raised her head from the pillow to peer around.

This wasn't her bedroom ... but there was coffee on the table beside her, and she sipped it gratefully.

Memories began to trickle back in. Last night had been the bachelorette party - that explained why she was waking up on someone else's sofa. She vaguely remembered drinking wine with dinner at the very upscale restaurant, and then Loueen and Lucy had gone home sober in deference to their children. The rest of the women, however, had gone out on the town - and that somehow included *Lana*, Lois remembered with a worried frown. "God, how much did I drink?" she groaned.

"Enough to kill a horse," Maggie Sawyer's voice came from somewhere behind her. "Is it safe to get near you, or are you still gonna snarl and try to smack me?"

"I'm awake," Lois grumbled, shoving her rumpled hair back from her forehead. "*God*. Why did I let you guys talk me into this? *Why?*"

"One last wild night out with the girls, and *I* didn't talk you into it, Tobie and Cat did," Maggie replied, coming further into the room. She looked at Lois critically and then shook her head with a sigh. "You look like hell, Lois."

"Bite me, Sawyer," Lois growled, sipping the coffee.

"Be glad I was there," the lieutenant sighed, sitting down on the chair opposite Lois. "I was the only one halfway-sober enough to make sure you and the rest of the boozers got some hydration before you went to sleep. Your head would be twice as bad if I hadn't."

Lois vaguely remembered whining as she was forced to drink an entire quart of some sports drink. "Yeah, you were also the one who said I couldn't go back to my apartment," she replied. "Which is why I've got this knot in my shoulder from sleeping on your sofa."

"I'm not having you get sick in your sleep and choke to death a week before your wedding, Lois," Maggie said seriously. "We see it all the time. I wasn't going to leave you alone to sleep it off. If anything happened, you would've been glad to be here."

I think Kal-El would've flown to my rescue if anything drastic happened, Lois thought, but she merely yawned and shuddered at the taste in her mouth. "Thanks, Maggie," she said. "I'm sorry you got elected to be the responsible one last night..."

"Well, I think Lana had planned to stay sober and keep an eye on everyone," Maggie told her, "but Tobie bought her a Long Island Iced Tea and didn't tell her what was in it. From what I gathered afterward, Lana decided she liked them and bought herself three more. She was totally smashed by the end of the night - you and I had to practically carry her up to her hotel room."

Lois sat up all the way at that. "Is she okay? Lana's not a drinker..."

"She'll be fine," Maggie reassured her. "Probably about as hung over as you are, but basically okay. If your ex ever finds out it was *Tobie* who got her started, though, he'll never forgive her."

"Richard will get over it," Lois said. "Nobody held a gun to Lana's head and made her drink. It's high time she got a chance to kick up her heels, anyway." She yawned again and grimaced. "Ugh. Maggie, do you have some mouthwash or something? Yuck."

The lieutenant chuckled. "Go take a shower, Lois. It'll clear your head and rinse off the cigarettes-and-spilled-beer perfume you're wearing. There's a travel toothbrush on the sink you can use, and Listerine in the medicine cabinet. I haven't woken Tobie yet, so you'll have hot water."

"Thanks," Lois replied, smiling for the first time that morning. "I owe you, Mags."

"You've been in debt to me for years," Sawyer replied. "And if you don't quit calling me

that I'm gonna pitch you out the front door without a shower, *or* the rest of your coffee."

"*That* would be police brutality," Lois joked weakly. "Seriously, though. Thank you for looking out for all of us. I don't think anyone expected to get as drunk as we all did, and I'm glad you were around to keep us off the front page of someone else's newspaper."

Maggie grinned. "Any time," she said. "Besides, getting to watch the four of you sing karaoke - badly - was worth the trouble."

"Oh, *God*," Lois groaned. "I thought that was a nightmare!"

"Nope, it was real. Including 'Stand by Your Man' and other hilarious classics," Maggie laughed. "Anyway, scram. I've got to leave for work; you're a lucky sucker for having two weeks off. I'm gonna wake Tobie for I head out, so she'll probably drink the rest of the coffee by the time you get out."

"I'll take another cup into the shower with me if I have to," Lois replied, arching an eyebrow. *Thank God, Clark has the twins at his place. I'm just going to go home and sleep this off. Oh, my head - I haven't been this bad off since college.*

"See you at five for final fittings," Maggie said, still amused. "Altering the freakin' tux is taking almost as long as making the bridesmaids' dresses from scratch."

"Well, if you could show up for more than half an hour at a time," Lois teased. "The rest of us have been subjected to tailoring torture for a couple hours at a stretch, and the dresses were started before you guys bought the tuxedos."

"Speaking of clothes," Maggie added, "your stuff's on the back of that chair, freshly laundered. I know, I ought to run a halfway house for drunken reporters. Now go on, stop talking and get showered - some of us have jobs to go to."

"I didn't *want* the week off," Lois replied testily. "Perry made me take the time."

"Hey, he's giving you away at the wedding; that makes him an official father figure. So he can do that," Maggie shot back.

Left without a suitable retort, Lois just rolled her eyes and gathered up her clothes. "This is gonna be a *long* day," she muttered under her breath. "As if the last two months haven't been..."

Promises to Keep

The day before...

Patrolman Murray, coming off-shift after delivering evidence to the S.C.U. offices, lingered around the precinct for a few moments. He made small talk with the detectives, discussed a few cases, and paused for coffee on his way out. As was his habit, he parted the blinds and peered out into the parking lot before heading back to his cruiser. Getting surprised once by the drunk, angry brother of a man he'd just arrested had left him with a lasting caution.

What he saw today, however, was no cause for worry. Quite the contrary; the young cop grinned at the view. Detective Kurland, also coming off shift, saw him and said casually, "See something funny?"

"Grand slam in the parking lot," Murray replied, never shifting his gaze.

"What's a grand slam?" Kurland asked.

"It's a hunting term," the younger man told him. "When you bag one of each subspecies - like a whitetail, a mule deer, and a blacktail."

"You tryin' to say we have deer in the parking lot?" Kurland gave him a dubious look.

"No, but there's a blonde, a brunette, a redhead, and a girl with black hair, all leaning up against the same car," Murray said, peering out for a better look. "Nice. I hope they like men in uniform..."

Shaking his head, Kurland parted the blinds next to Murray and took a look. He, however, wasn't pleased. "You rookie, those are *reporters*," he snapped. "Shit, that's Tobie Raines from the *Daily Star*, Lois Lane from the *Planet*, Cat Grant from WGBS News, and ... well, I dunno who the redhead is, but I don't like her choice of company. Hey! Anybody know why we've got a media invasion in the parking lot?"

One of the older officers, Lieutenant Dan Turpin, laughed at both of them. "Raines, Lane, and Grant? They're not here for a story. Hold on, boys." With another chuckle, he turned and yelled down the corridor, "Sawyer! Your entourage is here!"

"They're here for *Sawyer*?" Murray said. He glanced back outside, looking at the lineup in disbelief. "You mean Maggie Sawyer? She's..."

"*Lieutenant Sawyer*, boy," Turpin scolded him. "Hey, Mags! The natives are restless!"

"Tell them to hold on a minute," Maggie's voice floated out to them from somewhere in the back of the office. "I'm doing paperwork."

"Goddamn forms in triplicate," Turpin muttered companionably. He looked at the two younger officers, grinned, and winked. Raising his voice, he called back to Maggie, "You want me to invite 'em in for coffee while they wait?"

"Hell no!" she yelled back. "Reporters are like stray cats - give 'em coffee and they never go away. I already made that mistake once."

"Twice," Turpin retorted. "Lane's got clearance to use the shooting gallery, thanks to you."

"Would you rather Lois be running loose *knowing* how to shoot and in good practice, or just throwing lead around like any other civilian who's watched too many bad cop movies?" Maggie asked, coming up the hallway. "Dan, I'm out of here - we're already gonna be late to the rehearsal."

"Yeah, and you're off tomorrow for Lois' wedding, unless something big goes down - in which case the bride'll postpone it herself to chase the story anyway." Turpin chuckled again and clapped Maggie on the shoulder. "Go on, get out while you can. I just never figured you for a bridesmaid."

"Who said I was a bridesmaid?" Maggie asked him, and gave him one of her rare smiles. "I'm one of the groomsmen."

That startled a laugh out of Dan, and Maggie turned to go. Murray stopped her at the door. "Um, Lieutenant? Ma'am? Mind if I shake your hand?"

"Not at all, Patrolman?" Maggie said, doing so with a mystified air. "Mind if I ask why, though?"

"Hoping some of your luck will rub off?" he said apologetically.

She gave him her best level, steely-eyed cop glare, wondering if he was about to make some crude sexist remark. When the rookie just looked abashed instead of sneering, she relented; he meant no offense. "Trust me, that crowd is more trouble than it's worth most times," Maggie told him. "You gentlemen take care; Dan, see you day after tomorrow."

With that she was out the door and heading toward the car, a dark green Mercedes she didn't recognize. To her surprise, she saw Lana sitting outside with them; then again, no one at the precinct would've known who the designer was. Probably thought she was another reporter. "All right, I'm gonna have to ask you lot to move on," Maggie said in her sternest voice. "You're disturbing the peace and possibly inciting a riot amongst the single male officers."

That prompted an amused grin from Lois, pulling herself up from her leaning position against the Mercedes. "Well, *that's* a line I've never heard before," she drawled sarcastically as Maggie reached the car.

"So arrest us," Tobie teased. "I saw somebody peeking out the window; did they think we were about to storm them with questions?"

"No, but one rookie thought he was gonna come out here and try to pick all of you up," Maggie said.

That brought a round of derisive laughter from the three reporters. Lois pushed her sunglasses up as she grinned even wider. "Oh, someone overestimates his appeal. Especially if you told him who we were."

"Dan called you all my entourage," Maggie said with a self-deprecating chuckle. "Then the kid wanted to shake my hand in case having a bunch of women follow you around is contagious or something. Poor boy, I still don't think he gets it..."

"Not from us, he's not," Tobie laughed nastily. "*Your* entourage wouldn't do him any good. Me and two married women..."

That brought Lois' hazel eyes over to Tobie sharply. "Wait just a minute, there, Raines. One married woman and one engaged woman. I'm not married *yet*."

"Close enough," Tobie said. "If you *try* to skip out on this one, your wedding planner there will probably tie you to a handcart and let Perry *roll* you down the aisle."

"I wouldn't have to," Lana said. "Martha certainly would, though."

Seeing an opportunity to harass the news anchor, Tobie said, "Well, at least the rookie's skills aren't *totally* botched. There's always Cat, who lives up to her name."

"I do have a boyfriend, you know," Cat said loftily.

"Who is it this week?" Tobie asked her, feigning innocence while Lois snickered and Maggie tried not to.

Lana cleared her throat quietly. "Ladies? We're going to be late to the rehearsal as it is." Over the past four months, she'd gotten to know Lois' circle of friends well enough to realize that if they got started with sarcastic comebacks, they'd never stop.

"Let Lois drive," Maggie suggested. "She'll get us there faster."

"Are you sure?" Tobie asked, looking from Lois to Lana dubiously.

"Why not?" Maggie said, shrugging. "I'm off duty."

That little addition seemed rather cryptic to Lana ... right up until the moment Lois got behind the wheel, revved the Mercedes' diesel engine, and smiled a slow, evil smile. But by then, it was too late - Lana had already agreed to let Lois drive and handed over her keys.

Arriving at the Centennial Hotel, Lana was the first out of the car once they slipped into the parking space, resisting the urge to bolt indoors. "What's wrong, cheerleader?" Lois asked her merrily.

"I will *never* ride in a car with you again," Lana said. "*Never*. I'll baby-sit your daughter's insane shirt-diving ferret for a year before I get in a car you're driving. And under absolutely *no* circumstances *including* the end of the world as we know it will I ever let you drive *my* car. Heck, I'll let Tobie take me out drinking before I do *that* again! You are the most reckless, lead-footed..."

The reporter shook her head, eyes skyward, as she slid out from behind the wheel. "Why is it that all you people from Smallville, with the exception of one kid, are a bunch of light-weights scared to *drive* a car?"

"That's not driving, that's completely reckless..." Lana began.

Tobie overrode her. "Look, I didn't mean to get you drunk," she explained. "I'm sorry, all right? Besides, I'm not the one who went back to the bar and ordered *three more* freakin' Long Island Iced Teas!"

"You should've told me what was in them," Lana reminded her, but without rancor. "Gin, rum, tequila, *and* vodka? Do I look like I drink any of the above on a regular basis?"

"You're married to Richard," Tobie replied. "That'd drive anyone to drink."

Lana glared, but Lois hit her fellow reporter in the shoulder. "Tobie, shut up! You know how I feel about that topic," she snapped. "Some of us are rather fond of Richard. Do you remember what I told you about him? Hmm? Remember what I said to you the first time you met him - it still applies."

"Someday I'm going to ask you what that was," Lana said, noting the embarrassed expression on Tobie's face with interest. "I'm just glad we did the bachelorette party the week before, not the day before. *Lois* was hung over the next morning, and I can't imagine how horrible that would be tomorrow."

"It was my fault," Maggie said as she got out of the backseat, slipping on her sunglasses. "I was supposed to be staying sober enough to keep an eye on all of you so no one ended up in the hospital or in jail."

Remembering that morning, Lois had to groan. "Yeah, well, from what I can recall, we three didn't exactly help you much in that arena. *Who* dared me to do tequila shots? And *why* did I agree to it?"

"Tobie dared you," Cat said. "And you did it because you left your good sense three vodka sours behind."

"Maggie, I'm not trying to assign blame," Lana told the policewoman gently as they headed to the door, ignoring Tobie and Cat sniping at each other in their wake. "If anyone's at fault, it's me. I didn't *ask* what was in the drink - I thought it was like hard lemonade, just with iced tea instead - and I *never* should've gone back for three of *anything*. We have a saying back home: if you can't run with the big dogs, stay under the porch. And I definitely should've stayed under the porch."

"I don't know about dogs," Tobie said, leaving Cat and Lois alone for the moment. She patted Lana's shoulder with a grin, and continued, "But you're welcome to run with this gang of crazy bitches any time."

"Thank you," Lana replied warmly. "Still, next time I'll stick to something non-alcoholic for the sake of my own sanity. Lois, my keys, please? I'm sure my poor car is traumatized after that..."

"It's a freakin' E320 with a V-6 engine," Lois complained, tossing the keys to her. "That's how it's *meant* to be driven! It ought to be illegal to drive it like someone's grandma's Buick. *Jeez.*"

"Right," Lana said, shaking her head. She'd never wanted to know what it felt like to drive seventy miles an hour on surface streets. "Shall we, ladies? I believe everyone else is already here... Lois, I need you for a few minutes for the final fitting on that dress."

That stopped Lois in mid-stride just outside the entrance. Sighing, she rolled her head back to stare at the ceiling of the garage. *Not again...* There had been several fittings over the last month and no matter how glorious the dress had turned out, she was just about over the poking and prodding. The look on her face was all too akin to her twins' faces when they were told they had to clean their room. Even the tone of her voice was the same, that plea for mercy. "Do I have to? I've got a doctor's note..."

"I thought we were done with final fittings," Tobie groaned. "Is it just Lois, or are we all gonna be subjected to tailor torture?"

"I didn't hear you complaining when we were all lounging around in our underwear, Tobie," Cat teased.

"Yeah, well, why would I?" the *Star* reporter replied. Maggie just sighed heavily, rolling her eyes as she held the door for all of them.

"For the record, Lois is the only one getting 'tailor torture' this afternoon," Lana said. "The rest of you just get to rehearse the wedding until I'm sure you know what you're doing."

"Wedding advice from the woman who got married barefoot on the beach in the Bahamas," Tobie shot back. "Hey, that's got a nice little alliterative ring to it..."

"The *second* wedding," Lana corrected. "For the first I had a big church wedding with all the usual trappings. *Far* worse than this."

Slowly, the reality of how many things were left to do and how much of it revolved around her was closing in. Lois was the last one through the door, dragging her feet again. It was starting to feel too real, too close... "Is it *really* too late to elope?" she muttered.

"The caterer and the band have already been paid, so yes," Lana replied, catching the reporter's shoulder. "Come on, it's not so bad. At least you got Pachelbel's *Canon in D major* instead of '*Here Comes the Bride.*' I *hate* that piece of music, personally, but my mom..."

That effectively cancelled out any jitters that were creeping up on her. "Any song with the alternative lyrics 'Here comes the bride, big fat and wide,' is *not* a good thing," Lois commented sourly, the expression on her face and the tone of her voice making the bridesmaids snicker. "My cousin Eric had seen *Sixteen Candles* on DVD recently and kept singing it all through Lucy's rehearsal. I'll have classical, thanks."

"And I'll completely support you in that," Lana replied, one hand in the middle of the reporter's back to get her moving again.

Lois sighed and stepped forward, remembering how that little debate with her mother had gone. "Thank God, I have *someone* to back me up."

They didn't even make it all the way across the lobby before the daily round of crises

began. Kay, looking as if she wished she'd never gotten involved in this wedding, hurried up to Lana with a notebook in hand. "You want the bad news or the worse news?" were the first words out of her assistant's mouth.

"Both." Now it was the redhead's turn to sigh, still heading for the ballroom with Lois being marched before her. "And I'll go on record as saying that *I'm* starting to wish you eloped, Lois."

Kay laughed shortly before listing the current issues. "First off, the florist screwed up the flowers - some of the roses were pink instead of red. I got that one handled, I think, but if they don't pull through on the correction we might have to run out to another florist and pick up some red roses and hope no one notices that the professional arrangements were tinkered with. Next, the caterer is freaking out because they lost the check."

"They *what*?" Lana asked in clear amazement. Lois' expression said more than words ever could.

"Lost the check," Kay replied, shaking her head slightly. "They know they *received* it, and they know they didn't *cash* it, but they lost it somewhere in the shop and now they're totally bouncing off the walls."

Lois just stood there with crossed arms, her brows knitting. She could feel herself growing annoyed, but she had promised Lana that she'd leave the person-to-person issues to the redhead. Lois had enough stress just going through with the event; she was the wedding planner. Lana had said she could handle it.

Right. More like, 'I can't have you going medieval on the staff before I get you married off, you heathen', Lois thought with a grin. Nevertheless, she weighed in with, "I'd imagine. What kind of idiot loses a check that amount?"

Just then, she heard her thought confirmed out loud. "Thank God Lana's handling this," Cat muttered softly. "At least *she* has a personal assistant to keep track of everything. And less of a tendency to cuss people out for being stupid. Can you imagine *Lois* doing all this herself?"

The mere thought provoked a snort of amusement from Tobie. "They would've eloped. Seriously, look who we're talking about here. We both know Lois wouldn't put up with this herself; she'd bail in a heartbeat and say to hell with the moms and their fancy-schmancy wedding."

"Oh, dear," Lana was meanwhile groaning to Kay, ignoring the whispered conversation behind her. "Remind me who paid the caterer?"

"The mother of the groom," Kay said. "And speaking of moms, that's the best news of all. Mrs. Lane just called a few minutes ago. Her car blew a tire - and I mean it blew out the whole sidewall. She said she ran over something, she and Lucy are fine, but it's going to take at least half an hour for Triple-A to get to where she is. More like forty-five minutes to an hour, in this traffic. They're not that far from here, though."

Hearing that, it was Lois' turn to groan. Closing her eyes in irritation, she threw her hands up, muttering, "Figures. I just told her to take it to the dealership to get it checked, but *no*. She wanted to wait until *after* the wedding. And it blows the day before. *God, Mother...*"

Lana came to a decision in seconds. "Fine." Opening her purse, she took out her car keys and wallet, and handed both to her assistant. "This is what we'll do. Kay, take my car and go meet Ella and Lucy. If you don't mind, I'd like you to let them drive the Mercedes back while you wait for Triple-A."

"No problem," Kay said, trying to hide a smile at the scowl on Lois' face. "And?"

Tobie had crossed her arms, watching Kay closely. "Wish I had somebody to run around

following my orders," she whispered under her breath.

Finding an outlet for her exasperation, Lois couldn't let it pass by. "They'd quit and file sexual harassment in a week," Lois snarked from where she stood, unable to resist letting them know she heard them this time. "This is why you'll never make editor, Raines. Tradition holds that every editor makes a pass at their secretary at some point, and you'd have to go one step farther to prove you're better than the boys."

"I *am* better than the boys," Tobie said drolly, looking bored. "And I don't *want* management. That's only for people too old and too lazy to report."

"So you keep telling us. Probably so *much* better that you'd drag your poor secretary off to the supply closet," Lois returned. Now thoroughly distracted from the current crisis by this line of discussion, she walked over to confront her with a smirk. "And you know what? You can *bite me* about management - I didn't really get much *choice* in the matter!"

Before Lois had a chance to think about her choice of words, Cat was on her. "Oh, speaking of supply closets, you mean like *you* dragged a recently-appointed International editor off to the supply closet last year?" the news anchor interjected sweetly.

"Hey!" Lois shouted, only now realizing how she had set herself up. "I think you're misinformed, *as usual*, Ms. Grant. I was already *in* the supply closet legitimately; he came in to find me and, well, it was barely more than a kiss no matter *what* you heard. And if you know about it, it was likely you heard plenty. Besides, I'm marrying him - what more do you want?"

"Wait a sec," Cat replied, eyes gleaming, "isn't that what Perry White said about Loueen? And now your boss has a baby on the way..." Lois just glared, unable to make a snappy comeback to that.

"After that, run by the caterer's and pay them with my debit card," Lana was saying to Kay. She was aware that Lois had stepped away, could hear the whispering behind her but couldn't make out the words, and on the whole she preferred it that way. "My PIN is 5784. I'll tell Martha to put a stop payment on the check she wrote to the caterer's, and she can pay me the amount. Oh, and while you're out, stop by an ATM and pull some cash for tips - I think one of the empty company lockbags is in the trunk of my car anyway, so you can use that to carry the cash. About three hundred ought to do it."

"Sure thing," Kay replied, grinning. "I'll get right on that, boss."

"You know I hate that," Lana scolded as Kay went to carry out orders. "And *don't* get a speeding ticket in my car!"

"C'mon, it'll burn the carbon out!" Kay called jokingly.

"Lois already did that on the way here. The car - and I - will never be the same," Lana replied, getting a laugh from her assistant. Then she turned to the reporters and one policewoman following at her heels. "All right, you ladies. You get a reprieve from rehearsal until Ella gets here. Lois, come on, let's do the final fitting. You look like you lost a pound or two."

That pulled Lois right out of her joking with the other girls. "Bull," Lois said, looking affronted at that and then a little guilty. "You *cannot* tell that by looking." It always happened when she was worried. And, with the big day drawing nearer and nearer, her stress levels were creeping up as well.

Lana didn't argue with her, just shaking her head slightly. She turned back to head into the ballroom, and nearly ran into Richard. The rest of the bridal party filed past them as Lana gave him a quick hug. "Hello, darling."

"Hi," he said, stealing a kiss. "Not that I'm complaining, but you *do* realize you just gave

your assistant your money and your car, right? I would've gladly gone and gotten Ella and Lucy."

The redhead just chuckled and caught his lapels gently. "Did it ever occur to you that I might want you here?" she purred, and kissed him again lingeringly. "C'mon, I've got to do Lois' final fitting and see what the decorators have been up to since I left to pick up the girls..."

This was becoming a very familiar sight whenever this particular pair of newlyweds was around. It had taken some time to get used to it, for the slight feeling of wounded jealousy to fade; both Lana and Richard had been chagrined any time they thought Lois had seen it. Now, four months later, she could only be happy for them. Especially Richard. But that didn't mean she didn't heckle them about it. Watching the two of them with an affectionate shake of her head, Lois rolled her eyes at Cat and Tobie and said in a raised voice, "Oh, for the love of God, here they go again... Quick, someone pass me the insulin."

And they were getting pretty good at ignoring her. Sliding her arm around his waist, Lana nudged Richard toward the ballroom. He draped his arm around her shoulders - she happened to be the perfect height for them to walk like this - and they walked into the ballroom together.

Chaos reigned, as expected. With the wedding so close, everyone was trying to manage the last-minute adjustments to the ballroom itself; the flower arrangements Kay had mentioned, the seating, the placement of the musicians, the positioning of the aisle itself. And this wasn't even going into the garden outside, which would play host to the reception. The mere thought of all of the things that could go wrong roared up in Lois while she tried, with little success, to fight it back. And then she heard the sound of running feet and giggling voices nearby.

She had known that Richard was bringing Ron and Clark from the office, her fiancé being allowed to work until the day of the wedding. The reminder set Lois' teeth on edge, but knowing that they would have the two weeks following this to themselves did a bit more for her morale. The boys had also picked up the twins from school, and they were currently chasing each other around the huge space, Jason in his Official Ring-Bearer t-shirt and Kala proudly wearing her Flower Girl tracksuit. Ron and Clark were supposed to be outside somewhere, setting up *those* decorations for tomorrow, although most of the reception decorating would be done the morning of the wedding. *Tomorrow*, Lois thought, biting her lip.

She forced her attention back to the present, determined to take this moment by moment. Watching Jason and Kala dodge adults gleefully, their mother sighed. All things considered, the two of them had been remarkably well-behaved throughout the last few weeks. And really, could she blame them for their excitement? Every effort had been made to make the twins a part of this event, up to and including a unity candle for both the adults and the children.

Just then, Jason nearly collided with the florist and Lois was forced to put an end to their little game. "All right, enough, you two," Lois called, crossing the grandly-decorated room to her little balls of energy. "Me and Daddy already told you that you had to behave. No running. C'mere, you two. I swear it's like I adopted you from the zoo or something..."

"Can Captain Jack be in the wedding?" Kala asked breathlessly as she ran up to her mother and jumped into her arms for a hug. "Betcha they make *tuc'cedas* for ferrets!"

"Gazeera too!" Jason called, latching on to Lois' leg. For a moment, Lois staggered at the onslaught of twin before she righted herself. Thank God they hadn't decided that they both wanted to be held in her arms at once.

If the mere notion of the upcoming wedding made her queasy, this just made it worse. "Hell no, no animal mascots of the apocalypse at the wedding," Lois said, kissing Kala's cheek

before letting her slide down and kissing Jason on top of his head. Just as the two of them began to fuss about calling their pets that, Lois stopped and seemed to think about it seriously for a moment. "No, wait. Now that I think about it, sure, Kala. I bet everyone would love it if I threw the weasel into the crowd instead of the bouquet. And instead of tossing the garter, Clark could toss the lizard."

Both twins crossed their arms and frowned up at her, mirroring the stern position that Kal-El used when scolding their mother. So used to them mimicking her, Lois had to laugh at the sight of Kala and Jason both in the 'Annoyed Superman' pose. "Mommy! Don' be mean to Cap'n Jack!" Kala pouted.

Lois just snickered, then caught sight of the person to blame for those godforsaken beasts being in her life in the first place... "Perry! You know one of these days I'm gonna throttle you for buying my kids *wild freakin' animals* as pets!"

"What now?" the older man grouched as he came toward her, one arm around Loueen's quite expanded waist. "Did that little bitty lizard nip you again? I swear, Lois, you used to be a tough-as-nails reporter, but the last few months I've had more whine from you than Napa Valley produces annually."

Lois growled incoherently, but not even that could mask her obvious affection. "You realize Loueen saved your life, right, old man? If she hadn't slipped up and caught pregnant, I wouldn't feel the least bit guilty about strangling you with your own tie. Now the kids want their pets in the wedding. Thanks a freakin' lot."

"Slip up, hell," Perry retorted, tousling Jason's hair and kissing Kala's cheek. "She *planned* this. Didn't you, you scheming minx?"

"You love it, you crusty old sonofagun," Loueen teased right back. "Lois, you should've seen him with the baby name book the other night - it was actually cute."

"Woman, I've never been cute in my life," Perry protested just a little too much.

"Sure, Chief, you were born with a cigar in your mouth and a scowl on your face, and your first words were, 'You call this a maternity ward?' Riiiiight," Lois snarked, one hand on her hip as she grinned at him skeptically.

"Shut up, soon-to-be Mrs. Kent," Perry growled.

"Mrs. *Lane-Kent*, thank you very much," Lois shot back heatedly, that left eyebrow arching.

Before she and Perry could really get into their usual round of acidic banter, Lana caught her elbow lightly. "Perry, Loueen, thank you both for being here," she said smoothly. "Unfortunately, we can't start the rehearsal yet. Ella and Lucy aren't here; they were having car trouble. Kay's on her way to get them, but until then, I need to kidnap Lois for a few minutes. May I?"

"Sure," Perry said with a genuinely fond smile for his niece. "Stab her with a pin for me, will you? Might let out some of the grouchiness."

Loueen just rolled her eyes. "Oh dear God. If we don't stop them they'll grouse at each other all day. Lois, scram."

"Do I *have* to?" Lois grumbled as Lana led her away, the twins tagging along.

Lana noticed that Richard was trying to unobtrusively follow them as well. Trying to sneak a glimpse of the dress, which so far they'd managed to keep all the men from seeing. "Hey, Jason, sweetheart? Why don't you and Richard go check on the caterers for the rehearsal dinner for me?" She gave Richard her most charming smile, and added, "If you could, love, make sure the guest book and the commemorative silver platter are up front. Oh,

and check on the place cards..."

"Hey, I thought we eloped so I didn't have to deal with all of this," Richard said.

"No, we eloped because you didn't want to give me the chance to run away to Italy again," Lana replied. "Besides, *you* got married without having to worry about all these details. The least you can do is help Clark and Lois - especially considering his other obligations?"

With a grin, Lois added, "Forget it, flyboy. That dress is staying top secret until tomorrow afternoon. Don't make me call security. "

Sighing, he admitted defeat. "C'mon, Jason. Help your poor Daddy Richard get through this madness." With hugs and kisses for their mom and Lana, he gladly went with him.

"Nosy devil, isn't he?" Lana commented, all three of them watching the boys go. "All right, Lois, come on. Looks like the coast is clear. Soonest begun, soonest done."

They hurried toward what was normally a small conference room, which had been commandeered into the bridal room because it connected to the larger space. Kala had kept hold of her mother's hand, grinning; only the girls were allowed to see the dress before the actual wedding, and she had been absolutely arrogant about the privilege. "Can I wear *my* dress?" she pleaded. "It's so pretty."

"It is very pretty, but not half so much as the little girl who's going to wear it tomorrow," Lana told her. "Wait one more day, sweetheart. We want it to be a surprise, remember?"

"I think Daddy's gonna like Mommy's dress," Kala whispered. "But I think he's gonna like the first one best."

"He'd better," Lois muttered, while Lana chuckled. It had been Kay who absolutely *insisted* that Lois have two dresses - the first and only L. Lang original bridal gown would *not* be worn to an outdoor reception. So a second gown had been purchased and altered, something slightly more in line with the mothers' expectations. On one thing, though, Lois utterly refused to compromise: the reception gown was also ivory, not white.

They were headed for the makeshift bridal room and found the bridesmaids already there. "Figured you might need a lookout," Cat said. "The boys have been trying awfully hard to see the dress, haven't they?"

"Thank you," Lana said as she shepherded Lois and Kala inside. Cat, Tobie, and Maggie followed them in, the *Star* reporter leaning against the door protectively. "Clark's been behaving, but Richard acts as though we have the Ark of the Covenant in here or something."

"It's driving him nuts that his wife designed a dress for his ex, and he hasn't seen it," Maggie told her. "These reporters can't stand a secret. They'll risk their lives to find out whatever you tell them they're not allowed to know."

"Amen," Lois, Cat, and Tobie all said at once. Lois gave a snort of laughter, and then caught Lana's meaningful glance as the redhead carefully unzipped the garment bag containing The Dress. Just seeing it brought the jitters back, although she refused to let the others begin to guess. "All right! Sheesh. Lana, it's got a corset back - it's meant to be adjusted. Can't we leave this 'til tomorrow?"

"No," Lana said. "Lois, it's not that bad. C'mon, hurry up."

As the raven-haired reporter sighed theatrically and started unbuttoning her blouse, Tobie grinned evilly and said, "Hey, I've got a couple twenties in my purse. Want me to wave 'em at you so you feel more at home?"

The ensuing conversation got Lois out of the dress suit she'd been wearing and into the bridal gown quickly, but even Cat was slightly disturbed by the amount of profanity she knew was only averted for Kala's sake. "All right, lighten up, you two," she said at last. "Miss

Munchkin there is gonna start thinking that Mommy and Aunt Tobie aren't really friends."

"And this innocent Midwestern girl might lose her hearing," Lana said, adjusting the long, lacy skirt. She moved on to the corset-style back of the dress and commented, "It's a wonder your children haven't acquired a taste for soap."

Kala, who had dismissed the irritated grumbling as business as usual between the rival reporters, piped up to remark, "Both our daddies say not to use Mommy's driving words. *Ever*. 'Cause they're really, *really* bad an' they know we're not bad kids so we shouldn't use bad words."

"Thanks for the news-flash, Kal," Lois retorted, casting her daughter a sardonic look as she tried to stand ram-rod straight.

Cat grinned and hugged Kala as she misapprehended her mother's comment and preened. Lois just snorted and shook her head as the blonde woman praised her child. "Sounds perfectly logical to me. Smart girl, listening to your Daddy - both of them. Clark never swears, does he?"

"Never has," Lana responded, not looking up from her task. "With the possible exception of damnation. Neither do I, as a matter of fact, and you'll be shocked to learn it's possible to make yourself understood without cursing."

"That look on Lois' face means she's resisting the urge to bellow something that would set your tender little Kansas ears on fire," Tobie said drolly, as Kala scuffled her feet and looked reproachfully at her mother. "Some of us just feel the need to blow off steam every now and then, and swearing is better than shooting your boss."

"Amen. You have no idea how often that's saved Perry's life." Lois heaved a sigh, and that little bit of relaxation made it clear that she had, indeed, lost a pound or two.

She might as well have committed treason from the look the designer gave her. "Didn't I tell you not to lose weight?" Lana scolded, lacing up the back of the wedding dress more tightly. "Lois, you fret too much."

It was clear from the uncomfortable look on her face that Lois was aware that she had done it, too. Extreme stress always had that effect on her and this week definitely went into the 'stressful' category. "Did you just say 'fret' in a sentence that didn't involve guitars?" Lois snarked back, changing the topic. "What the heck is up with Smallville, anyway? Does the local TV station only run shows from the fifties or something? Next thing you know you'll be trying to get me to swap recipes or something."

"Only if I want my kitchen to explode," Lana told her, grinning. "Although I'd gladly pick up that pumpkin cheesecake recipe if you're willing to share..."

"Bite me, cheerleader," Lois retorted.

"You do realize that your only insult is incredibly outdated, right?"

The bridesmaids all snickered at the pair of them. At first, Tobie and Cat hadn't quite believed that Lois and Lana were really friends. It sounded like a strange way to befriend someone, by marrying their ex, but it seemed to have worked for the two women. Mutual respect and admiration were very much evident, and unlike the rest of Lois' friendships, the relationship didn't border on combative. Even Tobie and Cat, her long-term friends, had to admit that Lois' competitiveness and keenly sarcastic sense of humor could be a little abrasive at times. But Lana seemed able to shrug off Lois' sharp remarks without needing to respond in kind, and Lois in turn curbed her tongue around the redhead.

Not that Lois didn't pull her chain, as well. It was just that she didn't do it so hard. Making a face, she shot back, "Well excuse me if I can't give a proper comeback to Ms. Oh-So-Virtuous-and-Pure. *You* could've worn a white dress..."

"And did," Lana returned the volley easily, grinning as she pulled the laces tight. "In spite of the fact that I kissed *your* husband back in high school."

"Yeah, and we all know I kissed your husband, too. For the last three years." Her tone was superior until they saw her flinch, Lana putting a little more pressure on the laces. "Hey, I need to be able to breathe."

"You need this dress not to fall off halfway through the ceremony. And the funny thing is, Richard's never complained. Imagine that." Everyone saw Lana's little grin and Lois' unamused glare over her shoulder at her. "Okay, take a deep breath for me."

"He's not stupid enough to tell *you* that," Lois muttered under her breath to save face, obeying with a heavy sigh. The dress fit just tightly enough through the body, but was not uncomfortable. "Are we done here?"

Lana walked around her, eyeing the dress critically. "Thankfully we won't have to take in any of the seams. But you listen to me - if you lose another *ounce* I will be very disappointed in you."

"Okay, *mother*," Lois said, glaring at her. "What am I, six?"

"I am!" Kala said, beaming.

"And amazingly, you're better behaved than your mom," Lana said, ruffling Kala's hair lightly. "Okay, hair down. Let's get an idea of how the final look of it will be, even if we don't have the veil with us at the moment."

"Hey Lois, were you that cute at that age?" Cat asked, sharing a conspiratorial wink with Kala.

"Almost," Lois replied as she pulled her hair out of the topknot it had been in, shaking the length of it out so it fell around her shoulders. Catching the wistful look of awe her daughter was eyeing the dress with, she smiled fondly at Kala. *One of my little miracles*, she thought, looking at that small face. "But I think my little girl there far exceeds any record of cuteness I ever set. Love you, baby."

That caught Kala's attention, making those hazel eyes meet hers. "Love you, Mommy." The huge grin that broke over those rosebud lips made Lois momentarily forget about all of this wedding nonsense.

Until suddenly the bridal room door came open, almost knocking Tobie over. She whirled around and grabbed the frame, holding the door nearly shut and also blocking the view of whoever was outside. "Who the hell... Oh. It's *you*."

"Hi," Richard said. "I'm looking for my wife - the decorators have a question for her. Mind getting out of the doorway, Raines?"

Lois groaned, rolling her eyes. Just when they were almost done... "I knew it was too good to be true. Richard, for the love of God, you can wait five minutes! We're *busy* in here!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Tobie purred in her most saccharine voice. "The bridal room is girls-only ... Dick. Don't worry; we'll be done in a second." The way she smiled at him was merely an excuse to bare her teeth; Tobie was the only one of Lois' friends of whom Richard had never approved, and the feeling was definitely mutual.

"Stop it! Stop it right now! Tobie! Richard! *It still applies!*" Lois yelled.

The *Star* reporter got her meaning instantly, giving a disgusted sigh, but it took Richard a second longer to remember. "Oh for the love of... Lois, c'mon. No way."

"*You're* saying no way?" Tobie hissed, wrinkling her nose. "Sick."

"Then knock it off, both of you," Lois retorted. "This is my wedding rehearsal and I don't want you two stirring each other up. So can it."

Richard gave a long-suffering sigh. "Hey, Lana - when you get done here, come back to the Land of the Sane, please? We miss you."

"Goodbye, Richard," Lois called in her most firm tone, staring at the half-open door in vexation. "Your wife will be out in a minute and so will we. Close it, Tobie."

Tobie shut the door on him, muttering, "You don't even have a summer home in Sane, you psychotic flyboy."

Lana just arched an eyebrow at her as she helped Lois out of the bridal gown. "That *is* my husband you're talking about, Ms. Raines."

"Oh crap, you used my last name, watch me tremble," Tobie replied sarcastically. "Look, I've never gotten along with the guy - and *he* started it."

"Yes, but *you* could stop it," Lana pointed out, keeping her voice neutral. "You bait him, Tobie. I've watched you do it."

"Yeah, well..." Tobie began, only to get cut off by Lois.

"Lana, forget it. It's no use. There's a sure-fire cure for what ails them both," the *Planet* reporter said, with a glare for Tobie. "And they both know what it is and that I have no problems *reminding* them what it is."

"In his dreams," Tobie snapped. "And my nightmares."

"Enough, girls," Maggie finally said. "Lana's got a point, Tobe. You do egg him on, and if you wanted all this nonsense to stop, you could make that happen. And quite frankly, I'd be delighted if you would stop harassing him."

"Okay, *fine*," Tobie said grudgingly. "I'll try to be civil to him. For your sake, Mags. If it was just Lois I'd drive him nuts just to tick her off."

Now it was Kala's turn to utter that long-suffering sigh. Those little arms were crossed again when Lois looked over that her child. "How come everybody's mean to Daddy Richard?" Kala asked her mother worriedly, her lower lip pouting just a bit.

But it was Lana who answered her. "Aunt Tobie and Daddy Richard have way too much in common for their own good," she said, ignoring Tobie's indignant squawk and the knowing chuckles from everyone else. "With that, everyone, it's time to go out there and rehearse. If Ella and Lucy aren't here yet, we can at least get started blocking things out."

That was met by groans from everyone but Kala, who cheered and started looking around for her little flower basket.

"Someone get her a top hat and a whip," Richard muttered, rearranging the rows of chairs. "I didn't know I was marrying the ringmaster of this circus..."

"I need a little more clearance down the central aisle," Lana called out. "Thank you, love. Clark, hon, if you're finished with the podium, give Richard a hand, please?"

"You're welcome," Richard called back, and gave Clark a long-suffering look over his shoulder. "I wouldn't do this for anyone else, you know that?"

"Maybe I'll autograph your plane," Clark joked gently, grinning as he set the chairs in the next row back a little farther. "Seriously, though. Thank you."

"Yeah, well, I *still* haven't gotten a look at that damn dress," Richard grouched. "No one else has, either, and the girls won't say anything except how awesome it is. And none of the groomsmen has any idea - except Maggie, and she won't tell, either." Giving Clark a speculative look, he added, "I know you haven't stolen a look ... that doesn't bother you?"

"Not at all," Clark said. "I'll see it tomorrow. In the meantime, I trust Lana's sense of style. Besides, I'm marrying *Lois*, not the dress. She may never wear it again, but I'll see her

every day."

Richard just shook his head. "How the heck can you be so *calm*? I mean, you're patient about the dress, you don't mind being ordered around by my wife and the two moms, and you even get along with *Raines*. It's like you're some kind of Zen god or something."

"Technically, none of the Buddhist faiths have gods," Clark informed him. When Richard gave him a speculative look, Clark just smiled. "I studied all the major religions - it was part of the world culture lessons from my father. I couldn't limit myself to understanding just *one* society, even if I do spend most of my time here. This *planet* is my home, not just this country or this city."

"Heavy," Richard remarked. "Next time I write an article, I'm gonna call you a citizen of the world."

"Lois did it eight years ago, shortly after we met. May 11th, page four, third paragraph. That was the fifth interview."

Richard had to stop and stand up, staring at Clark. "Perfect recall, too?"

"Yes."

"Does *she* know that?"

"Yes."

"And she still argues with you, knowing you can quote her chapter and verse if she contradicts herself?"

Clark leaned on one of the chairs, chuckling to himself softly. "Nothing stops Lois from something she wants to do. It's one of the reasons why I love her."

Richard just stared at him for a few moments longer, shaking his head slowly. "Man, if you weren't my hero before, you are now. I *know* Lois, and in some of her moods, wanting to marry her qualifies you for sainthood."

"Boys, a little less chatting, a little more chair-arranging, please," Lana called out. "I don't know about you two, but I'd like to get done so we can all have dinner..."

They both looked at her and shared an amused laugh, redoubling their efforts on the seating. Perry and Ron came to lend a hand, and even the bridesmaids got involved, complaining the entire time. The only person missing was the bride; Lois had taken the twins out for a walk. They hadn't seen Clark on his way in to help with the interior decorations, and he was starting to miss his fiancée.

Once the aisle was widened to Lana's specifications, everyone got set up to run through the rehearsal one last time. "I'll just go find Lois and the kids," Clark said quickly, shoving his glasses up. He hurried off to the garden to look for them before anyone could stop him, wanting a moment with his family before they all got swept up in the mad rush to get things done.

His family. At last, he and Lois and the twins were finally here; tomorrow they would be a family in fact as well as in the heart. He had legally adopted the twins, at last silencing that little bit of doubt caused by the blank lines on their birth certificates, and both children had elected to take his name - though they didn't exactly give up being Lanes, either. Kala was hyphenating like her mother, and Jason had taken Lane as his middle name. With tomorrow's ceremony, they would officially be the Lane-Kents, and it wouldn't be a moment too soon for Clark.

He found the three of them just outside the doors, Lois sitting on one of the benches in the garden while Kala and Jason chased each other, blowing bubbles with stolen wedding favors. Clark smiled to watch them, remembering the discussion a couple of weeks ago. Lois

had blanched when she'd seen the cost of environmentally-friendly dissolvable rice, but Lana had insisted that they would *not* have a bunch of exploding pigeons to herald their wedding. Lois had completely lost it, laughing so hard at the image that Lana had to thump her on the back, and they had gone with a mixture of bubbles in bell-shaped containers and the bird-safe rice.

Clark must've chuckled out loud, because Lois turned to look at him, tossing her hair over her shoulder. She had been a little shy the last few days, the enormous reality of all this crashing down on her, and he half expected her to be coy now. But Lois saw the grin on his face and smiled in return, the bright and open smile she so rarely wore. Seeing that, Clark glanced around for witnesses, and finding none, he rushed to her side and swept her into his arms.

Lois yelped, clutching his neck as he kissed her, and both twins laughed as Daddy spun Mommy around.

Let No Man Put Asunder

The morning of...

Richard unlocked Lois' apartment door early in the morning and headed inside, whispering to Lana, "Be quiet. If she's not up yet, I don't want to wake her."

"She's your ex, not a hibernating bear," Lana whispered back. "Besides, *someone* has to wake her if we're going to get her and Kala to the spa in time."

"Just let me put coffee on and get the kids up," Richard replied, moving easily through the apartment. They'd been over often enough to visit, and were planning to stay here for a week to watch the twins while Lois and Clark went on their honeymoon, so both of them were comfortable in the apartment.

While Richard started brewing coffee, Lana glanced through the latest pictures the twins had made and hung on the refrigerator. Jason seemed quite the portraitist - she quickly recognized several drawings of Lois and Clark. And then, to her immense and unexpected joy, she saw a drawing titled 'My Family' which included *everyone*. Both grandmothers, the Troupes, and even she and Richard were represented. "Richard, look," she whispered, nudging him.

He grinned just as broadly as she had, and then opened the fridge. "Damn, she's got Panera bagels," he said to himself. "And that hazelnut spread..."

"Leave that alone," Lana hissed at him. "We're not here to raid her fridge, Richard!"

"Speak for yourself," he replied. "Besides, who says I'm taking these bagels for me? I'm just making the twins breakfast."

"Yeah, right," Lana sighed. "Richard, shoo. Go make her coffee and I'll fix the bagels for everyone - you included, you shameless mooch."

He rolled his eyes but set about making three cups of coffee. Not without a final mutter of protest. "We're house-sitting and twins-sitting for a week; the least she owes me is a bagel."

"Hush," Lana scolded him as she spread the hazelnut cream on five bagels. "We both leaped at the chance to have the twins all to ourselves for an entire week, and you know you love the chance to be back in Metropolis again."

"You're right," Richard conceded, "as usual. Besides, you realize that that balcony out there is the one where the first Superman interview took place? It should be on the national register of historic places."

Lana took Lois' coffee and her own from him, picking up two bagels for herself and the reporter. "Sometimes you are *such* a fanboy, love," she commented, kissing him. "I'm going to get Lois."

"Seriously, put the coffee down and leave," Richard told her. "Lois is *dangerous* in the morning. Let me get the twins up and sic them on her."

"So she can yell at them instead of you? Let me handle it." Shaking her head at his silliness, Lana headed into Lois' bedroom, expertly balancing the bagels and coffee.

"I love you," Richard called after her as he went in the opposite direction to wake Jason and Kala. "I'll miss you - I'll write you a great obituary."

Rolling her eyes, the redhead went into the darkened room, where Lois was merely a lump under the covers. "Good morning, Lois," Lana said gently.

Lois growled in her sleep, moving around just a bit, which gave Lana pause for a moment. This might actually be as dangerous as everyone claimed... *Oh, please. Lois isn't half as vicious as she lets people think she is. You know perfectly well that most of it is a front.*

Besides, she wouldn't harm anyone who brings her coffee. That's a proven fact,

according to Clark. With that comforting thought, Lana sat down on the edge of the bed, placing the bagels on the nightstand, and held Lois' coffee mug just in front of her while sipping from her own. "Come on, it's time to wake up," she said soothingly. "You have a busy day ahead of you. Coffee and breakfast await."

For a long moment, Lois didn't move or acknowledge her presence. Lana sipped coffee patiently, barely able to hear Richard at the other end of the house coaxing the twins out of bed. She knew Jason was sometimes as difficult to wake up as his mother, but Kala at least ought to be excited to start the day...

While she wasn't looking, Lois reached out from under the covers and took the coffee mug from her, sipping the hot black liquid before she even sat up fully. Lana had to chuckle at her; that wavy hair was currently a mass of tangles, and those keen hazel eyes were mere slits in her scowling expression, pausing in inhaling her coffee just long enough to let out an enormous yawn. Giving a low groan in the back of her as she stretched slightly, she happened to glance at the redhead's face. "Wha's so funny?" Lois grumbled.

Lana fought to hide her smile. "Your hair is an absolute wreck," she told her, unable to conceal all of her amusement. "Come here, let me see if I can do something with it. Breakfast is on the table there - we broke into the bagels. Sorry."

"That's why I bought 'em," Lois replied, a trifle less grouchy as she sighed and turned her back to Lana in defeat. If it was as bad as she said, the designer might have better luck than she would. "Having bagels keeps Richard out of the éclairs in the freezer. You might wanna learn that bait 'n' switch trick, living with him. He'll steal your food."

Lana chuckled as she started gently untangling Lois' hair. "I'll remember that."

In Jason's bedroom, Richard had disentangled the twins from each other and gotten them to at least sit up. They now had separate bedrooms, though they were still sleeping in the same bed, simply alternating rooms. Dr. Marrin said that was fine for now, and their comfort and security was of primary importance. He had turned out to be utterly professional where the twins were concerned, and luckily Jason and Kala hadn't spilled the truth about their father.

It almost garnered him a little respect from Richard - and considering that he'd seen the blackmail photos, it took a *lot* to respect Kinky Briefcase. Richard smirked a little as Jason hopped out of bed, his sandy hair still tousled. He was *still* wearing the Godzilla pajamas he'd gotten for Christmas. Kala saw her brother getting up, and in an effort to beat him she dove out of bed and raced past him.

Richard blinked in amazement; she was *fast*. She'd gone by like a greyhound, her feet thumping loudly on the carpeted floor, and Jason just glared at her with a surly expression. "Girls," he grumbled, scrubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"C'mon, tiger," Richard said, patting his son's shoulder. "Up and at 'em. Today's the wedding, remember?"

The transformation that came over the little boy's face was amazing. From grumpy and sleepy he went directly to wide-eyed and excited. "I get to carry the rings today!"

"Exactly. And you have to look your best, so hop to it." Richard shepherded him into the bathroom, where Kala was already standing on the footstool and brushing her teeth. She gave Richard a wide, foamy grin when he tousled her hair.

Fortunately, the twins were fairly quick about their morning routine once they were out of bed. Richard had them ready in less than half an hour - although *not* dressed in their wedding finery. They would change into those clothes at the last minute to keep them from getting dirty.

Once Jason and Kala were seated on the patio, eating bagels and drinking juice, Richard went to check on Lana. He hadn't heard any snarling from Lois or calls for help from Lana, but that didn't necessarily mean that his ex hadn't killed his wife silently.

To his surprise, Lois actually looked halfway awake, drinking her coffee like a normal person instead of hunching over the mug like an angry hawk. Wonder of wonders, Lana was actually sitting there untangling her hair - which Lois generally wouldn't let anyone do. The slightest pull on one of those knots would make her yelp and curse and swat at the offender. As it was, Lois actually looked slightly blissed out, leaning into it. Richard shook his head in disbelief. "The kids are up," he said conversationally. "Lana, I don't know what kind of horse-whisperer mojo you have goin' on here, but you should seriously take this act on the road. That right there is the equivalent of sticking your head in a lion's mouth."

Well, obviously it hadn't blissed her out *that* much. Although by the sparks flaring in those eyes, that woke her up just a bit more. "Shuddup, you big jerk. You come over here, I dare you."

"Hush, Lois, just ignore him," Lana soothed, then gave her husband a disapproving look. "Richard, it's not difficult. All you have to do is keep quiet until she gets some caffeine in her system."

"Yeah, well, I've tried that, and I got coffee burns all down my leg."

"Because you bonked me in the nose, jackass. Not only that, I didn't get to sleep until three in the freakin' morning! And then I didn't even get the damn coffee because you spilled it when I hit you!" Lois snapped, glaring at him savagely.

He remembered why she'd been awake that late ... unfortunately, he tended to wake refreshed after a long night, while Lois woke up grumpy. "Hey, I was trying to hasten your evolution from primordial ooze to human," he said, grinning slightly.

"Richard, hush," Lana scolded. She didn't see Lois' evilly amused little smile - any comeback Richard wanted to make was stifled by the presence of his wife. "You're just making her worse."

"Fine," he said, taking a step closer. "I'll take Jason out - the groomsmen are having brunch together. You ladies have fun at the spa, and watch Kala; she's hyper this morning."

"I wonder who stirred her up and made her that way?" Lana asked rhetorically. "Go on, darling. I'll see you at the Centennial. Love you."

Daring Lois' proximity to kiss his wife, he replied with a grin. "Love you more."

Once he was gone, Lana managed to coax Lois the rest of the way awake despite her muttering. A second cup of coffee had helped this state of affairs along. She got Kala dressed in her flower girl tracksuit again, since the little girl insisted on it, and when Lois came out of the shower Lana ambushed her with the hooded shirt the bridesmaids had purchased. "Lana, come on! No," Lois protested vehemently, trying not to notice the redhead's reflection in the mirror as she brushed her hair. "You are not getting me in that thing; I *told* Cat she was a sick woman for even buying it. It is *not happening*, Lang. Get over it."

"Lois, it won't hurt you to wear it for *one morning*," Lana said cajolingly. "Please? All the bridesmaids are wearing their matching shirts for the trip to the spa."

The reporter crossed her arms and glared. "Okay, first of all, I don't wear hoodies. Secondly, it says *The Future Mrs. Kent* on the back, and I'm going to *Lane-Kent*, thank you very much. Third, it's got a great big fake engagement ring attached to one shoulder. Don't I have enough humiliation coming up later today?"

Her own reply was a pleading gaze from sea-green eyes ... and then a wounded look from

the pair of hazel ones that mirrored her own. She hadn't even known Kala was in the room. "You don't wanna match with me, Mommy?" Kala asked.

And now there were two sets of disappointed eyes gazing back at her over her shoulder. *Just give in this once. It'll be easier...* Lois groaned, covering her face with her hands. "Why did you have to gang up on me?" she whispered. "Oh, *fine*. It's only for one morning..."

The rest of the bridal party, including both mothers, met them at the spa, and everyone exclaimed over Lois' shirt. Tobie, Cat, and Lucy got to wear red shirts that had the word *Bridesmaid* written across the front in glitter, and someone had found similar black shirts reading *Mother of the Bride* and *Mother of the Groom* for Ella and Martha. Even Kala strutted around proudly in her white tracksuit that proclaimed, in bright pink lettering, her flower girl status.

This trip was Lana's treat; in spite of Lois' insistence that the dress and her wedding planner services were gift enough, Lana had quietly booked them all for facials and manicures the morning of the wedding. Including Kala - the dark-haired little girl quickly became the darling of the spa staff with her excited antics. When everyone was getting clay mask facials, which they had to leave on for fifteen minutes, one of the spa attendants came by with a tray of cucumber slices and put one on each closed eyelid. Kala watched this with her head cocked and a frown line beginning to appear between her dark brows, until she could contain her curiosity no longer and asked Ella, "How come you're puttin' *food* on your *face*? That's gross!"

Ella laughed. "It keeps your eyes from looking puffy," she explained. "Gets rid of dark circles, too."

Kala scowled, looking from her Nana to her mother. "Puttin' pickles on your eyes does that?"

"Yup," Lucy confirmed, as the rest of the girls snickered.

Still frowning at her mother, Kala leaned forward and whispered, "Nana, Mommy draws dark circles around her eyes. On purpose."

"That's eyeliner, sweetie, and it's something different," Ella said. The other women tried to contain their laughter, Lucy failing conspicuously, as she continued, "The cucumbers - not pickles, pickles are what cucumbers turn into - help get rid of those nasty gray baggy spots *under* your eyes. Which you don't have, because you're young."

"Oh," Kala replied thoughtfully. "It's still weird."

"Feels nice, though," Cat told her. "Give it a try, honey."

Kala obeyed, looking suspiciously up at the attendant who placed two thin slices of cucumber over her eyes. The rest of the group realized she evidently approved when they heard her snoring a few minutes later.

Lois had been uncharacteristically silent throughout this, and Ella reached out with a mother's intuition to take her hand. She could feel the tension vibrating in her oldest daughter, and squeezed her hand gently. "Lois, it's going to be just fine," she whispered.

"Are you still stressing, Lane?" Tobie called, softening her usual harsh banter. "C'mon, it's a wedding, not a root canal. Some of us actually envy you."

"Yeah, and you're marrying *Clark*," Cat added. "He's like the sweetest guy on the face of the earth. Quite a catch; relax and take pride in it."

Lois couldn't help chuckling a little bitterly. What did *they* know, anyway? She wasn't just marrying Clark; she was marrying *Superman*, too. This was her wedding with Kal-El, and every time the two of them had tried to be together in the past, something had gone catastrophically wrong. She'd found out his identity, and the Zod Squad arrived to turn their

world upside down. They'd almost patched up their relationship while searching for the twins last year, and then *she* had gotten kidnapped and Luthor almost killed *both* of them. What would it be this time? An asteroid? His father's dire pronouncements? Or maybe that old standby of a first-time groom, cold feet? It could be as simple as that - why would he, with everything he was and could be, want to settle for her? Lois Lane, nasty-tempered over-caffeinated journalist, a woman with a permanent chip on her shoulder...

Ella was holding her left hand, and now someone else took her right. A work-worn hand, lightly callused, the joints thickened by arthritis, but the skin papery-soft as only an older person's could be. *Martha*. "I am so very glad that you and my son are getting married," she said quietly. "I'm delighted that he has found such deep and profound love, and I'm positively ecstatic that I can officially welcome you and the twins into the family. But you know, Lois, you and Jason and Kala have been family all along. This ceremony is simply that - a formality recognizing what everyone already knows to be true."

Silence met her words, until Ella asked softly, "Are you sure you don't want to run for Congress, Martha? You've got quite the gift for oratory there."

"Just saying what needs to be said," Martha replied, and Lois squeezed her hand. It didn't quite banish her jitters, but it drove them far enough away for her to relax a little.

Coming back from brunch, the groomsmen headed into the ballroom. Richard was the first one through the doors, and he came to an abrupt halt, staring around him. "Wow," Jimmy said softly behind him.

The room, which they had last seen after rehearsals yesterday evening, had been transformed overnight by Lana's team of decorators. The boys had helped set up the chairs, but the black frames and white seat cushions looked a little stark without further decoration. Now, with black candelabras holding white candles at the end of every third row and a fine red ribbon run along the backs of the chairs, the seating was elegant. The carpet running down the aisle was white, with a narrow tracery of black and silver along the edges, and the windows had been hung with sheer white draperies that bore the same pattern. They had been pulled back with wide, silver-edged red ribbon to let in the afternoon light; the ceremony would be conducted without artificial lighting, just the candles and the waning sun.

Lois wanted a secular wedding, so the various accessories were on a table up on the dais at the front instead of on an altar. Lana had covered it with two tablecloths, a black-bordered red one underneath and a lace-edged white one on top. The red and black only showed through the openings in the lace, which Richard particularly admired as he wandered in.

The flowers looked lovely, too - someone had fixed the mix-up over the roses, and the white lilies used sparingly in arrangements lent a traditional touch. In fact, the entire room spoke of Lana's particular style, grounded in classical sensibilities but with a more streamlined, modern approach. No frilly ruffles here, but plenty of rich fabric neatly gathered into soft pleats. The silver and crystal champagne flutes and serving set were ornamented with scrollwork, but even that was clean and elegant.

No wonder Lois let Lana take over the planning, Richard thought. *This is all very much to Lois' taste. Who would've thought that two women so different would have such similar styles?*

"This is pretty wicked," Jimmy remarked, looking over the guestbook and the silver platter for the guests to engrave. "Lois and Clark went all out, didn't they?"

"Funniest thing was everyone arguing over who got to pay for what," Ron told him. "Both moms wanted to foot the bill, Clark and Lois fought over how much they were allowed to

contribute, and Lana donated her time, her employees' time, and the dress. I'm sure she picked up a couple of other things, too, though no one knows exactly what. I've seen people try to get *out* of paying for stuff before, but this is a new one on me."

"Lois and I didn't *fight*," Clark corrected mildly. "We just didn't want either of our mothers spending so much on this wedding. But if I'm totally honest, I'm kind of glad she and I didn't have to pay for it all ourselves."

"Geez, I'd have gone broke," Jimmy said. "I can't imagine what it all cost."

"Wait 'til you see the reception stuff," Richard told him. "Eight kinds of dessert treats, not to mention the hors d'œuvres... Hey, wait a sec. I wonder if the caterers have been here yet."

The groomsmen all paused, the thoughts of sweet and savory snacks filling their minds. Richard grinned and ruffled Jason's hair as the boy looked up at him in confusion. "Hey, sport, how 'bout we all go make sure the reception food tastes good?"

"Lois will be furious," Clark warned.

"No, she'll just kill you all," Maggie said. "Especially if you get to it before she does. You *do* know there's cheesecake involved, right?"

"You know, once in my life I'd like to have a bite of cheesecake before Lois gets to it," Richard replied.

"Not on her wedding day," Maggie retorted. "I don't want to have to tell your wife she's a widow. Forget it."

Jason had been looking back and forth between the adults while they talked, but since no one seemed to be heading toward food, he went back to his primary concern of the morning. "Daddy, when can I wear my pimp hat?"

Ron and Jimmy immediately dissolved into laughter, while Clark looked dismayed. "Not yet, Jason," Richard said patiently. "Wait and surprise Mommy right before the wedding."

"You *want* to die, don't you?" Maggie asked. "First you try and steal the desserts, and then you want to 'surprise' Lois with that hat. You ought to have something to live for; you *just* got married a few months ago! Quit trying to get yourself killed by your ex, okay?"

"He'll get away with it," a new voice said, and they all turned to see Kay approaching them. She gave Richard a wry smirk as she continued, "I keep thinking my boss is going to completely lose her cool, but somehow he manages to make her think he's cute and funny."

"I *am* cute and funny," Richard said with his broadest grin. "Not to mention devastatingly handsome and virtually irresistible."

"Stick with cute," Kay told him, laughing. "It's keeping you alive. Anyway, to answer your question, the caterers haven't set up yet. But they *do* have a tray of samples set aside for anyone who helps with putting the reception tables in the garden, and since you all have a while before you have to get dressed..."

Jason looked up at her with wide, pleading eyes. "Miss Kay, does this mean I can have some cheesecake?"

"Maybe," Kay chuckled softly. Trying to distract him, she asked, "Where's your sister? I've never seen you two apart."

He made an absolutely disgusted face. "Gettin' her *hair* done with ev'rybody else. *Girls*. Bleah."

Everyone laughed, Ron patting his nephew on the shoulder. "You'll change your tune one of these days. Girls are kinda fun, when you get older anyway."

"*Kinda*?" Richard said incredulously, the expression on his face priceless. "You have *four* kids, man."

Everyone met up again when the girls got back from the spa that afternoon. All except Lois - she'd been forced to allow a professional to style her hair and do her makeup, and no one wanted the groom to see her before the wedding. So while the mothers and bridesmaids met up with the boys and kept them distracted, Lana hustled Lois off to the bridal room.

No one realized what had happened until Lana had already closed the door to the bridal room. *Then* Richard looked up and sighed in exasperation. "Damn! They did it again! She managed to sneak away *again*. Three months off the job and I'm losing my reporting instincts."

Tobie bit her lip on a sharp retort, while Cat gushed, "Oh, you guys, she looks *so beautiful*. You're going to be so surprised."

"Isn't that what everyone says after you have life-altering plastic surgery following a car wreck?" Richard grouched, more than a little annoyed with himself. "Either that or after you die and the mortician puts makeup on you..."

"*Richard!*" Lucy yelped, and hit him. "Get over yourself! You'll see the dress today. We *promise*."

"And nobody with a y-chromosome gets to see the bride before she walks up the aisle," Tobie added, editing the remark in deference to the children.

No one had yet noticed Kala preening; she had been giving a little bit of very light makeup while her hair was styled, mostly so she wouldn't feel left out. Jason was the first to spot the hint of blush and lip gloss, and he leaned forward, staring. Kala beamed at him, so proud of how adult she looked until he asked, "What's the matter with your *face*?"

The little girl looked as if she'd been slapped. The look of indignant rage that crossed her features came straight from her mother. "You're a stupid *boy!*" Kala yelled, the embarrassment obvious in her voice. "It's *makeup*, dummy-head! It's what grown-up girls wear!"

"But you're not a grownup," Jason protested. "You're just a little kid!"

After feeling like a princess, nearly as pretty as Mommy, this was not what his twin wanted to hear. Kala shrieked angrily and lunged at him, and Clark had to snatch her up by the waist before she revealed her super-speed. "Enough," he said sternly, looking down at the child on his hip.

"But Daddy!" she wailed, lower lip trembling.

"Sweetheart, you look lovely," Clark told her with a proud smile, chucking her under the chin. "Jason's just never seen you in makeup before. Besides, he's a kid too."

That seemed to avert the threatened tears, Kala giving Jason a superior look, as Richard pulled the boy over to him. "We've got to work on your girl skills, son," he teased Jason. "You obviously take after Clark there. It's all right, we have a few years before you start dating."

Jason didn't understand, cocking his head in bemusement, but Clark heard him and looked up. "Um, Richard?"

"Yeah?"

"What exactly are you trying to say about me?" Everyone went silent, watching the two men - everyone except Kala, who was still pouting and glaring at her confused brother as Clark set her down.

Hoping he hadn't taken it as an insult - they both knew what was real and what was an act - Richard grinned apologetically and said, "Well, you're not the most suave guy on the face of the earth, Clark. I mean, not everyone can be *me*."

Clark just looked at him steadily, seeming not to hear the nervous chuckles. "If that's the case, Richard, then how is it *I'm* marrying Lois and you're not?"

"I'm already married," Richard said quickly.

"Yes, but you *were* engaged to Lois. And now she's marrying me - that has to be the ultimate statement in the dating skills department." Only then did he smile broadly, and everyone burst into laughter at Richard's expense.

Tobie, however, particularly appreciated seeing her longtime rival knocked down a peg. She stood on tiptoe to hug Clark and kiss his cheek, snickering, "Thanks."

Clark just shot Richard a very perplexed look over her shoulder, which Richard returned with even more bewilderment.

In the bridal room, Lana checked her watch and breathed a sigh of relief. "We're running a little early - the guests won't arrive for an hour, and all that's really left for us to do is get you dressed."

"Lucky me," Lois said sarcastically, although she was grinning just a bit. "Leave me some breathing room when you lace that thing this time, okay?"

"As much as I can," Lana promised as she unzipped the garment bag that held Lois' dress. "Listen, Lois, do you believe in wedding superstitions?"

"Not really," the reporter replied, sitting down with a sigh. "I wasn't exactly planning on getting married. Ever."

"Well, there's the one about something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue," Lana began.

Beginning to get it, Lois nodded. "Okay, so *that's* why the handkerchief has blue embroidery. Well, that's taken care of."

"The dress is new and Ella's emerald pendant was handed down from your grandmother, so it counts for old. That leaves something borrowed."

Lois gave her an arch look. She had seen that thoughtful expression on Lana's face several times in the last two months. "You're plotting something, cheerleader."

Lana handed her a small jewelry box, and Lois opened it, eager for something to distract her from the impending moment of truth. Inside was a pair of emerald drop earrings, set in silver. While not a perfect match for the new ring and the antique necklace, all three pieces would harmonize well. "I know you wanted to wear the silver filigree earrings I gave you for Christmas, but what do you think of these?"

The expression on Lois' face was answer enough as she looked up at her, shaking her head. What could she possibly say? "Thank you, Lana," she managed quietly, her expression open and honest with affection. "You didn't have to do this. Any of this. You've really gone out of your way on this wedding and I don't think I could make this up to you."

Shrugging one shoulder, the redhead said, "What else would you expect me to do for the sister I never had?"

Unable to help herself, Lois felt her heart constrict. For a moment she was going to reach out and squeeze Lana's hand. *Oh, to hell with it.* Impulsively, Lois reached out and hugged the older woman. Smiling, she murmured again, "Thank you."

The bridesmaids and moms finally left Richard to his humiliation and headed off to the bridal room to help Lois get ready. "Okay, people," Kay told the groom's party. "Time to get dressed. Family members will start arriving in forty-five minutes. Hustle it!"

"You've been working for Lana too long," Richard said, giving her a quick wink before hurrying off to change into his new suit. In spite of having teased Lana about not letting him

pick out his own clothes, he couldn't fault her taste. The dark blue suit fit perfectly, and its color made his eyes stand out.

He was the first one finished, and since Clark was helping Jason get ready, Richard ran out to his car and brought back the black fedora. When Jason walked out of the men's room in his brand-new suit, Richard was waiting for him with it, and the little boy's yelp of delight was audible in the lobby.

That accomplished, Kay drafted Richard to go meet the arriving guests. Ron's family would be here shortly - two of his sisters were looking after the kids while he and Lucy got ready for the wedding. Richard was particularly looking forward to seeing Michelle and Christiana again, and when they were the first ones through the door he greeted them with a broad grin and open arms. "Michelle! Yonnie! Looking lovely as always. I see you brought the herd."

The two young women both laughed as they gave Richard hugs and kisses on the cheek, Michelle carrying her four-month-old namesake. The three older kids also hugged their Uncle Richard, who complimented Nora and Joanna on their dresses and admired Sam's new suit.

Their arrival seemed to be the cue for other friends and family members to start showing up. Perry and Loueen were next, and Richard teased his uncle about actually looking respectable for once. When the older man retorted that *Richard* was hardly one to talk about respectable, Loueen split them up before they could start bantering.

Still chuckling, Richard met the next handful of guests and directed them inside, where Kay seated them. He was just getting the hang of all this when Clark suddenly appeared at his side.

Literally appeared; Richard hadn't seen him walk up, but he felt the draft of super-speed. "I have to go," Clark muttered distractedly.

"Oh, no," Richard said, his heart sinking. "Not now. Not today. C'mon, man, *not today*."

"It's a volcano in Indonesia," Clark replied, his eyes focusing on Richard. "I can't..."

"It's your *wedding*," Richard hissed. "You *know* Lois is scared of something like this happening - the whole reason she's been acting like the tough-as-nails General's Daughter because she's out of her mind with terror. Clark, *no*. You can't leave..."

"Richard, I *have* to." The look of desperation in Clark's eyes made the conflict in his heart apparent. The lives of hundreds, maybe thousands of people, or his marriage to Lois - choosing between the two was never going to be easy. "Tell them I stepped out for a minute. I'll be back as soon as I can." With that he was gone, only the open lobby doors betraying his passage through the room.

"You'd better get your ass back here as fast as you can, or Lois will kill us all," Richard muttered, knowing Clark could hear him. He would've liked to swear pungently and extensively, but the guests started to arrive in earnest, and he had no time to himself. All he could do was hope with all his heart that Clark made it back in time...

"Flyboy just got owned," Tobie told Lois the moment she walked into the bridal room. "Utterly, completely, totally smacked down. By *Clark*."

That got her an incredulous look, and the girls had to tell Lois all about that brief exchange between Richard and Clark. Cat finished the tale by adding, "And then Tobie was so glad to see your ex get one-upped, she went and smooched Clark on the cheek. Thus proving that the apocalypse is at hand."

"Oh, stuff it, Grant," Tobie teased back. "It won't *really* be the end of the world until *you*

stay in a relationship more than six months."

Amidst more sarcastic comments, Lana chivvied Lois out of her clothes and into the bridal gown, with Ella and Martha helping make sure the fabric didn't get wrinkled. Everyone was so busy that they didn't notice how quiet Lois was. For once, the snarky reporter wasn't participating in the good-natured teasing amongst her friends.

At last, with the dress on and properly laced, everyone went silent to admire the full effect. Martha carefully lowered the tiara onto Lois' raven hair, arranging the veil. Ella stepped forward and fastened her mother's emerald necklace around Lois' neck. She paused, looking at her daughter - the oldest, the problem child, the one she never really expected to get married. The one she always worried she hadn't been able to do right by. But here was Lois, radiant in ivory lace, the silver and emeralds gleaming.

"Wow," Tobie said softly, for once without a cynical comment.

"Aw, sis, you look amazing," Lucy added, sniffing a bit.

Ella bit her lip, her eyes glistening. "My little girl," she whispered, touching her cheek. "Oh, Lois, you look stunning."

Lois looked at her mother for a long moment, her expression unreadable, and then the dam broke. Everyone reacted with shock when she burst into tears - a first-time bride was expected to cry at her wedding, but this was *Lois Lane*. She was infamous for doing the unexpected, and very few people knew her romantic side.

Fortunately, Lana had the presence of mind to grab a handful of tissues and hasten to Lois' side. "The rest of you, *out*," she snapped, the first time any of them had ever heard the redhead even slightly raise her voice. When they didn't obey instantly, Lana looked away from Lois to glare at the group of them. "If you all get weepy and sentimental she's just going feel worse. *Go. Now.*"

They filed out, even Lucy and Ella, and Lana tilted Lois' head back and dabbed at her face with the tissues. "It's okay to be nervous," she soothed. "Here, sit down for a minute."

"I'm not nervous," Lois protested weakly, trying to dash the tears from her eyes. "I'm wondering what the hell's wrong with me." But she let Lana coax her into sitting down, and held still while the redhead checked her makeup and blotted her face gently.

"Oh, really?" Lana asked. "What do you mean?"

"Something awful's gonna happen," Lois murmured pessimistically as she stared at the ceiling, unaware that Kal-El was already in Indonesia. "It always does - we *never* win. Every time things start to go good for us, something awful comes along to ruin it all. We got together the first time, and the freakin' Zod Squad came along. After he came back, when we started to get back together, goddamned Lex Luthor almost killed all four of us. Now that we're married, something else is gonna happen..."

"Lois, nothing bad is going to happen," Lana soothed, taking one of her hands. And then, trying to distract her, she teased gently, "Besides, you're not married yet. You still have almost an hour to go."

"I don't mean the..." Wide hazel eyes turned to gaze at her, Lois looking almost frightened, before she gave a self-deprecating little chuckle. "Um ... damn. That was stupid."

Lana sat back and stared at her suspiciously. *What is it with this woman and secrets?* "Um, what? Lois, what have you done now?" At least the reporter wasn't crying.

"Uh... You know the office party? When I got Jimmy's car for him?"

"Richard and I were in Gotham, but we heard about it." Lana crossed her arms and kept on giving Lois her best older-sister stare. "I hear you had the attention of every man in the

place."

"We slipped," Lois said in a tiny voice.

"You what?"

"We *slipped*, all right?" The stress she put on the word brought almost immediate understanding from Lana, who nodded. Lois gave a heartfelt sigh. "Freakin' Smallville values. Anyway, Mr. Morality was beating himself up about the next morning, and we already had the license, so we went to the courthouse..."

"Why you little sneak!" Lana said, half incredulous and half amused. "You mean to tell me you've been married for two weeks? *Lois!*"

"*Well?*" Lois looked thoroughly ashamed of herself, and finally glanced back at Lana. The other woman's expression made her laugh and drop her head in her hands. "Yeah, we've been married for two weeks and not acting like it. He hasn't even been to the apartment since."

"You mean you haven't..."

"No," Lois groaned feelingly, rolling her eyes back. "And it's killing me."

That cracked both of them up so hard that Lois wasn't the only one with tears in her eyes. "Oh, dear God," Lana finally sighed. "That's just priceless."

"Yeah, go ahead and laugh," Lois replied. "I guess this is punishment for jumping the gun."

"Jumping the superhero, more likely," Lana replied, almost offhandedly.

Not faking her shock, Lois gaped at her. "*Lana!*"

That effectively broke both of them into laughter again. When they'd managed to control their snickers, Lana asked, "Are you going to be all right?"

"Yeah, I think I'm gonna be okay," Lois sighed. "I just... I never planned to be here, you know?"

"I know," Lana said, taking her hand again and squeezing it gently. "Sometimes the best things in life are the ones you didn't plan for and couldn't ever expect. Look at me and Richard. And before you make some snide remark about needing insulin to look at us, I'll remind you that you and Clark are just as adorably romantic."

"Can't argue with you," Lois replied with a rare sweet smile. "We kinda make the phrase 'star-crossed lovers' ridiculously true, don't we?"

"Yes, but you also prove that old saying, 'love conquers all'," Lana reminded her. The reporter could only smile tremulously, the enormity of this day still hanging over her. Having that certificate of marriage was one thing, but it hadn't seemed real until just now, seeing her reflection in the mirror. She looked like the princess her childhood had never let her want to be. And for today only, that was just fine.

As Lois was getting settled down, Jason burst into the room and skidded to a halt. For a moment, he just stared at Lois, and the dumbfounded expression on his face made it clear he didn't recognize his own mother. "M-mommy?" he stammered, and then slowly grinned. "*Wow*. Mommy, you look *beautiful*."

Lois chuckled through the last of her sniffles. "Thank you, sweetie," she said, returning the smile. Only then did she take in his appearance, a look of slow-dawning horror on her face... "Lana, *what* is that on my son's head?"

"Uncle Ron says it's my pimp hat!" Jason replied brightly. "He says I gotta walk like this when I wear it..."

His exaggerated strut made both Lois and Lana break down laughing all over again. When she finally caught her breath again, Lois gave one last disapproving look at the hat, and

let out a deep sigh. Gathering her courage, she looked over at Lana with a small grin. "Okay, gang. Let's do this."

Once Upon A Time

Kal-El soared in a tight spiral around the cloud of searing ash and molten rock spewing from the top of the supposedly-dormant volcano. The vortex created by his flight contained the debris, and that was his primary concern at the moment. *Thankfully there's no lava flow*, he thought, adding an extra notch of speed as he rose through the air. Poisonous vapor, chunks of rock, and hot ash were enough to deal with for now; more than enough to wreak havoc on the villages tucked into valleys below the volcano. And, if not contained, the debris could spread on the wind...

Even while he worked to control the volcanic eruption, Kal-El was listening intently to events half a world away. From the sounds of things, nearly all the guests had arrived at the wedding, and Richard was growing frantic. Every few minutes Kal-El heard him mutter something along the lines of "*You'd better get back here in time.*"

I'm trying, the hero thought, gritting his teeth as he flew. Some of the heavier rocks were starting to fall under their own weight, but he couldn't help that. He blew a gust of freezing breath to cool them, so at least they wouldn't start a forest fire wherever they crashed down. *Just let me finish this - I'm hurrying as much as I can. Please, please, don't let Lois find out I'm not there...*

Richard was so wound up in thoughts of potential Lois-caused destruction that he had completely blocked out everything but that and constant reminders under his breath to Clark, in spite of the distance. So wound up, that he didn't even see the groom's mother approach.

"Richard White, where on earth is my son?"

The reporter jumped, stifling a curse. Tilting his head back, he took a deep breath to calm himself. "Martha! Oh, my God. Do you have to do that?!" With a little sigh, he started to explain. "He's ... well, he's in Indonesia."

The incredulous look on the older woman's face almost broke a chuckle from Richard, despite his high-strung state. "*What?*" Martha hissed. "What was he *thinking?*!"

"That erupting volcanoes are bad for people living under them, apparently," Richard groaned. "I don't think he realizes that *Lois* will erupt and rain fire and destruction upon us all if he doesn't make it back in time."

"She won't be the only one," Martha said grimly. "Listen, I'm going to send Ben out to greet guests; you've been at this from the start, I'm sure you need a rest. I'll go let Lana know about Clark..."

Richard glanced worriedly in the direction of the bridal room. "I sent Jason to find her, but he hasn't come back. I have this sinking feeling that Lois saw him in the pimp hat and she's having a tantrum." He actually had the nerve to look guilty.

"The *what?*"

Richard went from guilty to embarrassed in only seconds, remembering who he was talking to. "Uh, this crazy black fedora I got him. Ron named the thing," he explained quickly, moving them both toward ballroom. "Let's do this. I'll go keep the groomsmen distracted if Ben takes over out here."

In moments, Ben was standing in the lobby to greet the guests, and Richard was headed back to make excuses for Clark. He found the three groomsmen hanging around near the side door through which they would enter, Ron and Maggie trying to make Jimmy relax. The photographer clearly felt uneasy in a tux, tugging at the collar and watching the clock. "Guys, I'm not sure I wanna be up there in front in everyone," he said with obvious apprehension. "I'm

gonna screw up somehow, I always do..."

"Relax, kid," Maggie told him. "It's the *groom* who's supposed to freak out, not the groomsmen."

"You know why that whole tradition exists, right?" Richard said, beaming at Jimmy. Maybe this would distract the boy a little. "If the groom gets cold feet, the best man is supposed to marry the bride. Now, since we don't *have* a best man..."

"Already married a Lane," Ron swiftly interjected.

Maggie gave a droll chuckle. "Disqualified."

Jimmy just looked at both of them and then turned to Richard, blushing the same fiery red as his hair. "Uh..."

"Guess that's your job, Olsen," Richard said with a conversational tone, slapping his shoulder affectionately. "Word of advice: take your vitamins. You'll need 'em. Trust me."

The thought was too much for Jimmy, whose brilliant blush suddenly faded to a cheesy pallor. Ron, who knew better than the others just how long Jimmy had carried a torch for Lois, saw his expression and grabbed his shoulders before he could faint. "Easy, man," he said, laughing. "You know Richard's just messing with you. Don't faint on us."

"I'm all right," Jimmy said weakly. "I just... Don't go and spring matrimony on a dedicated bachelor, okay?"

They all laughed dutifully, Maggie shaking her head slightly. "You're a cruel man, Richard White," she said, and turned away from Jimmy and Ron. "C'mere for a sec."

Richard followed her out of earshot of the others; that steady, inquisitive look from ice-blue eyes still unnerved him. Police officer was one of those professions that were never completely off-duty, and the reporter still sometimes felt like he was some kind of suspect around Maggie. "Yes?"

She knew about his hang-ups - a lot of people were nervous around cops - but Maggie was the one of Lois' friends that Richard actually halfway got along with. "You're under arrest for damn nigh giving Olsen a heart attack," she said flatly, then smirked when he actually looked a little frightened. "Seriously. Where the hell is Clark?"

"He had to step outside for a minute," Richard replied with a shrug he hoped looked nonchalant. "Wedding jitters, I guess. It's not every day a guy marries Lois Lane."

"Yeah, and the thought was enough to make Olsen almost pass out," Maggie said. "Kinda scary - glad it's not me. But he *likes* her for the hellion she's always been. Why flake out now?"

"He's a perennial bachelor," Richard explained, trying to come up with a plausible answer off the top of his head. "It's a big change, you know? And then there's the twins to think of, too. Clark's used to taking care of himself, and now overnight he's got a wife and kids. It takes a little adjustment."

She nodded slowly, although it was clear she wasn't convinced. "And you have no freakin' clue where he is right now, do you? Because I know a bullshit story when I hear one."

"Not exactly," he admitted.

"That's what I thought," Maggie sighed, running a hand through her short blonde hair. "Well, Clark's famous for rushing in at the very last minute, so I'm not gonna panic yet. But if you think he won't show, tell me, all right? Someone had better be ready to restrain Lois if he jilts her."

"Oh, he'll show," Richard said firmly, hoping Clark was listening this way. "If he knows what's good for him, he'll be here on time."

Martha's news wasn't exactly heralded with joy. "He's not *here*?" Lana hissed as the two of them stood a few feet from the closed bridal room door, green eyes going wide. "Martha, you've *got* to be kidding."

"I wish I was," the older woman replied, shaking her head. "Something came up and Clark had to step out for a bit - how's Lois?"

"Almost ready," the redhead told her worriedly. *Why now? Oh, of all the times, God, why now?* "She's already had one breakdown; I don't want to be here if he's late. But it's almost time... We have to stall this wedding."

Worrying her lower lip between her teeth, the designer thought quickly. "Okay, this should work. Martha, the ring bearer's pillow is under the table just inside the doors. Go grab it and hide it somewhere. That should keep everyone busy looking for it instead of wondering where Clark is."

Martha hurried off to do that, and Lana took a moment to breathe deeply. "Clark, wherever you are, you'd better hurry back..."

Richard paced just inside the lobby doors, his stomach roiling. Lana had been out five minutes ago to tell him someone had found the ring bearer's pillow; she'd been forced to yank the wires from the speakers to keep the wedding from starting without the groom. And everyone was now looking for Clark. Perry kept saying that the boy had been late to everything in his life, this was no different - but he'd privately whispered to Richard that he hoped Clark did show up. The consensus was that if Clark didn't arrive, Lois would kill him. *And anyone else who gets in her way*, Richard thought, straightening his sleeves for the sixteenth time.

"We've got sound back," Lana said behind him, peering out of the ballroom. "Seen him yet?"

"Not yet," Richard replied, noticing that she had finally changed into the dress she intended to wear during the wedding. *Damn, yellow really suits her.* "How close...?"

"Lois is getting nervous," Lana said, nibbling her lower lip. "We might have to tell her-"

"*No*," Richard said instantly. "She'll bomb the place - it'll be like Godzilla on crack. Whatever you do, don't let Lois find out he's not here!"

"All right, fine," Lana sighed. "I'll go break down in tears if I have to..."

Just as she spoke, the revolving doors in the lobby whirred far faster than they should've, the mechanism letting out a protesting squeal. Clark rushed through, blue eyes glazed in panic. "Thank God," Richard and Lana exclaimed in unison. The redhead continued, "Get ready *now*. I don't know how much longer I can stall Lois."

"C'mon," Richard urged, grabbing Clark's arm and hustling him to the changing room. He unzipped the garment bag holding Clark's tux and handed it over, asking, "Did everything turn out all right?"

"Barely," Clark responded, taking the suit off the hanger. "How's Lois?"

"She doesn't know you weren't here," Richard said. "Weren't you listening...?"

"I was a little busy at the time," Clark said, giving him a look. And then he *blurred*; Richard heard fabric rustling at high speed, and suddenly Clark was dressed except for the tie. "I can't seem to knot one of these at super-speed," Clark muttered, glancing in the mirror as he rapidly knotted the tie.

"Nice trick," Richard said quietly, holding the door open so they could both get to the ballroom. Just outside the doors, he paused. "Hey, Clark?"

"Yes?" In spite of being pressed for time, in spite of having come straight from saving people's lives to one of the most important moments in his own, Clark stopped to meet Richard's gaze and give him his complete attention.

"Congratulations," Richard said, and offered his hand.

Clark took it, and pulled Richard into a hug. "Thank you," he said simply.

Those three words and that gesture would have to stand for a great deal: *congratulations on being a better man than I am; congratulations on finally having your kids officially be yours; congratulations on winning the woman I wanted to marry; thank you for being a father to my children; thank you for letting her go; thank you for being my friend.*

They both stepped back, smiling. "I'm glad it's you," Richard said. "If she *had* to trade up after me, it's gratifying to know she had to go *that* high. Besides, no one else could *survive* marrying her."

Clark laughed and thumped his shoulder affectionately. "And now you can say Superman considers you one of his best friends," he told Richard just before they opened the doors.

Richard beamed at that, but couldn't help asking mischievously, "You nervous?"

"Terrified," Clark responded, staring at the closed doors.

"Good," Richard replied, and Clark gave him a startled frown. "You're supposed to be; it's not a proper wedding if the groom's not scared out of his wits."

Clark managed a laugh at that. "Okay, let's do this."

Lana ducked back into the bridal room only to be immediately confronted by Lois, who had obviously been going to open the door herself. "Where's Clark?" the bride said with a suspicious look. "One minute, everything's fine, then I'm all alone in here. What's happening?"

"Sorry, there was a sound issue," Lana told her calmly, adjusting the chain of Lois' emerald necklace. "This is just too lovely. Lois, calm down; everything *is* fine. Clark's here, you're set, and we should be ready in just a couple of minutes. The boys are getting set up in the other room, and Perry will be along in a moment."

The expression on Lois' face didn't change. She still fully expected some sort of minor disaster on this of all days. "You're completely *sure* Clark's here?" Lois asked warily, arching an eyebrow.

"I just saw him a moment ago, getting ready to change into the tux," Lana replied as she did a last minute check of the dress, immensely grateful that she didn't have to lie.

"Uh-huh." Lois' deadpan tone made it very clear that she remained unconvinced.

"Seriously," Lana told her with a smile, catching her chin. "He's in the changing room right now. I wouldn't lie to you - Lois, I can't lie any better than Clark can. Stop worrying."

The reporter glared at her a moment longer, then sighed. "You've got a point."

Before Lana could say anything else, they heard a sharp knock and the bridal room door opened very slightly. "Lois, you'd better not be naked," Perry grumbled.

An instantaneous grin bloomed over Lois' lips at the sound of that voice. As always, Perry's presence seemed to immediately ground her. "Like you haven't seen most of it," she snarked back, obviously baiting him.

"Not since you were sixteen, and I didn't want to see it then," he retorted from the other side of the door. "*You* were the one who thought running around the house in a long t-shirt was perfectly acceptable. Would've thought Elinore raised you better, but she always says you're a complete heathen anyway."

"I love you too, old man," Lois laughed, while Lana marveled at the way Perry had

managed to alleviate her anxiety so quickly.

"So is it safe to come in here or not?" Perry asked. "It's almost time for your last walk as a free woman. Didja have your final meal? Got any last requests?"

Instead of answering, Lois opened the door and scanned the hallway before stepping out. "It's a wedding, not a death sentence," she quipped, halting in her tracks to wonder if she'd actually *said* that, and expecting a scathing taunt in reply.

Perry was uncharacteristically silent, staring at her. After a moment, he managed to murmur, "My nephew married a damn good designer. That's a helluva dress."

Lana couldn't help laughing. These two simply *couldn't* do anything normal. "I'm going to check on the music," she chuckled. "I'll signal for you two when everything's ready..."

In keeping with Lois' wishes for a secular ceremony, they had found a notary to perform the ceremony. Lori happened to be a friend of Ella's and perfectly willing to preside over the wedding. Just now she was making small talk with the groomsmen. "I've known Lois since she was a little girl," she told Jimmy with a fond smile. "You could say I was part of it all from the beginning. And I'm very proud to be here at the end of one chapter in her life, as well as the beginning of the next."

Clark hurried to the side entrance that would be used by the groom's party, followed by Richard, and all three groomsmen let out loud sighs of relief. Jimmy rushed to hug him, saying, "Man, Richard was telling me I'd have to marry Lois if you didn't show up. I'm too young to die!"

That got a laugh from everyone. "No, I wouldn't miss my own wedding," Clark said, taking his place. "I just hope Lois doesn't decide to, you know..."

"Oh *please*," Maggie groaned. "Seriously. We were all afraid we'd have to tranquilize her if you didn't show. She's come this far, she won't back out now."

"And if she tries, we'll sic Lucy on her," Ron said, grinning.

"Amen," Richard added. "As Lana would say, the caterer's been paid - you can't back out now."

Kay had been in charge of making sure everyone was seated, and now she saw Lana at the doors giving her a thumb's up. Turning to the groomsmen, she whispered, "Places, everyone!"

"Good luck," Richard said before hurrying to his seat in the front row.

Clark drew a deep breath, and Ron patted his shoulder. "It's gonna be okay," he said. "Just relax and pretend it's another rehearsal, only with fancier clothes."

"And a huge crowd," Jimmy whispered, and Ron elbowed him.

"Nah, don't pretend it's a rehearsal," Maggie said. "Richard was making faces at everyone the whole time, remember? We don't need that." The laughter that remark provoked helped ease the tension considerably.

The lights went down, and Clark heard Lana whisper, "One minute," to Richard as she took her seat. He tuned his keen hearing toward the main doors, where the bridal party was getting ready...

"And walk *slowly*," Kay said, as Kala bounced from one foot to the other. At least she'd stopped spinning in circles to make her skirt flare; getting dizzy wasn't fun.

The music began, softly at first, and Jason stood to attention. He actually started toward the door, but Cat caught him. "Hold on, sweetheart," she chuckled. "Candle lighters first, then

bridesmaids, then you and Kala, okay?"

"When does Mommy get to go?" he asked, looking around for her and Uncle Perry.

"Right after you and your sister," Kay replied, checking her watch. "Okay, candle lighters - Sam, Nora. Go ahead. Every third row, skip the ones up at the very front. Take your time, no one's in a hurry."

The oldest two Troupe kids nodded before stepping out into the ballroom. Kay watched them through the barely-opened door, and once they'd lit all the candles the room took on a romantic glow. "Bridesmaids," Kay whispered. "Lucy, go. When she's halfway up, Tobie, you start. Cat, when Tobie's halfway up, your turn."

Everything was proceeding according to plan. When Lucy reached the fifth row, Ron started out from the side entrance and met her precisely at the front of the aisle. She took his arm and they proceeded up onto the dais, taking their places behind the altar. The other two couples would follow in sequence, and while Kay was watching them, Lois and Perry came to the doors.

Kala turned around, and her jaw dropped. She had seen the dress, seen the makeup, and seen the hairstyle, but not altogether. Lois was taking deep breaths, clutching her bouquet as if it was a lifeline, and she managed a smile when she met her daughter's gaze. "Mommy, you look like a princess," Kala whispered.

"Thank you, sweetie," Lois murmured, flashing a bright grin for her children, who were both now watching her.

"Jason, Kala, you're up," Kay whispered, handing him the ring pillow and giving her the flower basket. "Slow and steady, let everyone see how wonderful you look." Beaming, they headed out.

Perry reached up to lower the veil, and Lois looked at him with raw terror in her eyes. "Don't worry," he muttered gruffly. "It's no worse than a root canal ... for the rest of your life."

That made her chuckle slightly, and he took his place beside her, waiting for Kay to open the doors. Without turning to look at her, Perry whispered in the gentle tones most people wouldn't imagine him capable of, "You look beautiful, Lois."

Lois had already linked her arm through his, but she slid her palm down to squeeze his hand. "I love you, too."

Clark felt his heart catch in his throat when the twins started walking up the aisle. Jason bore the rings with great dignity, head up and eyes focused straight ahead ... where the bridesmaids and groomsmen were desperately trying not to laugh at the infamous hat, which he'd somehow managed to wear into the ceremony. Kala walked at his side, keeping to the same stately pace, and scattered handfuls of rose petals along the aisle just the way she'd been coached. *My children*, Clark thought, his vision blurring slightly as he watched. *Finally, absolutely, beyond any shadow of a doubt, they are my children at last.*

The murmurs that the twins' appearance caused suddenly hushed as the room took a collective breath in awe. Clark blinked the burgeoning tears away and focused on the doors, where Lois and Perry stood. The editor looked solemn and distinguished for once, but that wasn't what had silenced all two hundred guests. Clark gasped at the sight of Lois, a thousand thoughts crashing into each other in his mind. *She's so beautiful* was one of the most prominent, followed by *So **that's** why they were hiding the dress and I can't believe I'm this lucky.*

In the candlelight, draped in ivory lace, with her shoulders bare and her raven hair loose

and wavy beneath the sparkling tiara, Lois looked unearthly, even divine. Absolute silence accompanied her up the aisle, except for the gentle strains of the music. Every one of the guests followed her with their eyes, but Lois looked only at Clark. Their gazes met in spite of the veil and the distance, and he knew she was walking up that aisle for him alone. Her heart was racing, and left to her own devices Lois would've bolted, but her love of him kept her steady.

As the doors opened and she got her first look at the warmly-lit ballroom, Lois' heart seemed to stutter. For a moment, all she could do was gaze around in wonder at the transformation that had overcome the room they had just finished setting up the night before. It had been a beautiful room before, to be sure, but now...

It was only Perry's gentle nudge that got her going again, glancing at him with worried eyes through the veil. Perry only gave a gruff smile and a slight nod. *It's time, Lois.* One more deep breath, one more instant to steady herself, and the bouquet of red rose and white lilies in a death-grip, they stepped forward into the glow of her wedding.

It was like being in a dream; Kala's comment about princesses hadn't felt apt until just now, the moment finally here. All eyes were on her as she and Perry made their way up the aisle to the soaring strains of *Canon in D*, the twins proudly making their way up a dozen steps before them. *This is it, kid. It's really happening. No exploding building, no earthquake, no alien invasion. This is where you get your happy ending.*

Just as she was laughing at herself, Lois looked forward and cerulean eyes met hazel, their connection immediate as always. That familiar shiver ran up her spine at the sight of him and her heart sped up; she knew he could likely hear it, knowledge that added a deep ache to the feeling. She felt tears prick her eyes just looking at him, the distance between them finally, forever, closing. *Oh my God, look at him. Kal-El. I don't think I've ever known a more beautiful man in my life. Inside and out.* Then her natural snark rose up to add, *Even in those glasses. Although they're better than that first pair.*

And he's mine. He's agreed to be mine. Her heart soared at the thought, and in her mind she spoke to him as if he could hear her. They were so close in so many ways, it wouldn't surprise her if he knew her thoughts. *How could I have ever kept my feelings from you? How could there have been a moment in time that you doubted it, if it feels so obvious to me, hero?*

Finally noticing the expression on his face as they drew closer, Lois felt her own lips curving up in an absolutely adoring grin. It was all she had not to laugh out loud. *Wow, I guess he really does like the dress. Surprise, Kal-El.*

Conscious thought broke down at the sight of Lois - *his fiancée* - in that stunning dress, coming up the aisle toward him. This was *real*, his most cherished dream coming true at long last. Only the carefully repeated rehearsals of yesterday got him moving.

They met just at the first row, both of their mothers watching them with unabashed tears in their eyes. But the couple had eyes only for each other, as Perry solemnly handed Lois over to Clark. For a moment, he held her hand and gazed into her eyes, and Lois managed a tremulous smile.

Clark tucked Lois' hand into his elbow as they proceeded up the shallow steps of the dais. He chuckled, very softly, and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. That helped Lois recover her equilibrium enough to whisper, "You may wanna pick your jaw up off the floor..."

Squeezing her hand again, Clark smiled at her, and for a moment the bridal party all

understood just how Lois had fallen in love with him. The purity of love between them made them radiant in that moment, and their twins grinned at them in delight. Jason and Kala were excited to be up front with the adults, practically quivering with glee.

Lori smiled at them proudly as they took their places before her. "Friends, we are gathered here today in the presence of these witnesses, to join Clark Kent and Lois Lane in matrimony, which is a most exalted union and therefore is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly - but reverently, discreetly, advisedly and solemnly. Into this hallowed estate these two persons present now come to be joined. If anyone can show just cause why they may not be joined together - let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

She paused for a moment, long enough for Clark to notice his mother dabbing at her eyes, and for Lois to think, *If that bald-headed bastard Luthor comes strolling in right now, I'll kill him with my bare hands. I will not let anything stop me now.*

No one spoke; nothing disturbed the ceremony, and Lois let out a tiny sigh of relief as Lori opened the book she carried. "Sonnet 116, by William Shakespeare," she said, and read in a clear, even voice.

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds
admit impediments. Love is not love
which alters when it alteration finds,
or bends with the remover to remove:
Oh, no! It is an ever-fixed mark.
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
it is the star to every wandering bark,
whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
within his bending sickle's compass come;
love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
but bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved."

It had seemed the perfect choice of reading for this ceremony, considering the tempests Lois and Kal-El had weathered. But Lois couldn't help thinking that having Shakespeare read at her wedding would mark her as a romantic forever.

Lori closed the book and looked out at the guests. "Love - true love - is a precious thing, and marriage is the ultimate expression of that love. The vows made here today are not mere words; these are the promises of the heart, made out of love and respect and the desire to honor one another, and as such the ceremony of marriages deserves its solemnity and grandeur." She took a deep breath, and gave Clark and Lois both a quick, encouraging smile as she continued. "Two hearts cannot become one, two minds cannot fuse, and two lives cannot merge seamlessly, for two separate people cannot become one without one becoming lost in the other. You are entering into a partnership of equals, one that will compromise and sacrifice from both of you if it is to work." Hazel eyes met cerulean, and for the moment both of them were thinking the same thing: *Lady, you have no idea.*

"This ceremony will not grant you an instant happily-ever-after," Lori cautioned them. "There will be trials ahead of you, as there are in every relationship. But the commitment you make today, the vows you swear to uphold, will hold you together throughout those storms. And then you will find that those oaths, far from being a binding shackle, are the strength that

supports you both." She said the last sentence with a knowing glance at Lois, and after a moment of silence nodded to the pair.

Clark took a deep breath and reached for Lois' hands. The veil was no barrier to his vision; he could see the tears standing in her lovely hazel eyes. He had been terrified that he'd forget the vows they'd chosen at this crucial moment, but one look at the face of the woman he loved erased all of his anxiety.

"I, Clark Joseph Kent, take you, Lois Joanne Lane, to be my friend, my lover, the mother of my children, and my wife," he said, his hands trembling and his voice catching slightly on the last word. "I will be yours in times of plenty and in times of want, in times of sickness and in times of health, in times of joy and in times of sorrow, in times of failure and in times of triumph. I promise to cherish and respect you, to care for and protect you, to comfort and encourage you, and stay with you, for all eternity."

Lois had to take another deep breath, knowing her hands were shaking worse than his, and only looking directly into those amazing blue eyes kept her from panicking. "I, Lois Joanne Lane, take you, Clark Joseph Kent, to be my friend, my lover, the father of my children, and my husband," she said, managing not to betray her nervousness or the surreal feeling that washed over her. Was she *really* doing this, really marrying the literal man of her dreams? "I will be yours in times of plenty and in times of want, in times of sickness and in times of health, in times of joy and in times of sorrow, in times of failure and in times of triumph. I promise to cherish and respect you, to care for and protect you, to comfort and encourage you, and stay with you, for all eternity."

Both of them sighed in relief; they'd done it, neither of them had messed up the words or passed out, and Clark hadn't been called away by duty. It was all downhill from here...

"And now, the exchange of rings," Lori prompted. Jason had started to yawn during the first long reading, and Ron had lightly tapped his shoulder. Now, at his cue, he stepped forward and held up the white satin pillow with the two rings tied to it with ribbon. Clark untied the white-gold band reverently; this had been Martha's ring. The inside was still engraved with 'Jonathan & Martha', but there was just enough room for 'Clark & Lois' as well. Offering their rings had been a special gesture from Martha, to let Lois know once and for all that she was welcomed into the Kent family.

He took Lois' left hand and gently slipped the band onto her ring finger, saying softly, "I give this ring as my gift to you and symbol of my love. As this ring is a circle without end, so is my love for you unending. Wear it and think of me and know that I love you, this day and forevermore."

Lois gulped, biting her lip to keep from crying. *This is supposed to be a happy occasion, you twit*, she scolded herself. *Keep it together*. It took her a little longer to untie what had been Jonathan's ring, but Jason's broad grin steadied her, and she stroked his hair once before turning to his father. Surprisingly, her voice didn't shake as she repeated, "I give this ring as my gift to you and symbol of my love. As this ring is a circle without end, so is my love for you unending. Wear it and think of me and know that I love you, this day and forevermore."

Their hands clasped for a moment, the rings with old and new names touching each other. As Martha and Ella both rose from their seats, each taking a candle from the candelabra at the end of their row, Lori said, "Clark and Lois are going to light their unity candle as a symbol of their marriage. The candles from which they light it represent each of them, with the wisdom and love they have received from their parents." She paused for a moment, letting the mothers light the tapers beside the central unity candle.

Lois and Clark each took up a taper, and carefully bent them to the wick of the central candle. It was inscribed with both of their names as well as Kala's and Jason's full names, and as the new flame sprang up Lori continued with the recitation. "They come into their marriage as individuals and they do not lose their identity. Rather, they create through their commitment the bond of family. Therefore, the three candles remain lighted, one for each of them and one for their united family, as symbols of their commitment to each other and their children, and to a lasting and loving marriage.

"What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined together to strengthen each other in all labor, to minister to each other in all sorrow, to share with each other in all gladness, to be one with each other in the silent unspoken memories?" Lori asked. "From 'To Be One with Each Other', by George Eliot. And now, by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife." She gave them the blessing of her smile again, and said lovingly, "You may now kiss the bride."

Clark lifted the veil reverently, seeing Lois on the verge of tears. As many times as they had kissed - once with an audience nearly as large as this, that time when they'd announced their relationship to the office - he was still nervous now. Leaning down slightly, he met her gaze with all of his profound love shining in his eyes. Lois tilted her face up to him, lips curving in a smile just before she closed her eyes.

They kissed, tenderly at first, but this couple had never been able to kiss without putting their hearts into it. Lois' arms slid up around his neck as he kissed her more deeply, and the entire room broke into thunderous applause as the guests spontaneously rose from their seats.

Lois pulled back slightly, looking up at Clark in amusement. All the nervousness had vanished at the touch of his lips, hearing her friends clapping and the twins giggling. Knowing he would understand, Lois murmured, "Do you think for once they could *not* interrupt?"

Clark laughed, resting his forehead against hers, and simply luxuriated in having her in his arms at last.

"Food, glorious food," Jimmy muttered, picking up another cannoli. "Man, they went all out, didn't they?"

"Four kinds of cheesecake," Richard informed him, grinning. "I almost forgot what it tastes like."

"Shoo, I starved for this dress," Lucy said, elbowing him aside affectionately. "Wasn't that the loveliest wedding ever?"

"Incredible," Ron agreed, passing her a pair of strawberries painstakingly dipped into white and dark chocolate. The resulting pattern made the berries look as if they were dressed for a wedding. "What I don't get, though, is how she managed to get a second dress for the reception."

"It was more like what the moms wanted," Cat said, flashing Jimmy her brilliant grin as she snagged the cannoli off his plate. He hadn't been able to look directly at her since she'd caught the wedding bouquet ... and the tossed garter had landed right on him while he wasn't even trying to catch it. "Besides, the wedding dress is a custom-created L. Lang original. No way are they gonna risk someone pouring wine on it. You should've heard Kay howl."

"Yeah, that dress is worth a down payment on a house," Tobie said, strolling up to them. "And I don't know about you all, but I'm damn glad they didn't do that nonsense of smearing cake all over each other's faces. I don't think I could've respected Lois anymore. You *have* tasted the cake, right? It'd be sacrilege."

"Since when have you ever respected Lois?" Richard asked, and Ron elbowed him hard.

"Flyboy, I knew her before she'd ever *heard* of you," Tobie reminded him. "And I do respect her. I respect any woman who, at the age of seventeen, could bankrupt four pool-hustlers older and supposedly wiser than herself."

"Ancient history," Cat said. "Besides, Richard, we all love Lois. She and Tobie only fight because they're too much alike, personality-wise."

For once, Tobie and Richard were content to let it drop, especially since they heard the announcement being made that the bride and groom were about to have their first dance. The wedding party made their way over to the covered area set aside for dancing, as the band got ready.

The bride and groom had each chosen a song, and Lois' was to be played first. Almost everyone expected Clark to step on her toes a couple of times; only Jimmy and Perry had seen them dance at the Pulitzers, and both of them were hoping for that same grace to suddenly manifest here.

Lois and Clark took their places, and she looked up at him with a little smirk as the band began to play. Neither of them had told the other which song they picked, and he didn't recognize the first verse. But the refrain caught his attention, and he grinned as they danced.

*There once was love thrown into your room
But you never knew
A calendar of days just for you
But you never knew, never knew, no
And the truth that you'll find will always be
The truth you hide*

*So how do you love, how do you love
When your angels can't sing, and your world is still
Lacking of me*

*There once were eyes that only saw you
But you never knew
A portrait of a flower in full bloom
But you never knew, never knew no
And the words that you fear will always be
The words you hear*

*This space where you've been living
Has gifts you've never given
That's the face you always show
Ask me for words of wisdom
Tell me of your condition
I don't know, I don't
I don't know*

*And the truth that you'll find will always be
The truth you hide...*

To everyone's surprise, Lois and Clark danced well together. They looked simply perfect,

with him in the handsomely-tailored suit and her in the reception dress, having kept the tiara but taken off the veil. As Richard beamed at them, he felt a hand tap his arm lightly, and turned to see Lana beside him. He kissed her; no words could express how happy they both were for Lois and Clark, and how that happiness was unexpectedly free from any bitter taint. With his arm around her shoulders and hers around his waist, they watched the dance with unalloyed joy ... as Lana quietly stole his cheesecake. Some traditions had to be maintained, after all.

Lois beamed up at Clark; the song spoke of how nearly she'd come to losing him, and the pain of separation they'd both endured. But they both knew how they had survived it, never quite giving up on each other even in the darkest hour. There was a brief pause while the band changed gears for Clark's song.

The first few bars sent shivers down Lois' spine, and she stared up at him, tears pooling. He didn't...

*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*

He did. Lois burst into tears, shocking Clark, and he pulled her off to one side, trying to soothe her. The twins, meanwhile, had heard 'their' song being played, and they joyfully took over the dancing area. They were used to the slower, softer lullaby, and this upbeat version of the song gave them a chance to shake loose the pent-up energy of having stood still during the long ceremony. Kala especially had to twirl with every line, her dress flaring out around her.

"Lois, I'm sorry," Clark whispered, stroking the tears from her eyes.

"It's okay," she sniffled, and then laughed. "I just never... This was like my anthem of loneliness, and you just made it a thing of joy."

"You're sure?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," she replied, and kissed him. "I love you so much..."

"No more than I love you." He kissed her forehead gently, stroking her raven hair, and whispered, "I'm still almost expecting to wake up... I can hardly believe this is real. We're really married."

Tilting her face up for another kiss, Lois murmured, "You're really mine at last."

"Mommy!" the twins yelled, Kala adding, "C'mon! You gotta dance!"

"Yeah!" her brother exclaimed. "It's our song, you gotta!"

"Our keepers bellow," Lois said, and they returned to the dance pavilion. As it turned out, Clark had actually requested two songs. As soon as *Your Wildest Dreams* ended, *I Know You're Out There Somewhere* began, and Lois laughed out loud.

The rest of the reception was everything the wedding party could've wished for. Jimmy, once he'd eaten his fill, roamed the hotel gardens with his camera, snapping candid shots of the guests. It seemed as though everyone danced at least once; Lois wound up dancing with Perry as well as the groomsmen and Richard. Jimmy himself had to hand over his camera for his dance with the bride, during which he blushed furiously.

He got some lovely pictures of Richard and Lana dancing together, and when Loueen politely excused herself, he even managed a shot of Perry and Ella dancing. Lois was clearly visible in the background, with her hand over her mouth and a tender expression on her face. The Chief was actually *smiling*, making that photo one Jimmy would definitely keep.

But the perfect photograph was one of the last. Lois and Clark had gotten away from the revelers for a moment, and they had paused beneath a tree. Jimmy had to zoom to even get them in the frame, and it was still clearly a long-distance shot, but so perfectly composed. Lois' arms were around Clark's neck, the two of them standing close and gazing into each other's eyes, and the shot had even captured a lovely bridge over the pathway in the background.

Not even the fact that Lois had taken off Clark's glasses and was holding them in one hand could mar the beauty of the picture...

Lois stifled a yawn and tried to stretch surreptitiously; she felt ten pounds heavier thanks to all of the rich food. "Let's see if we can sneak out," she whispered.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Clark replied. "I don't think anyone's watching that little gate at the back of the gardens. We can double back and ask the front desk to bring the car around."

Grinning like a couple of schoolchildren, they eased away from the crowd. No one seemed to notice, and the moment they reached the gate, Lois bolted through, laughing. Clark followed her, catching her hand and pulling her close, both of them chuckling at their own silliness. "Wonder how long it'll take them to realize we're gone?" he asked.

"Richard won't notice 'til the food's gone," Lois said confidently. "I'm sorry we didn't say goodbye to the twins one more time, though..."

"Me, too," Clark replied. "But I don't really want to be pelted with rice."

"Uh, remind me whose idea - other than Lana's - it was to buy the expensive-as-heck ecologically-sound rice?" Lois scolded as they continued to run.

They made it around to the front just in time to see a black limousine pull up to the hotel's port-cochère. They'd known that Richard and Lana were arranging for a rental car to drive them to the hotel in Montreal, since Clark supposedly disliked plane travel. That little story neatly covered for the fact that Superman found it extremely difficult to get off a plane in mid-flight without being noticed, and his dread of being trapped in that situation lent authenticity to his claim that he didn't like flying. He'd fly if he absolutely had to, but let everyone know that he preferred to drive any reasonable distance rather than take a plane.

But this wasn't just a rental car, it was a stretch limo, complete with 'Just Married' written on the back window and streamers flying from the windows and bumper. "They didn't," Lois said, coming to a halt suddenly. "Oh, Richard..."

"We did," Lana called, just then leaving the front door of the hotel. "The *last* thing you need on your honeymoon is a long drive, so we got you the car and driver. You two can pick up a rental to drive around the city once you're up there, but the trip itself should be a chance to relax."

"And the car's big enough to stretch out in, if you catch my drift," Richard added from behind them, sounding just slightly out of breath. Lois and Clark turned around, only to see half the wedding party with Richard, all of them grinning manically.

"You didn't think you'd get away with sneaking out, did you?" Tobie asked.

"CAUGHT YOU!" Kala yelled. She and Jason came tearing out the front doors of the hotel with the rest of the wedding party and the guests behind them. Lois and Clark literally

had nowhere to run, and rice rained down on them as everyone laughed and cheered.

Some of the guests had bubbles instead of rice, and those bright glimpses of iridescence surrounded the couple as they ran for the car. Laughing - and getting in a last handful of rice herself - Lana hugged them both and kissed Clark on the cheek. "You two have fun and don't worry too much about home," she admonished.

Ben hugged Clark, beaming with pride. "Your daddy would've been very proud of you, Clark. She's one helluva woman." Clark returned the hug unreservedly, murmuring his thanks; the remark about Jonathan had touched his heart.

Ella swept Lois into a hug next, whispering, "I'm so proud of you, baby girl," into her ear. Stifling a sob, Lois hugged her back hard and told her she loved her. Meanwhile, Martha was hugging her son and wishing him well. The twins, over-excited and full of sugary treats, bounced around hugging everyone, but Jason and Kala managed to give extra hugs and kisses to Mommy and Daddy Clark. The rest of the family and close friends managed to squeeze in for hugs, getting pelted equally with bubbles and rice by the rest of the guests.

Richard gave Clark a bear hug, muttering congratulations, while Martha hugged Lois. Then Ella hugged Clark and kissed his cheek, and Richard swept Lois off her feet into a hug, swinging her around while she screamed in surprise. He set her down only to kiss her forehead, grinning at her without a trace of bitterness. "Good luck, you surly caffeine addict," her former fiancé said.

"I guess it's true what they say," Lois replied, looking up at him lovingly. "The journey *is* worth the destination. We both got off at the right exit, huh?"

"Yeah, babe," he told her. "I don't have any regrets about us - it got us both to where we are now. And even if you're not my wife, I still love you. Always will."

Lois lifted her chin in spite of tears gleaming in her eyes, and she gave him that trademarked thousand-watt grin. "Right back atcha, Richard. No regrets."

He hugged her again, adding softly, "And I really *do* love you more now that I know the real you. Good luck, Lois. Go on, have fun."

Lana held the door for them both, giving Lois a quick kiss on the cheek as she got in the car. "I'd say don't do anything I wouldn't do, but..."

Lois burst out laughing as the door closed, shaking rice out of her hair. Clark caught the back of her neck and pulled her close for a kiss. Lois smiled, hearing their audience whoop as the limo started to pull away, and she glanced back through the rear window for one last look.

The wedding guests had spilled out into the driveway that led under the port-cochère, and everyone was waving: their mothers, Perry, the *Daily Planet* staff, all of their friends... But right out in front were Jason and Kala, jumping up and waving frantically. "Have fun at Mon Tree Hall!" Jason yelled, just as Richard caught him and held him up. Lana did the same for Kala, and that was Lois' last view before the car turned the corner.

And Ever Shall Be

Lois snarled and slammed her phone down. "Goddamn Tobie Raines! This is *not* funny! Her and her warped-ass sense of humor... I swear, when we get back to Metropolis, I'm going to *throttle* her!"

I couldn't help chuckling at her. "She had to have tipped the driver," I supplied. "There's no other way she could know the exact moment we arrived here." That had ruined our plans to take advantage of the privacy of our spacious honeymoon suite as soon as we got settled in. Lois was furious now, and the calls had evaporated the romantic mood brought on by the champagne and chocolates Lana stashed in the limo.

"Yes, well, I don't exactly appreciate being called every five minutes on my wedding night," Lois spat, raking her hands through her hair. The tiara lay on the bedside table, and her gorgeous raven curls fell freely down her back. In spite of - or maybe because of - her anger, she was beautiful to me, and I smiled warmly.

The room phone rang, and Lois stalked over to pick it up. "Grand Central Station, what the *hell* is your problem? ... Hi, Mom. Yeah, we made it in... The girls have been playing tricks... Oh, *would* you? Thanks so much! Here, let me get you their numbers... No, Lucy wasn't in on it. Just Tobie, Cat, and Loueen. I'm sure a few calls from you and Martha will settle them down." She laughed nastily, reading out her friends' phone numbers to her mother.

I just shook my head slightly; Lois and her friends had always been a handful, and if they sometimes seemed more like enemies than friends, well, you had to be around when one of them was hurt or in need. The others would close ranks against all outsiders and stubbornly defend each other ... until the status quo returned, and then they'd be back to squabbling again. I knew better than to get involved in the current war over the harassment-by-phone. It was best just to stay here on the bed while Lois and her formidable mom handled the situation.

After hanging up with Ella, Lois sighed heavily and raked her hands through her hair one more time, dislodging still more rice. "*God*," she sighed. "I can't stand this! That's it, I'm taking a shower. Clark..."

I picked up the remote and smiled at her. "It's all right, there's a Royals game on tonight." She rolled her eyes. "A *long* shower. Freakin' baseball..."

I laughed softly as she snatched up her bag and headed into the bathroom, unzipping the back of the reception gown on the way. Taking a moment to admire the view, I resolutely looked away and turned on the game. She needed a moment to calm down after getting so upset, and I was willing to give it to her.

All of this was still hard to believe; here I was, with Lois Lane, on our honeymoon. We'd pretended to be married on more than one assignment, including that memorable trip to Niagara while posing as newlyweds, but this time was for real. Lois was finally, really, *mine*, and so were the twins. *Our* children - the phrase still sent shivers down my spine. In spite of everything fate could throw at us, we were finally getting our happy ending.

I listened for the twins; I'd gotten much better at picking up on their heartbeats quickly. Luthor would never be able to kidnap them so easily - assuming he was still alive, which I privately hoped he wasn't. Shoving that dark thought aside, I tuned my hearing toward Metropolis...

The twins, giggling. And then, "*Where did that come from?*" Lana's voice, followed shortly by Richard's. "*Nowhere.*" Jason and Kala laughed again as he prompted, "*Mommy had this stuff in the fridge when we got here, right, you two?*"

Lana wasn't having any of it. "*Richard, you raided the reception buffet! I can't believe*

you! *That's so ... so...*"

"*Hey, this is good stuff. I wasn't going to let it go to waste,*" he protested.

Just then, Jason piped up with, "*We got three slices of weddin' cake, too! One of each kind!*"

I chuckled as Lana groaned at them. "*The worst part is, all of the leftovers were boxed up and split amongst everyone who helped with the wedding. Which means we have a whole box of this stuff that I already put away.*"

Richard and the twins, far from being ashamed, cheered openly. I couldn't help sympathizing with them, and briefly checked on the rest of the family. Most of them were asleep; Ma and Ben were staying with Ella, and they had all turned in for the night. Everyone else was either in bed or on their way there, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

How strange it felt to suddenly have a family, and a large one at that. For years it had been just me and Ma. Even when I dreamed of a seemingly impossible future, I had never thought further than marrying Lois. Children were out of the question; we're from different *galaxies*. I had no right to expect children...

And I hadn't realized that by loving Lois, I would acquire her family as my own. Ella was one more person to guard my secret, and seeing the developing friendship between her and Ma warmed my heart. Lucy and Ron and their children had always loved me, and I cherished that now - no one could ask for better in-laws or more wonderful nieces and nephew.

Perry and Loueen were family of a sort as well; that dance between him and Ella acknowledged it. He had been Lois' father in all but blood, and seeing him smiling proudly at us both was a moment I would never forget. Though on the topic of family I never expected to have, Richard and Lana were certainly the biggest surprise. He had gone from my rival to something like a brother, and she - while still one of the loveliest women I'd ever laid eyes on - was more my best friend than my old flame. And I love that. It's the best of all possible endings.

I was barely paying attention to the game, not even following the score while these thoughts tumbled around inside my mind. And then the bathroom door opened, and Lois stepped out shyly. I turned to glance at her...

...and stared.

Lois had changed into something I'd never seen her wear; this corset and hose must've been purchased especially for this night. With her hair damp and lying over her pale bare shoulders, she was a vision of loveliness that made my heart catch in my throat. Every thought skidded to a halt, but one:

*This is my wife. My **wife**. Mine, now and forever.*

While I stared speechlessly, she gave me a hesitant little smile. "Thought you'd be asleep by now," Lois whispered.

In answer, I picked up the remote and switched off the television, my eyes never leaving her. How one woman could be so incredibly beautiful and not *realize* it...

Lois laughed at the expression on my face, and rushed to my side. Incredibly, she was *nervous* after all this time! Her heartbeat raced, and I cupped the back of her neck to bring her face close to mine.

Finally, I managed to find words again. "I love you," I whispered, and kissed my wife.

~ Fin ~

Dedication

After this, we both just want a moment to thank everyone who's helped us along the way in the almost two years that *Little Secrets* has been in existence.

First, I have to thank Anissa (anissa7118 and Maryse Bardolph) for having put up with me being a Superman fan all these years and listening to my various cooing, fangirling, ranting, and raving for the last fourteen years. I also have to thank her bringing herself into a fandom she barely knew just because I didn't think I could capture Kal-El on my own. We've had our share of arguments about direction and characterization, but it always turned out better for the story in the end. I could have never done any of this without you.

I have to thank htbthomas for discovering my little intro and for egging me on until I had the guts to finish up Act One. Did you ever think it would go this far? *LOL* And I wouldn't have half the fans I have if you hadn't promoted us so strongly, something I can never begin to repay you for. There are so many other little things that I wouldn't have if not for you. You were even the one to get me to join LJ. Thanks, Mom, for being there every since time I needed you.