

Little Secrets, Act Two

by **Kala Lane Kent**

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Rating: T

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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 Metropolis 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."