

Everywhere

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Summary: When Clark decides to end his relationship with Lois for her own good, she breaks. Deciding that she can't handle working with Clark at the Daily Planet anymore, she sets out to collect stories from all over the world. In doing so, she learns that she can't stop loving Clark. She takes him 'everywhere'.

A few notes to help with ease of reading. *** denotes breaks between scenes. <> denotes Clark's thoughts. <<>> denotes Lois' thoughts. {{{{ }}} denotes scenes of past events. ^^ ^^ denotes journal writings. ++++ denotes the passing of a significant amount of time.

The story picks up right after the events in 'Contact'. It should be fairly easy to follow from there.

I have to make note of a few things. I got the title of this story from the song 'Everywhere', sung by Tim McGraw, written by Mike Reid and Craig Wiseman. In the song, even though the couple is separated- by choice- he still carries her 'everywhere' he goes. I don't think I used direct lines from the song, though I did use direct reference. I did use direct lines from another Tim McGraw song: 'You Don't Love Me Anymore', written by Kim Carnes and Gregory Barnhill. That song was the original inspiration for this tale. It wasn't a single that was ever released, but it, in my opinion, is one of the best songs Tim McGraw has ever sung. It's beautiful and if haven't heard it, you should definitely listen to it. Once you do, you'll understand parts of this story inspired by that song.

I also took inspiration for Lois' stories during her journey around the globe from other places. The human trafficking story was inspired by actual news events about this very real problem in our world. Every year more than 800,000 thousand people go missing, believed to be thrust into the dark world of human trafficking. After writing this story, I saw a Lifetime movie about this very subject. It's frightening to think such things happen.

The border patrol story-- another inspired by news events, though from bits and pieces and not one specific thing. I definitely do not remember any stories involving border agents executing people. That part I totally made up.

The African diamond story was inspired by the movie 'Blood Diamond'. The movie claims to be inspired by true events. Again, this is another very frightening, very real thing that is happening in our world. If you haven't seen this movie, you should. The story is incredible.

Some of the awards mentioned-- the Bailey, the Pulitzer, the Merriwether... We know the Merriwether was mentioned on the show. We know the Pulitzer is real. The prizes I used are real prizes for different journalism awards, although not these. Believe it or not, the actual prize for the Pulitzer is, in twenty categories, a certificate and \$10,000 cash award. In the public service category, it's a gold medal. And an eligible story is not automatically considered. It has to be submitted with a \$50 entry fee. All the awards I've mentioned in this story are real and exist for various journalism awards. And if I could find the notes I made for this story, I'd tell you exactly which ones. But I wrote this so long ago, I can't find my notes now.

I've probably left something out. I never intended any infringements of any kind-- to any of the songwriters, screen

writers, or of course, writers of L&C or to DC Comics. I merely borrowed all the toys to play with for a bit.

I'd like to give a shout out to everyone who helped me with this story. There are a lot of you and you know who you are, so I won't list everyone because, like my notes, I might overlook someone and don't want to hurt his or her feelings. Thanks to everyone who read along on the boards, even though I was so lax in getting this posted.

It's hard to believe that after so long our little L&C corner of the world is still getting new fans. And it's still inspiring new and unbelievable stories! I'm just glad I'm part of it.

She looked so small lying there; the bandage on her forehead testament that he'd failed her. It was also the incentive he needed to do what had to be done.

"We just... can't be together," he told her softly.

"What?" she asked, the expression on her face clearly showing the confusion she had to be feeling.

"I love you way too much to ever put you in danger," he continued, glancing down at his shaking hands. Why couldn't she just understand? Why couldn't she just accept this?

He finally lifted his eyes back to her fearful stare. "I have to do this," he said softly.

"Clark..."

"No, Lois. This just isn't going to work," he argued, silently begging her to give in.

"Don't you think you're being a bit dramatic?" she asked.

"Call it what you like, but I won't take the risk."

"Don't you mean 'we'?" She shoved the covers back on the bed and rose to stomp into the kitchen.

He sighed heavily before following her. "There can't be a 'we', Lois. I can't take the chance of anyone ever using you against me again."

She drank down the water she'd poured before slamming her cup into the sink, effectively sloshing the remnants of the clear liquid across the front of her shirt. Turning around, she faced Clark with fire in her eyes.

"Haven't you thought that maybe the damage has already been done? People are well aware that Superman and I are friends!"

"That's why I have to put distance between us."

"Uh, huh. And what the hell does that have to do with you?"

His brows furrowed at that. "I, ah, I'm Superman," he stammered softly.

"I know that!" She threw up her hands in frustration, pacing restlessly. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't Clark Kent and Superman supposed to be two different people?"

"Well, yeah," he answered, not entirely sure where this was headed.

"Then I ask again, what does Superman have to do with Clark?"

He slowly closed his mouth as understanding dawned.

"What better way to disassociate yourself from me than that?" Lois asked without waiting for his answer to her last question.

"I understand what you're saying. Really, I do. But it would never work," he told her.

"Why not?" She placed her hands on her hips, fully challenging him.

"*I* can't disassociate myself from you."

"Isn't that what I just said?"

He sighed again. "Lois, if we continued to see each other, my feelings would leak through into my Superman personality, and we'd be right back where we started."

"So, we just give it all up?"

"I'm sorry," he told her regretfully. He just didn't see a way around this. He would die if anything ever happened to her

because of him being Superman.

Lois entered her bedroom again, looking around as if she'd never seen the place. She was hurting and he knew it. There just wasn't another way to do this.

"I wish there was some other way," Clark told her as he took a step in her direction. He wanted to reach out to her, comfort her. But he was the cause of her discomfort. Discomfort she would have to endure.

"So do I," she replied in a strangled tone.

He was about to say something else, but a cry for help stopped him.

"I have to go," he said quickly, then disappeared in a flash of color.

This was for the best, he told himself as he flew toward the scene of an accident on the Tenth Street bridge. One day Lois would come to understand why he'd had to do this.

She had to.

Silent tears made tracks down Lois' cheeks as she stood in shocked disbelief. She pushed a hand through her hair and went to flop down on her bed.

Why had she cut her hair in the first place? She thought absently, her mind desperately searching for something, anything, to fill the void Clark had just left behind.

Who cares? She moaned and dropped over onto her side, giving in to the torrent of emotions running through her. Sobs racked her body as she tried to grasp what would make Clark do such a thing.

Had she really meant so little to him?

They'd spent two years building a bridge of trust that she'd thought couldn't be broken. Shaken maybe, but not broken. How wrong she'd been. In the span of a brief conversation, Clark had proven with absolute clarity what she'd learned so long ago.

Men were lunkheads - untrustworthy, egotistical lunkheads.

Lois smoothed a hand down the front of her slacks as she took a breath for courage, then stepped off the elevator onto the newsroom floor. She hoped she didn't look as unsteady as she felt. She'd cried herself sick the night before. Part of her had believed that Clark would get home and think about how idiotic he'd been, then call and apologize. But he hadn't called. And she absolutely refused to call him. She wasn't the one who'd done this.

She glanced up to see him drop his gaze back down to a file lying on his desk. He'd obviously seen her arrive and was trying to act as if he hadn't. Lois stood straighter, determined to show Clark that he might have shaken her spirit with his declaration to separate himself from her, but he'd by no means broken it. After all, she was Lois Lane.

Somewhere nearing midnight the previous evening, Lois had washed her face and allowed the anger to set in. Yes, Clark had hurt her deeply. But now she was mad. She loved Clark and for him to decide that *they* couldn't be together wasn't going to change that. However, she wasn't about to allow him or his decision to sideline her for long.

Lois dropped her briefcase on the floor beside her chair as she flipped on her computer. Ten minutes later, she'd checked her email and reviewed her notes for an ongoing story. She'd done it all without thinking about Clark.

Or the fact that he'd broken up with her.

Well, almost.

She glanced over at him. He was trying to appear busy, but she knew him too well. He was just as much an emotional wreck as she was. Deciding that the best way to handle her pain was to face it head on, she pushed up to her feet and made her way toward Clark.

"Look," she told him when she was standing before him.

"I'm not exactly sure why you did what you did. At this moment, I don't even care. I will tell you this. You've made your position perfectly clear. While I, in no way, understand or respect that position, I'm not about to sit around feeling sorry for myself. I love you and that's not about to change any time soon. But you've hurt me deeply. That's not about to change any time soon either. However, we do still work together." She stopped and glared at him.

"Unless you're going to change that, too?" It was a question that she expected him to answer.

"I'm not changing that," he told her softly.

"So," she hurried on before he could say whatever it was his lips were puckered to utter. "Give me a wide berth. Give me time to deal with this."

"Absolutely," he agreed quickly. Much too quickly for her.

"Good. I'll ask Perry to give us separate assignments."

And with that, she was headed in the direction of Perry's office. Clark felt as if the wind had been knocked from him as her words sank in.

Separate assignments... The words hang in the air as stagnant as smoke.

But what had he expected? To walk in here this morning like nothing had ever happened between them except a professional relationship? Friendship?

He leaned back in his chair as he realized that he *really* had separated them.

<Why did this whole thing sound so much better yesterday?>

He looked up when Lois walked back across the room toward her desk. She was the picture of professionalism. Her calm exterior belied her true feelings. That was a volatile situation.

<What have I done?>

It would be weeks before he realized the true extent of what he'd done. By turning his back on what they'd shared, Clark had solidified Lois' belief that she'd never be able to trust her heart to a man.

And when Lois was hurt, Lois became angry. When she was angry, she worked. She worked with a passion that was short of breathtaking.

The week following Clark's declaration, Lois managed to uncover a scandal inside the mayor's office. She also managed to get herself out of a close call with a pair of thugs bent on 'taking care of any loose ends'.

Lois stepped off the elevator with the first smile to grace her face in over a week. Her expose on the mayor had hit the front page that morning and she'd already gotten a call from Perry singing her praises.

The usual morning commotion in the bullpen stopped and loud applause rose up around her as she made her way down into the newsroom toward her desk, graciously accepting the accolades of her fellow staffers.

"Congratulations, Lois!" Perry bellowed as he held up the morning edition of the paper. "You've proven once again why you're the best!"

"Thanks, Perry," she answered as she dropped her briefcase.

"And I don't even want to know how you got that bruise,"

Perry went on.

"Good. Because I'm not going to tell you," she declared as she glanced toward Clark. The muscle in his jaw ticked in irritation. He was upset. Probably about her evening raid of confidential files in the mayor's private office at his house.

<<Good.>>

A few more congratulatory wishes were accepted before work resumed, and Lois sat down at her desk.

"Keep up the good work," Perry told her before he ordered

everyone back to work and headed toward his office.

“Lois?”

She looked up to see Clark standing beside her.

“Yes?”

“Could I speak with you in private?” he asked between clenched teeth.

During the week since he’d broken things off with her, they’d barely spoken. She’d spent a great deal of time out searching for leads on her case. At first she’d tried to convince herself it wasn’t so she wouldn’t have to see him, but that was no use. She had purposely avoided Clark, and she wanted to keep avoiding him.

“What is it, Clark? I’m really busy. The mayor’s giving a press conference this morning.” She shifted papers on her desk in an attempt to prove she’d meant what she’d said.

“We need to talk.”

Her eyes snapped up to his. “There can’t be a *we*,” she repeated to him the words he’d spoken to her that fateful afternoon.

“Fine. Let everyone hear. What do you think you were doing last night?” He demanded, his eyes flashing dangerously.

“My job. But what business is it of yours?”

“You can’t help yourself, can you? You rush right into situations you know you shouldn’t...”

“One,” she started as she rose to her feet. “I was a reporter long before I met you. Two, I’ll be a reporter for a very long time to come. And three, you’re not my father!”

“I don’t pretend to be.”

“No, but you think you’re my keeper!” She pointed a finger at him. “Just because you split up the team doesn’t mean all the players are on the bench.”

“You split up the team!”

“You negotiated the deal!”

“Excuse me?” Perry asked as he stepped in between his two best reporters. “Could we turn the volume up a bit? I don’t believe they heard you outside.”

Lois folded her arms across her chest, her ears burning in anger. Clark, too, crossed his arms, refusing to stop glaring at her.

“Now,” Perry told them when he had their attention. “Take this to the conference room and iron out whatever differences you have. I won’t allow either of you to disturb the tranquility of my newsroom.” He pointed in the direction of the other room and waited until they turned to go.

Lois was first to stomp into the room. Clark followed and closed the blinds after he’d shut the door.

“The whole purpose of me doing what I did was so that there would be distance between you and Superman,” he told her calmly, even though he felt far from calm. Just the opposite. He was seething because she’d placed herself in a situation that could have potentially ended badly.

“Did I call for Superman?”

“No, but you were hurt.”

“I have a bruise. I’ll live.”

“And according to your article...”

“Look, the real issue here is that you don’t have control. I am my own person, Clark. I’ll continue to be my own person. With or without you.”

“But...”

“But nothing! Just because you have a problem with me doing my job, doesn’t mean I’m going to stop.”

“I didn’t ask you to stop,” he said to defend himself, even as the truth of what she’d said began to seep through his consciousness.

“You might not have asked, but it’s what you want. You want me safe, out of danger. Well, I can’t control other people. *You* can’t control other people. Things happen. Dangerous things. Sometimes I end up in those dangerous situations. I’m a big girl.

I’ve done this job for a long time. I’m good at it. And unless you’re prepared to kidnap me and fly me off to some deserted island so I can’t get back, don’t expect me to stop!” She finished with a flourish of her hands.

Clark shoved his hands into his pockets and hung his head in shame. She was right. He did want her safe, tucked away so no one could hurt her.

“Clark, I’m a big girl.”

“I know that,” he told her and stepped around her. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. The distance was supposed to make things easier.

<This will never be easier. You’ll always worry about Lois.>

“Not what you thought, is it?” She knew him too well- knew that in his all-knowing wisdom, he’d failed to hash out all the details.

He turned back to her. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t plan on it. But if it happens, it happens. You or nobody else is going to change that.”

He could only stand there in silence. His mother had told him the same thing. Actually, his mother had almost scolded him for what he’d done.

“Now, we have a job to do, and I intend to do mine.” She received a slight nod in response. “Are you going to allow me to do that without making a scene every time I chase down a lead?”

“If you’re asking me to remain professional...”

“That’s exactly what I’m *telling* you. That’s what you wanted,” she pointed out. Without waiting for an answer, she turned and left him alone.

Clark sank to a chair as he replayed everything she’d said. She was right. He wanted her completely out of danger even if that was not possible. He never wanted to arrive at an accident scene of some kind only to discover that she’d been hurt or worse, killed. And he certainly had no intention of hauling her off to a deserted island. He might be Superman, but he’d never survive that.

How dare he? Clark Kent was not about to stop her from doing her job! He wanted this separation. If it hadn’t been for that stupid decision, he’d have been with her last night. Granted, she might not have been hurt.

And if a frog had wings, he wouldn’t bump his butt when he hopped!

Lois snatched up her purse and stormed out of the newsroom. Arguing with Clark, and herself, had put her behind schedule. If she didn’t hurry, she’d be late for the mayor’s press conference.

Clark stood in the back of the room in pure agony. It had been six days since his argument with Lois in the newsroom. She’d written a fantastic follow-up to her expose and now she was about to be the next woman auctioned off in the annual charity benefit for the Metropolis Children’s Home.

He’d been furious when he’d found out she was going to be available for this particular aspect of the benefit. Of course, he hadn’t voiced that fury to her. He had mentioned it to his mother, though. Martha had promptly given him a lecture about having his cake and eating it, too. His mother was upset with him about his decision to distance himself from Lois. He’d tried to explain, but repeating it had sounded so... dumb.

“All right, gentlemen. Dig deep. Our very own prize winning reporter Lois Lane is next up on the auction block,” Perry bellowed, taking to his role as auctioneer just as easily as he did his role as editor.

Lois smiled brightly. She’d approached Perry about this. He’d assumed she wasn’t available, but she’d reminded him again of her and Clark’s separation. The editor in him had hoped his star reporters would have worked out their differences by now, though the friend in him had offered her an encouraging

shoulder to lean on.

“Do I hear twenty?”

“Twenty,” came the voice of Richard Donaldson.

“Twenty! Do I hear forty?”

“Fifty,” replied another man in the crowd.

Before he knew what he’d done, Clark had shouted out his bid. “One hundred!”

“Way to go, Clark!” Perry beamed.

Lois glared at him. What was his deal? He’d broken up with her for her own good. Then he’d gone all ‘he-man’ on her. They’d barely spoken in nearly a week. Now he wanted to be the highest bidder for a chance to take her out on a date? Either he wanted her or he didn’t!

“One twenty five!”

Clark wanted to prove why he was called Superman. “One fifty!” How dare Gary bid against him! Didn’t he know that Lois was his...?

<Your what? You broke up with her. Remember?>

“Ten thousand!”

Perry stopped and looked at the man who’d stepped forward with such a generous bid. “Is that American dollars, sir?”

“Dollars, pounds, rubles... Whatever you’d like?” came the heavily accented reply of the man in a perfectly tailored suit.

“Patrick!” Lois breathed as she stepped toward him.

“Well, I thank you and the children thank you,” Perry said as he banged the gavel.

“What are you doing here?” Lois asked the man as they moved away from the continued action taking place behind them.

“I’m here on business,” he replied as he looked at her. “But there was no way I could come all the way to Metropolis without seeing my Lois.” He looked her over appreciatively, then smiled. “You look great.”

“So do you.” She finally gave into the urge to hug him. She’d met Patrick Sullivan when she was an exchange student in Ireland. She’d boarded with his family. The Sullivans were a wealthy Irish family who dealt in real estate. Patrick had a degree in business management and it seemed everything he touched turned to gold. He’d successfully established several businesses that he’d later sold for millions.

“I’m told you’re quite the reporter.”

“Still my passion,” Lois told him as she took the arm he offered and they drifted toward the doors that led out to the garden area of the museum where the auction was being held.

“From the articles I’ve read, I’d say it’s more like an obsession.”

“Yeah, well...”

Clark could only stare hopelessly as her laughter filled his ears. This Patrick was obviously someone she knew. He was tempted to eavesdrop, but decided instead to just leave. He’d asked for distance. Now he was getting it in spades.

Over the next week, Clark watched Lois... with Patrick. They’d gone to lunch, dinner, and even a concert together. He was still sick after his introduction to ‘Mr. Suave’.

{{{{Clark glanced up at the numbers on the elevator panel as he rode his way to the newsroom floor. He was tempted to sneak a peek to see if *Patrick* was there. He wasn’t exactly sure how much more of that man he could stand.

Was it too late to fly away?

The doors opened and Clark was face to face with Lois and her new... whatever he was.

“Oh,” she managed when she nearly ran into him.

Clark could only glare. He hadn’t meant to... not really.

Lois shot him a warning glance before smiling up at the man beside her. “Clark, this is Patrick Sullivan- an old friend. Patrick, this is Clark Kent. He works here at the Planet.”

“Yes,” Patrick drawled out. “The other half of Lane and

Kent.” He stuck his hand out in greeting.

Clark merely looked down at the offending limb before he stepped around Lois.

“Excuse me!” Lois grabbed him by the sleeve of his jacket, refusing to allow him to be so rude.

Clark sighed heavily before facing them again. “What? I have a deadline.” And he left her there, mouth opened in shock.

<What’s-a-matter, Lois? Didn’t think I had it in me?>

From his desk, he overheard her apologize to Patrick.}}}}

Clark glanced up from his computer to see Lois enter the newsroom. She took a drink from a coffee cup she held while looking at a piece of paper. He missed her so much. Would he ever be able to live with his decision?

Thank goodness his Superman persona kept him busy when he wasn’t working. If he had to sit around night after night with his tortured thoughts, he was sure he’d explode.

<Isn’t this what you wanted?>

He tossed the file he held onto his desk in frustration. It was going to be another very long day.

Lois walked alongside Patrick in silence. They’d had dinner at a wonderful restaurant in the bay area. Taking a walk in the cool night air had been a good idea when he’d suggested it. Now, though, she just wanted to curl up in her bed with her grief, the same way she did every night.

“Does he know what he’s missing?” Patrick asked her after a moment.

“What?” Lois looked up at him in surprise.

“The fellow who put that look in your eyes?” Patrick stopped them and ran his hands up and down Lois’ arms.

“Does it show that badly?” There was no use denying what he’d said. Besides, she was just too tired of making excuses. She was in pain and needed someone to talk to.

“I’m afraid so.” Patrick cupped her cheek softly. “I’d hoped that maybe we could fan that spark that once danced between us.” “Patrick,” she said softly and stepped away from him to lean on the railing of the pier.

“I take it that something happened,” he went on as he joined her.

“Yeah. He broke up with me.”

“Stupid boy.” Patrick lifted his hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Very stupid,” Lois whispered without elaborating.

They stood in silence for a long while before Patrick sighed. “Come on. I’ll see you home.”

Lois nodded and allowed him to wrap his arm around her, accepting the comfort he offered.

Half an hour later, they stopped outside her door.

“I’m heading back to Ireland tomorrow,” Patrick told her. Once again he lifted his hand to cup her cheek. “I do hope the lad soon realizes how stupid he is,” he whispered before he leaned forward and kissed her softly.

When he drew back, Lois wiped a tear from her cheek. “It was good to see you again, Patrick.”

“And you, Lois.” He gave her a tender hug, then turned and left.

Lois dug through her purse in search of her keys, completely unaware of the man who’d witnessed the kiss from around the corner. He watched until she closed her door before he left.

Clark had seen Lois and Patrick’s kiss. He’d been on his way over to talk to her about his imposed break-up when he saw them. The act had caught him off guard. When he’d come up with the idea that he was a jinx, he’d never given much thought to the day that one of them would become involved in another relationship that wasn’t platonic.

Granted, the last week had been torture. Seeing Lois with

another man was excruciating. Hearing her laugh, seeing her smile - it was nothing compared to seeing her lips pressed to another set that wasn't his.

He'd been prepared to tell her that he'd been stupid, that he'd had a fever. He would have fallen to his knees and begged her forgiveness. He just couldn't face another day without her.

Or another day with her in someone else's arms.

Now he didn't know what to do. He'd made his choice and obviously she had, too. He'd walked aimlessly most of the night, even too stunned to fly. Sometime nearing dawn he finally decided that more than anything, he wanted to see Lois happy. And if Patrick Sullivan made her happy, then, God help him, he'd support her.

If only he could convince his heart of that.

Lois was practically bouncing off the walls as she hurried to get to Perry's office. She'd gotten a call from an old college friend of hers last night with a tip about a possible award winning story. She'd immediately called Jimmy, who'd protested about her interrupting the game, to help her start preliminary research. After a few calls and a couple of visits to some of her usual informants, she knew she was on the cusp of a national shocker.

She breezed past a sulking Clark Kent without a second glance on her way in to see the chief.

"Lois, where the Sam Hill have you been?" Perry demanded when he saw her.

"You won't believe this one, Perry!"

From his desk Clark watched as Perry got up and closed the door to his office. It had been two days since he'd seen Lois and Patrick kiss. Two days since he'd tried to talk to Lois.

{{{{"I miss you," he whispered as he looked at her. How had he ever thought he could stay away from her?

After his decision to support her the morning after witnessing his world come to an end, he'd found himself at Lois' door, his heart aching too badly to face another moment without her.

"It was your decision, Clark."

"I know. But, Lois, this is hard."

"So much harder than you thought it would be," she repeated the words he'd said to her when he'd broken her heart. He sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"You broke my heart," Lois pointed out.

"I know."

"I don't think you have any idea!" She threw her hands up in frustration and walked around him to look out the window. He'd knocked on her door even before dawn this morning.

He did know because it was exactly how he felt last night when he saw her with Patrick.

"Can't we...?"

"What?" She demanded as she whirled back around to face him. "Be friends? Maybe some day, but right now it's all just too much."

"I was going to ask if we could start over."

"As in... acting like none of this has happened?"

"No. As in... me begging you to forgive me." He took a step toward her.

Lois lifted her hand to stop his approach. "No!" She gulped to swallow the lump in her throat. "I survived the broken heart this time. I might not again."

"Lois," he breathed, tears threatening his own eyes.

She stepped around him and opened the door.

"I'll go," he said, taking the hint. "Please, Lois," he said as he stepped at the door. "Don't shut me out of your life."

"You're the one that did the shutting," she told him with more bravado than she felt.

He reluctantly stepped through the door and she closed it firmly behind him. Leaning back against the wall, he could hear her soft sobs. But he also sensed her determination. It was that

determination that had given her the strength to tell him no. He'd respect that.

He'd have to.}}}}

He now understood exactly what she'd felt the day he'd done the same thing to her.

Lois hurried out of Perry's office a moment later. She grabbed her briefcase, and headed toward the elevator. Clark sighed heavily.

Thankfully a call for help stopped him from slipping further into his funk.

Sunshine made clouds look like pristine snow from above them. Funny how she'd never noticed that before.

Funny how she'd never cared before.

Lois sighed and turned away from the window of the plane as the captain announced they were about to make their final descent into LAX. She was on her way to pose as a prospective buyer for what she believed to be a trafficking ring. Larry Smiley was a nationally renowned evangelist turned dealer in human goods. She'd made all the contacts, done all the research, and everything led back to Smiley. He was apparently selling human beings to the highest bidder.

Children were being sold to barren couples. Young girls were being sold to nasty old men who wanted playthings. Young men were being sold to nasty old women who wanted boy toys. Couples were buying sex partners. Others wanted slaves. The list was endless.

What Lois needed a handle on was where he managed to get these people. With solid proof that Smiley was a bad egg, that Pulitzer was as good as hers.

Martha watched as Clark picked over his food. He'd come to the farm with the excuse that he wanted to help with the harvest, but she knew better. Her boy was hiding out so he could heal a little.

"Clark, you knew this wasn't going to be easy," she told him softly.

"Yeah." He pushed his plate back and stared across the room. "I never thought she'd leave town."

"Perry didn't say she left for good."

"I know. But she's been gone for three weeks." He stood and took his dishes over to the sink.

"Please tell me you haven't checked up on her as Superman."

"No. I've thought about it." He waited as the sink filled with water.

"You can't have it..."

"Both ways," he finished for her. She'd told him that so many times. So had his father. Clark was sure Jonathan was angry about this whole situation because as soon as he'd finished his supper, which he'd accomplished in silence, he'd excused himself.

Martha rose and placed her hand on her son's back in a comforting gesture. She hadn't thought Clark was so... lunkheaded. He'd made a decision she had absolutely no idea how to support.

And she didn't want to. Lois was perfect for her boy. She'd come to love the younger woman and missed her terribly. But what was the protocol for speaking with your son's ex-girlfriend? An ex that you still cared for, at that.

She sighed heavily before heading out to help Jonathan pick the beans. This was one situation Clark would just have to find a solution to by himself.

The sixty point headline on the front page of the Daily Planet the day Clark went back to work reminded him, and the entire world, that Lois Lane was the best at what she did. Larry Smiley and his crusade of evil had been thrust into the spotlight in a

manner he probably hadn't intended. He'd been arrested, along with several others, on numerous charges against his fellow man.

Clark couldn't suppress the smile on his face. She was truly something else.

"Listen up, people!" Perry yelled from just outside his office door. "Our very own Lois Lane has toppled the evil empire of the Smiley Institute for Higher Enlightenment! Every major newspaper in the country has picked up her lead. I'm told that this crack has spread into a gorge, uncovering a whole other world of corruption that's a lot deeper than we'd first suspected. Jimmy, I need you on this right away." He tossed a folder toward the younger man. "Kent, I need you on a plane to London tonight! Another arm of this ring is stretched all the way across the pond."

"But won't Lois be covering it?" Clark asked. While he missed her, wanted her back, there was no way he'd steal her glory either. She'd obviously worked very hard for this story. He'd distanced them physically, but he still respected her professionally.

"Lois is on her way to Washington to expose the Senator who's covered up the importation of these bodies."

"Senator?" If there was a Senator involved, the last place he wanted to be was across the globe from Lois. What if she got herself in trouble and needed Superman?

What was he saying? She didn't need his help. More importantly, she didn't want it.

"Apparently the Senator from Smiley's home state of South Carolina is good friends with the reverend."

Wow! Lois had hit the big time with this story. Clark couldn't help but be proud of her. He was also a little envious that she'd done it without him. Before he'd made the biggest mistake of his life, they would have probably worked on this case together.

"Plane leaves at nine, Kent. Come on. We have a lot to cover before you head out."

He followed Perry back into his office to collect the details of his assignment. He supposed this was his future- trailing along in the shadow of his former life.

Lois clicked the button on the remote. Every channel played the same thing. Arm after arm of the Smiley ring was being severed. Her investigation and subsequent stories had paid off- big time! Businessmen, a senator, law enforcement officers, border patrol agents, shippers, truckers, and a trail of others had been uncovered. Superman had rescued a ship full of people bound for New York City and buyers all over the country. A freight train had been stopped somewhere overseas with the same results: teams of people were packed into a cramped car bound for living hell. As Lois watched a replay of Superman lifting a small child onto a stretcher, she couldn't help but be proud of what she'd accomplished.

She was also grateful to the superhero for rescuing so many others from their deaths.

News organizations worldwide were covering this story around the clock. She'd gotten several calls to do interviews, but had refused because she wished to remain as anonymous as possible. It paid to blend in with her line of work.

And she would need to blend in. Perry had called to congratulate her on the story... again. He'd also told her about another story brewing in Texas. Apparently a woman had agreed to be a surrogate mother for a barren couple. The couple just happened to be very wealthy and well known in the business world. It wasn't a very interesting story until the surrogate mother went missing just hours after giving birth. Perry's sources seemed to think that there was something more sinister going on. He'd asked if she'd be interested in looking into it.

Would she? Wasn't she still a reporter? The best reporter in the country right now?

Well, along with Clark. They might not have worked side by side on this story, but the international portion had been covered quite well by his capable abilities. He'd uncovered just as much overseas as she had in the states. No, they might not have been partnered in the usual way, but they'd still managed to work together to form a lethal reporting machine.

Lois clicked off the television and lifted her suitcase. She'd been gone from Metropolis for more than six weeks. And for the first time she realized that the work and time away from Clark had done wonders for her outlook. Though she still hurt for what they'd shared, it was more of a dull ache now than the searing pain it had once been.

In fact, it had dulled so much that she felt able to call him and congratulate him on his part of this story.

As she settled into the backseat of a cab, she dialed a number she hadn't easily forgotten. Three rings later, she heard a once familiar voice.

"Hello?"

"I wanted to thank you for all you did on this case... And say congratulations. Your articles were just as powerful as mine."

On the other end, Clark took a steadying breath. He, too, had somehow learned to deal with his pain. He could never undo the damage he'd done, but he could accept the avenue Lois took to deal with it. He'd also found his salvation in being Superman and rediscovering that he was also a good reporter in his own right.

"Thank you," he answered softly. "But we both know it's not me the world is chasing for interviews."

Lois smiled. "They won't get them."

"Of course not. The spotlight is bad for your image." Clark allowed his heart to swell with pride. Lois was probably the hottest commodity in the news world right now.

And he'd had the privilege of working with her. But right now he was tickled they were able to speak to one another with a bit of civility.

"Absolutely." There was a brief silence before she managed, "So, anything new in the works?"

"Actually, a kidnapping case. Howard Taylor's daughter is missing."

"*The* Howard Taylor?"

"Yep. How 'bout you?"

"David Rains and his wife are suspects in an adoption/murder scandal."

"Really?" Another silence. At least they'd said this much to one another. It was progress from the silence that had stretched between them since their break-up.

"Ah, any plans to make it home for Christmas?" Clark asked to fill the silence. It was also an attempt to find out if he was going to see her any time soon.

"I'd forgotten that was only a week away," she answered. Time had gotten away from her. She'd spent Thanksgiving negotiating a transaction to nail Smiley. To her, it had been just another day.

And in light of how she'd felt lately, Christmas wasn't looking to be anything special either. Not long ago she'd been looking forward to the holiday this year.

Clark took that to mean she probably wouldn't make it back to Metropolis any time soon.

"How 'bout you? Flying out to visit your folks?" Lois wanted to know. She wanted to know more. Were Jonathan and Martha well? Had they asked about her?

They hadn't even called.

<<You haven't called them either.>>

The man on the other end of the line smiled. Lois wanted to know if his parents missed her. "You know there's no place like Smallville for Christmas." A brief silence. "They ask about you all the time," he finally said softly.

Her breath hitched. They *did* miss her.

She wanted to say she missed them, too. She wanted to say that maybe she should call them.

She wanted to say she missed Clark as well.

Instead, she said, "Well..." She missed the days when they could have talked for hours. "I have a plane to catch."

"Yeah."

"Thanks again."

"All in a day's work." He swallowed the lump in his throat. There was so much he wanted to say. So much he couldn't say. "Congratulations. If you ever decide to give an interview..."

"I'll call Jimmy," she joked and was relieved when he laughed softly.

"Take care, Lois."

"You, too." She flipped her phone closed and stared out the window as it began to rain. It seemed to fit her mood, and she readily accepted it.

In Metropolis, Clark replaced his receiver with a sad smile on his face. This was it. This was his life now. He and Lois would never be friends the way they once were.

At least they'd finally spoken. And it had been civil. It was certainly better than the damning silence.

Three weeks later, Lois' new story filled the front page of the Daily Planet right along with one of Clark's. She smiled down as she read the articles again. The hottest team in town had been transformed. They might work alone now, in separate states, but they were still a pretty formidable pair.

Lois was proud of Clark's work. Tricia Taylor was back home, safe and sound, and her kidnapper was on his way to prison. The picture accompanying the article was of Howard Taylor shaking hands with Superman.

Yes. Lois was proud of her former partner.

She would never understand why he'd decided they couldn't be together. However, she'd come to terms with it. Clark had been very dear to her and he always would. She'd finally realized that while she'd never stop loving him, she had to get on with her life.

And she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to do that in Metropolis with him. So, when she'd left Texas, she'd boarded a plane to Idaho. She was on her way to infiltrate a cult following of a man who believed himself to be the new Messiah.

She tucked the newspaper she held into her briefcase and her feelings for Clark away in her heart. He'd always hold a special place there, and she was finally at the place where she could accept that.

From Idaho, Lois trekked to New York City and the site of a terrorist bombing. She was the first reporter to interview the young man who believed it was his duty to bring understanding to the people of the world. He wasn't exactly clear about the understanding he wished to impart, but he was certainly emphatic about it.

He was actually quite disturbed and even tried to take Lois hostage. She promptly freed herself with a few well placed kicks. He later hanged himself with his jumpsuit. And apparently he was as deep as the terrorist ring went.

As Lois made her way down the concourse toward her next flight, she reflected on her past. More precisely, she wondered how Clark would have handled this case.

<<He would have talked his way out of the stand-off.>>

She smiled sadly. Yes. The boy scout would have tried a peaceful solution first.

A sigh for courage, and she was off to solve the next big tragedy.

A shooting at a school in Pennsylvania was what made Lois call home to speak with her mother. She and Ellen exchanged the

first heartfelt conversation they'd had in years. Her mother told her that she understood her need to travel when Lois explained that she wasn't sure when she'd return home. Ellen promised to take care of her apartment in her absence. She also apologized to her daughter for long-ago mistakes.

Lois left for her next assignment with a little more perspective than she'd had when she'd arrived.

Clark made it through Christmas and the New Year without his best friend. He even managed to keep from buying a gift for Lois when Valentine's Day rolled around. He'd smiled when he opened his mail two days before his birthday. There had been a card from Lois.

He'd also managed to work without his partner. And it had been some pretty terrific work. It seemed that if one of Lois' hot topics wasn't gracing the front page of the Daily Planet, one of his was. He'd earned himself another Kerth nomination. Of course, so had Lois.

An informant had put him right smack in the middle of another piece that would probably make noise, so he was late making it into work.

"Kent, where the Sam Hill have you been?" Perry wanted to know immediately when he stepped off the elevator.

"Getting the scoop..."

"Never mind. Get down here." Perry waved him down to his desk, then shouted above the noise in the newsroom. "Listen up, people. I have an announcement. I received a call this morning and our very own Lois Lane and Clark Kent have been named finalists for this year's Merriwether Award for their combined articles on the Smiley investigation!"

Clark's eyes widened in surprise. He had no idea they were even in the running. The Merriwether was a highly distinguished award in investigative journalism. It was second only to the Bailey in the reporting world, and sought after almost as intensely as the Pulitzer Prize. Achieving a Kerth meant the world of news had taken notice of your abilities. Earning a Merriwether meant you'd risen above your peers, nearing the top of your field.

It was also an award Lois had mentioned more than once. Sure, she'd often talked over this particular award, favoring the top of the mountain - the Pulitzer - instead. But Clark had come to know Lois well enough that he knew this particular accolade would mean a great deal to her.

"Congratulations, son!" Perry told him as he shook his hand vigorously. "Even though your articles were written separately, you've been nominated in the team category."

"Wow!" Clark whispered. After all he'd done to separate them - after all Lois had done - they were still being teamed together.

"I'm waiting on a call from Lois now. She doesn't know yet."

Jimmy came up to clap Clark on the back. "The winner is going to be announced in half an hour on LNN. Way to go, CK!" Clark could only grin at them. He was still too stunned to speak.

"Mr. White," a staffer shouted. "Lois is on line two."

Perry snatched up the phone on Clark's desk. "Lois, where are ya'?" Before she answered, he switched over to speaker phone.

"Iraq. Saddam's showing his butt with the insurgent forces. But I think I'm gonna leave this one to Sanders."

"Yeah, yeah. Do that!" Sanders was the Planet's Middle Eastern correspondent. "Listen, I got a call this morning. You and Kent have been named finalists in the team category for the Merriwether!"

There was a long silence before Lois asked, "The Smiley case?"

"That's the one!"

"Am I on speaker?"

"Yeah."

"Clark?"

"I'm here. Congratulations."

"That goes both ways. Didn't I tell you that your articles were powerful?"

Clark smiled. "Yes, you did."

There was a brief silence before she said softly, "I don't think this was part of your plans?"

He knew exactly what she meant. And it hurt like hell. "I think this is something I can live with."

"Yeah," she replied, and he could hear the smile in her voice. "I think I can live with it, too."

"The final choice won't be announced for a few minutes yet," Perry cut in. "Can you call back?"

"I don't think so, Perry. The situation is dicey here. If I want to make it out before they shut things down, I'm gonna have to go."

"Okay. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Ah, I'd rather... hear from... Clark."

Without caring what anyone thought, Clark reached down to pick up the receiver so he could speak to Lois a bit more privately. His heart had swelled when she made that declaration. After all he'd done to her, she wanted to hear the news from him.

"You name the time," he told her. And was relieved when Perry began to move everyone away from him.

"How about I just call you? That would probably be easier."

"Any time," he assured her.

"Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"We make a pretty good team, huh?"

"We make a great team," he replied as tears filled his eyes. He wished so desperately they weren't talking about reporting.

On the other end, Lois, too, had to stave off tears. She'd chased down journalistic achievements like this her entire career. To be on the verge of realizing that accomplishment with the man who'd ultimately separated them completely was pure irony.

"I'll call you as soon as I can," she told him after she regained a bit of composure.

"Okay." He listened as the line went dead. He slowly placed the handset back on its cradle. Funny how things worked out.

He was absolutely elated with his accomplishment, but he was more thrilled for Lois. He felt a little like he'd intruded on her thunder by being considered with her. They had written two separate accounts of the story, never intending for it to seem a joint work. True, their combined efforts really had been explosive. Still, this should have been Lois' moment.

She hadn't sounded like she was angry about his inclusion, though. The comment she'd made about this not being in his plans made it sound more like she might feel that *he* was apprehensive.

How could he be? He'd just received a professional nod that most reporters only dreamed of getting. To get it with Lois made it even more special.

Half a world away Lois entered her hotel room. She was exhausted, more exhausted than she remembered ever being. She'd made it out of Iraq easily enough. But her trek was the last thing on her mind.

Since her call to the Daily Planet that morning, all she'd thought about was her conversation with Clark. Being considered for the Merriwether felt wonderful. She'd worked hard for that achievement. She wasn't even upset about getting recognized as a nonexistent team. What dominated her mind was that Clark seemed to understand completely her need to hear the final results from him.

After all this time, through all the pain and confusion, he still

understood her better than she did herself.

She sighed heavily and sank down onto the bed. It was nearly three in the morning back home. Was it too late to call?

Or was that too early?

She shrugged and lifted her phone to her ear. She'd already dialed the number.

"Hello?" came the sleepy reply after four rings.

"The one night Superman lets you sleep, you're awakened by a deranged woman on the other side of the world."

Despite his sleep filled haze, he managed to chuckle. "I guess you made it out of Iraq."

"You should know not even a madman with a superiority complex can keep me down long."

He laughed full out at that. "Well, somebody should warn him that he was messing with a Merriwether Award winner."

Lois pumped her arm in triumph. "Really?"

"Yes, ma'am. But we have to split the ten grand."

She sighed heavily. "I have to admit that I wasn't exactly sure how I felt about this."

"That makes two of us," Clark replied. "I never meant to steal your thunder."

"This isn't a hardship, Clark."

"No, but it was your story."

"And you ruffled a few feathers yourself."

"Lois..."

"Look, I think we've safely established that we both earned this."

Clark took a deep breath. "I'm really proud of you," he finally managed. It was what he wanted to say anyway.

Lois' eyes filled with tears. There were so many regrets hanging between them now. "Yeah, well, you have a lot to be proud of, too."

Neither said a word for a moment, both lost in their thoughts. "You do know I'm going to kick your butt at the Kerths?"

Lois laughed loudly. "In your dreams, Kent!"

They laughed together for a moment before Clark ventured a question he was dying to ask. "Will you make it in for the luncheon to accept this coveted prize?"

"When is it?"

"Next week."

She wanted to. Winning the Merriwether was every reporter's ambition. It was a low key affair, the nominating committee having long ago opted to keep it that way. Yet, the recognition was, without a doubt, one of the greatest professional achievements one could attain.

So why didn't she feel more excited that she'd won it?

"I guess it's not as important as it once was," he remarked. Maybe she did resent him for winning this as a team.

"A lot of things aren't as important as they once were," she replied, knowing exactly what he'd meant by his last remark. But she refused to open old wounds. She'd worked too hard to get to a place where she was comfortable with her past with this man. She'd even begun to think that maybe she was ready to call him a friend again.

He understood. Staying away was her way of dealing with the pain he'd caused her. To have to come back and accept a joint award with him would probably be too much.

"Tell you what," Lois said suddenly. "Let's tuck that prize money away. And say, in five years, when we've both hashed out more bad guys than not, and things are starting to seem like a monotonous circle of endless tragedy, we'll rent a bungalow on a little island in the middle of paradise somewhere and spend a month or two writing our memoirs."

"And drinking little fruity drinks in our bathing suits on the beach," Clark continued.

"With no phones or newspapers or editors or..."

"Distractions of any kind." And he stopped. He'd wanted to

say 'or Superman', but didn't want to end their conversation. That was one remark that would have surely made her hang up. "We'll eat lobster and shrimp all day and watch silly comedies that should have never been made."

Clark laughed softly. "Snorkel in brilliant blue water and swim with the dolphins."

"You provide the flight and I'll negotiate the rate. We'll need a little money left over for a few double fudge crunch bars."

"I'll hit the warehouse before we leave."

"Then we have plans."

They both laughed again. "Do we have to wait five years?"

"You win the Bailey and I'll slip the ring on your finger. We'll leave right after the ceremony."

"You've got a deal, Lane!"

The Bailey was, in some ways, a bigger achievement than even the Pulitzer. It was given to a reporter whose work exemplified courage, integrity, curiosity, and intelligence while epitomizing the role of journalism in free society and producing recognizable results. It came with a \$35,000 prize and a diamond-studded platinum ring. It was considered the Super Bowl of reporting awards.

After a silence, Lois sighed and said, "I guess I should let you get back to sleep."

"Yeah."

"Congratulations, Clark."

"That goes both ways," he repeated the same words she'd said to him the day before.

"Take care."

"You, too, Lois." He waited for her to hang up first, but the click didn't come.

Instead, he heard her say, "I'm proud of you, too."

Then she hung up. He replaced the receiver and laid back to stare up at his ceiling, tears filling his eyes.

So many regrets.

Across the wide expanse that stretched out between them, Lois took out a photograph she kept with her as much as possible. It was an image of Clark without his glasses, a brilliant smile gracing his features. A rare glimpse of the man only she and his parents knew.

<<I don't resent you a bit. But I don't think I'm ready to face you either.>>

She sighed heavily.

So many regrets.

From there, Lois boarded a plane bound for Africa. The illegal African diamond trade seemed like the next juicy story waiting to be told.

Smuggling diamonds across the borders of South African countries was indeed a juicy story. It was also a very dangerous one. She met a few people that become invaluable to her survival. She also stumbled onto the hot topic of children being forced into the rebel army. That story earned her a broken arm and a scar above her left eye.

And Lois' article, by no means, shut down the practice, but it did make the right people aware of the situation. She headed back to the States, away from a politically divided country that she couldn't begin to change.

She glanced down at the photograph she held. It was of her and a South African boy, just twelve years old. He was so young and innocent. Yet, he'd been forced to do unthinkable things after he was drafted into the rebel regime. Lois had worked with his father, Rafiki, and her contact to free the boy, but so much damage had been done. The spark of youth had been doused in his beautiful dark eyes by men so inhuman she wondered how they looked at themselves in the mirror in the mornings. She'd saved this child, his life at least.

Peponi- his name meant heaven. Had his parents known the

hell their son would some day face?

A heavy sigh punctuated the quiet of the plane cabin, and she peered out into the darkness. She'd been so distraught following this particular case. And just when she'd begun to wonder if what she'd done had really made a difference, she'd gotten encouragement from an unlikely place.

{{{{Her suitcase was packed; she was ready to head home. Yet, the horrible images of young boys turned killers still filled her mind. Just as she was about to leave her hotel room, her cell phone rang.

"Hello?" She asked, just a tad impatiently. She wasn't in the mood for a lecture from Perry.

"I know it doesn't seem like it right now," came the soft male rumble over the line, "But you've done a good thing. That little boy has a chance now, Lois."

She dropped to the bed with a sigh as tears filled her eyes. It had been a long time since she'd heard from Clark. Nearly four months, in fact.

"I know you're beating yourself up because you couldn't do more," he continued when he heard her intake of breath. He'd debated with himself for nearly two hours about calling her. When he'd first read the article, he'd been half way to Africa before he'd stopped. He'd known she would be dying. This had been a tough case, one she hadn't seen very many positive results from. He'd known her well enough to know she'd have a hard time coming to grips with all she *couldn't* do, instead of feeling good about what she *had* done.

And what she'd done was nothing short of extraordinary. She'd caused a tidal wave in the political seas in Africa. A major investigation had been started and there were rumors that several international organizations were getting involved to help stop the torture of the South African youth being forced into unimaginable situations.

"Sources say that the UN is calling for an emergency meeting tomorrow morning."

"Really?" She asked as she wiped her nose. "I hadn't heard."

"Well, they've asked Superman for special support."

She nodded, even though he couldn't see her. What he'd done by imparting this bit of information didn't escape her. Knowing how the political game was played, what he'd just told her was probably so classified that not even the President was aware of it. Yet, he'd trusted her. She'd felt like giving up, and he'd come to her rescue.

Did he realize just what he'd done?

"Lois, your article was amazing. And I'm sure you've paid a tremendous price to get the information you did."

She smiled. He'd just asked if she'd been hurt or in danger. Some things never changed.

"It wasn't so bad, Clark. I did what had to be done." She glanced at the arm that had been covered with plaster only a few days ago. She'd done what she had to and then some.

He paused a second. He'd already spoken to Perry. He knew she'd been hurt, but just like always, she'd played it down. Some things never changed.

"And you did it so well," he forced himself to say. He'd been worried about her; that would never change. But they'd made their choices.

Or at least, he'd made his. There was no way to undo that now.

"Thank you... for calling," Lois told him after a moment.

"Thank you... for listening," he replied. It had been so long since he'd spoken to her. Why hadn't he called?

Why hadn't she?

Some things had changed too much.

"Well, my flight leaves in an hour." Lois stood, ready now to take on the next mystery.

"Take care of yourself," Clark said, almost in a whisper.

"You, too." She closed her phone, staring down at it as warm memories flooded her mind. So much had been happening over the past months, she'd barely had time to eat, let alone think about Clark.

But she was glad he'd called. She'd needed to hear his voice. She'd needed to feel him in her heart again.}}}}

She glanced back down at the picture she held.

<<He would have loved you.>>

And he would have tried to rescue every single child in Africa. Perry had told her that Superman was livid about what was happening in that part of the world. If she knew Clark, Superman was probably sick that he couldn't do a thing to help either.

Yes, she reflected. She was glad she'd spoken with him. It was what she'd needed, when she'd she needed it.

Did he realize that even with so much distance between them, they'd somehow remained so close?

A Metropolis-bound superhero had indeed been sick that he couldn't do more for the children of Africa. But there was suffering all over the world. There was no possible way he could help them all. He did what he could and that had to be enough.

It was never easy, but he plowed along as best he could.

He also did what he could as a reporter. In the past few months, he'd stopped the Lakes from stealing precious art from the Metropolis Museum of Art to add to their eclectic collection. He'd uncovered several million dollars worth of stolen art when he'd raided their secret lair beneath their mansion.

Then he'd uncovered a plot by a pair of sisters who'd discovered another form of Kryptonite. Red Kryptonite, something he'd come in contact with before, was used to strip him of his powers and temporarily transfer them to one of the sisters. Clark had worked, without his super side, to quickly rectify the situation and return Superman to the skies above the city. It wasn't until both sisters were in jail that he could breathe a sigh of relief.

As he'd read the headline with only his byline, he'd thought of his former partner. Things would have been so much different if they'd been able to work together. Clark missed his work partner.

He missed his friend.

It had taken him weeks to come to grips with what he'd done. There was no way to go back; no way to change things. He had to move forward, and he had to do so without Lois by his side. It was the choice he'd made.

The irony of their separation knotted his stomach almost painfully the afternoon he accepted both his and Lois's leather-bound Merriwether certificates. That was the day he finally realized that although miles separated them physically, they'd never be far apart. She was part of his very being and always would be. Separating himself from her emotionally, and now the physical separation, would never change that.

Lois had almost called Clark when she returned to the states and read about the Newtrich sisters stripping Superman of his powers temporarily. Although they'd talked a few times, there seemed to be an unspoken agreement between them that those conversations should only take place during very specific situations. This didn't seem like one of those situations. After all, he'd solved the case and gotten his powers back.

So, she set off for Northern California to investigate the disappearance of three teenagers at a college fraternity. It was two weeks later when a major news break stopped her in her tracks.

'I am the mother of Superman's love child' was the title of the article on the front page of every newspaper in the country. Every one except the Daily Planet.

Lois read about Lou Anne Stojanvich and her super-powered

son, Jesse. Superman was going to give a press conference that afternoon.

Could this be true? Could Superman, Clark, have a son she hadn't known about?

<<That's crazy!>>

<<Is it? He lied to you... every day for two years!>>

She tried to tell herself it was just laughable. Clark wasn't that kind of person. The truth was, she hadn't really known him at all. She'd been so sure that he'd never leave her. He'd told her as much. Then he'd up and broken her heart for her own good.

Lois reluctantly admitted that this Lou Anne person might be telling the truth as she watched little Jesse float during a news segment on LNN. Her heart ached when she saw the picture of Superman with Lou Anne outside a motel.

And if it was true, did that mean...?

<<Wait a minute! A picture of Lou Anne with Superman?>>

She snatched up the phone and dialed a number she knew by heart. When the man on the other end answered, she got straight to the point.

"This Lou Anne person is full of it, Perry! There's no way she's had his love child."

"Well, hello to you, too, Lois."

"Yeah, hi. This is hog wash!"

"It's been my experience that when something looks like a duck and walks like a duck..."

"It's borrowed a costume from the House of Horrors! Come on, Perry. Even you can't be this blind. Think about it. Superman has only been around for two years. This kid's at least six!"

"Did it ever occur to you that Superman wasn't born two years ago?"

"Duh! But if this kid's really his that means this woman would know that! And what could possibly be a bigger story than the true... real birth date of Superman?" She'd almost said too much. Clark might have ripped her heart out, but she wasn't about to betray him, even to Perry. And she wasn't about to let some floozy smear his reputation either.

There was a short silence before Perry said, "I told Clark the same thing. He didn't want the story, but I made him go on over there to interview this woman."

"And?"

"And Jesse's been kidnapped by some maniac."

Lois fell silent while she thought about that.

"We're not sure what's going on yet," Perry continued. "Care to come on back here and help us find out?"

"Ah, no. Clark's got it covered."

"I know that, honey, but he's not Lois Lane."

"Clark's good, Perry." She took a breath and added, "As good as I am. Give him time. He'll figure out what's going on."

"Yeah. I, ah, I just miss ya' is all."

"I know. I miss you, too."

There was another silence before Perry finally said, "Take care. And any time you're ready to come home..."

"I know." She cut their connection as a soft smile played on her lips. She did miss Perry and Jimmy... and Clark.

Clark... he must be going crazy. Something had happened to cause this little boy to have Superman's powers, but he wasn't the big guy's son. Lois knew that. Clark might have lied about his other identity, but he would have never lied about something like that.

And he would have never had a relationship of that magnitude with a woman and walked away from her without so much as a mention of her later. They'd spent a lot of time talking about their past relationships, and Lou Anne Stojanvich was not one of them.

Clark would figure it all out.

Two days later, Clark did figure it out. He also stopped a

missile from leveling an entire country.

Jesse had inherited part of his powers during a lightning storm in which Superman had landed a distressed airplane. The lightning had transferred part of his powers to Jesse, who had been sitting near the window when the plane was struck. The effect had worn off and Superman had rescued the boy from his kidnapper.

Lou Anne had issued an official retraction and life returned to normal.

At least to what normal was for a man who could fly.

He'd thought about Lois when the news of his 'love child' had first hit the papers. How would she have handled it if they'd still been together? Would she have doubted him when he told her it wasn't possible for the child to be his? Would she have backed Superman unquestionably?

He sighed heavily, unsure of absolutely everything anymore. It was still difficult for him to deal with the fact that he'd turned away from the only woman he'd ever loved. There were days when he'd rather have stayed in bed all day. Being needed as Superman, and the cases he took on at the Planet kept him going.

Thinking of Lois kept him sane. He still loved her and he always would. Nothing could change that. He'd long since stopped dwelling on what might have been and slowly accepted the way things were.

Lois shivered as she wrapped her hands around the mug in her hands. She was so cold. Why in hell had she made this trip? Why in hell did anyone think that they had to make this trip?

Work. Oh, yeah, right. She'd forgotten that little detail.

Another sip of her hot chocolate didn't help with the unbearable cold. She was inside for goodness sakes!

She'd almost taken an Alaskan cruise one time. She sure was glad good sense had prevailed.

Or had it been a hot lead on a story?

Either way, she hadn't gone and she was glad she hadn't.

But she was here now. And here was a small town in northern Alaska investigating a prostitution ring. For the life of her, she couldn't figure out why any self respecting woman had to come all the way to Alaska to sell...

Lois growled in frustration as her cell phone rang.

"Yeah?"

Twenty minutes later, she was out the door. Finally, a break in the case.

On the short ride across town, she glanced down at a picture of Superman on the front page of the Planet. He'd saved a bus full of kids from dying when their driver had a heart attack and nearly drove them all headfirst into Hobb's Bay. She couldn't stop the smile that crossed her face. Everybody's hero - that was Superman.

And no one's father, it seemed. Even though she'd had her doubts for a moment, she'd known, deep down, that Clark hadn't fathered a child with a woman like Lou Anne. Yet, she'd still been slightly relieved when the retraction came out. She'd almost called Clark that night. But what would she have said?

'Hey, I'm glad you didn't sow your wild oats with that tramp?'

Clark would have gotten angry and she would have said things she'd regret. It was better she hadn't called.

They'd come through it okay. Superman's image was still squeaky clean, Clark was still... Clark, and she was...

<<Freezing my ass off in the middle of nowhere!>>

But this is the life she'd chosen. Chasing stories had become her salvation. When she'd first left Metropolis, she had been sure her heart would never heal. At the end of that first story, she'd realized that she might actually make it. So, she'd run down another one and another, until even the ache was a shadow of what it had once been.

Winning the Merriwether Award as a team was ironic considering their current relationship. Yet, it helped put her feelings for Clark into perspective.

Memories of her time with him became a warm place she liked to go when she was feeling down. A man who had figuratively torn her heart out was the same man who now gave her sweet reprieve when she needed it most.

He was also, more often than not, right there beside her. He was quiet reflection when she needed him to be. He was sweet release when she needed it. He was who she shouted at when she was angry. He was who she talked to when she was at the end of her rope. So far from her, yet so very close. Lois kept Clark tucked within her heart almost as closely as she had when they'd been together.

She was also proud of all he'd accomplished. He'd recently uncovered a plot by a Nazi group to take over Metropolis. He'd also solved a huge case involving Jaxon Xavier and his virtual reality center that was a cover used to kidnap dozens of famous kids. Lois was especially proud of Clark's work on that one.

It was that pride, that deep-seated love that would forever remain in her heart, that allowed her to take him everywhere she went. From Alaska, she headed south to Colombia, South America. Clark was right there with her in the coffee fields as she dug out a spy. He was with her when she flew back to the states, to Georgia, to find out why there was a sudden outbreak of chicken pox. He sat next to her in Chicago when she interviewed the most notorious serial killer of their time. And he cried silently with her as she watched from her hiding place along the Mexican border as ten people were executed by a man they'd thought was taking them across the border to a better life in America.

Where ever she went, he was there. In everything she did, Clark was with her. She felt him everywhere.

Martha looked over at her son as he quietly ate his pie. He'd flown out to see them every Friday night he got the chance, and tonight was no different. In the months since he'd split up with Lois, her boy had changed a great deal. He'd... aged. He was a bit more contemplative now. He still smiled, still laughed, but she could tell it wasn't as genuine as it had once been. The light didn't dance in his eyes as it had before Lois.

The most sincere smile she had seen on his face was nearly a year ago after the acceptance speech he'd given for his and Lois' combined Merriwether. She could tell that he was dying inside because Lois hadn't been there with him to accept it, but he'd delivered one the most emotional addresses she'd ever heard. He'd received several comments on it later.

He'd stood on stage again a few weeks later to accept her Kerth Award. By that time, he just looked defeated. And it hadn't been because Lois had edged him out to take the honor. It was because she hadn't been there again. She hadn't even shown up to accept her Bailey Ring last December.

Summer had faded into fall, another Christmas came and went, and the New Year rang in the fact that she was still gone. If it hadn't been for Clark's work, Martha was sure he would have closed in on himself. His writing seemed to be on fire. Her son had become a renowned reporter in his own right.

"Will you be able to help with the planting?" Jonathan asked, just to break the silence. There was too much silence when Clark visited now.

"Sure. I can get most of it done in a day," Clark said without looking up from his pie.

"Good." Jonathan rose and left the kitchen. It was so hard talking to his son these days. It was even harder not to mention Lois. He missed that girl.

Martha reached over and covered his hand once they were alone. "Have you talked to her lately?"

"I haven't talked to her in... a really long time." He didn't

even pretend not to know who his mom meant. "I'm not down for reasons you think, Mom." He finally lifted his eyes to look at her. "You know she won the Merriweather again this year?"

"I did know."

"There's talk that she'll take the Pulitzer this year, too."

"Are you... jealous?"

"What? Mom, no." And he smiled. "I'm actually very proud of her." He leaned forward on the table.

"Why don't you call her?"

"Yeah. Maybe I will." Clark drank down the last of his coffee before he spoke again. "I miss her some days so much that I feel ill. Other days it's like she's right there with me."

Martha didn't say a word, just waited for him to finish. He hadn't talked about Lois with her in a while, and she felt that maybe he needed to.

"I will always love Lois," he admitted aloud for the first time. "I've finally realized that she will always be part of me."

"I think that real love is like that."

Clark smiled over at his mother. She'd been so understanding about this whole thing. "I don't think I've told you lately how much I love you."

She smiled. "I love you, too, son."

He rose and leaned down to hug her tenderly. When he drew back, he cupped her cheek. "I think maybe I'll go talk to Dad."

"I think it's time you did."

He nodded and went in search of his father. When he'd broken up with Lois, he'd created a void between himself and his father. It was high time he did something to fill it.

Standing in the doorway of Clark's bedroom, Martha could only wait. Wait to find out if her son would live or die. She and Jonathan had traveled to Metropolis to be with Clark for Easter, and she was glad they had. They'd only been there for a day when he'd become ill. His symptoms presented much like the flu, but they'd progressively gotten worse.

"He's slipped into a coma," came the voice of Sam Lane.

Not knowing what else to do when her boy had come down with this bug, Martha had tried to call Lois. When she wasn't able to reach the younger woman, she'd called Ellen Lane. With a little prodding, Martha had told Ellen that Clark's friend was ill. Because of who this sick friend was, they would need a special kind of doctor to treat him. Within an hour, Ellen had shown up at Clark's door with Sam. Sam had induced a coma using Kryptonite to starve the infection.

Martha nodded sadly at the doctor before going to join Jonathan on the sofa. He wrapped a comforting arm around his wife. All they could do now was wait. Wait and worry.

A prison break in Alabama had kept Lois busy for over three weeks. It wasn't until she was on her way to Florida that she saw an article on the Planet's website that stopped her cold.

She'd been forced to find a table in the coffee shop of the Miami International Airport to wait for her luggage to arrive. Since she'd been out of touch, she'd decided to peruse the Daily Planet's site on her laptop to catch up. When she read an article about Intergang trying to poison Superman, her breath left her in a rush.

She dialed the number to the Planet as fast as she could.

"Perry White?" came her editor's voice.

"I need to speak with Jimmy, Perry," Lois told him right away. The article in the Planet carried the bylines of Clark Kent and Jimmy Olsen. She was pleasantly surprised about that, but she had always known Jimmy would some day become a great reporter.

"Nice to speak with you, Lois. I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

"How are you, Perry? Where's Jimmy?"

He chuckled softly. "He's actually running down leads with Clark. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Well..." She glanced back at the article on the computer screen before asking, "No. I'll get back with Jimmy later." She wasn't sure why she didn't just call Clark. It had been so long since they'd spoken, and she was more than a little apprehensive about speaking with him after all these months.

And she was scared he'd ask questions she wasn't prepared to answer.

"Ah, fantastic work on that prison break."

"Just another day at the office."

Perry laughed again. The girl was relentless. "Since I have you on the phone... Do you plan on making it home any time this year?"

She had wondered how long it would take him to get to that. He asked her when she was coming home every time she talked to him. And she gave him the same answer.

"Are you there, honey?"

"Yeah, Perry. I'm sorry... I just..."

"I know," he told her. He didn't really, but he understood. He and Alice had gone through a rough patch over the last year, too, because he'd been hiding away in this damn newsroom as long as they'd been married.

"Ah, listen," he continued. "I got advance word this morning. He doesn't even know it yet, but Clark edged you out for the Kerth this year."

For the first time in months, Lois' smile reached her eyes.

<<Way to go, Kent!>>

"That's great," she said softly. "Hey, Perry, tell Jimmy I'm proud of him," she said to change the subject quickly. Though she was proud of him, she really didn't want to discuss Clark with Perry.

"That boy's really startin' to shine!"

Lois could hear the pride in Perry's voice. Jimmy was like a son to her editor.

"Gotta' run, Perry. I'll talk to you soon."

"Okay. Take care."

"I will." She flipped the phone closed, then immediately dialed another number she thought she'd forgotten.

"Hello?"

She had to take a breath when she heard the other woman's voice on the line. Lois had loved this woman as much as she'd loved her son. All this time had passed without so much as a word. Why hadn't she called the Kents? She'd been too stunned at first, then it had been too painful. And now...

"Hey, Martha."

The older woman inhaled sharply. Even after all this time, she'd know that voice anywhere. "Lois?"

"It's been a long time." Lois had to cover her mouth with her hand to keep from crying aloud.

"Too long." Martha, too, realized she shouldn't have allowed so much time to pass.

"I, ah, I just read the article Clark and Jimmy wrote about Superman being poisoned."

Martha smiled. Lois had read between the lines. "He was really sick, Lois."

"Oh, God." This time a sob escaped before she could stop it.

"He's fine now... Thanks to your father."

"My father?"

"I tried to reach you. I finally called your mother to see if she could reach you. She suggested Sam might be able to help."

"You told my father?"

"Oh, no," Martha told her quickly. "We told him that Superman was Clark's friend."

Lois had long ago lost touch with the kind of man her father was, so maybe it was best not to trust him with that kind of secret.

"How are you, dear?" Martha asked after a moment of silence.

"I'm... okay." It wasn't a total lie. She'd learned to deal with her past.

"I wish..."

"Don't, Martha." Lois gulped down her emotions. She'd only wanted to know that Clark was okay. If she and Martha dredged up the past, she'd be thrust right back into that horrible abyss she'd worked so hard to climb her way out of.

The older woman struggled with her emotions as well. Finally she sighed and said, "Should I tell Clark you called?"

"Ah, no. I just had to know if he was all right."

Martha understood. She understood that too much time had passed. She understood that while Lois and Clark still loved one another very dearly, so much stood between them.

"I'm glad you called," she replied instead. "Take care of yourself."

"I will, Martha." Lois blinked away a few tears, wishing desperately that things had turned out differently. "Take care of him," she whispered, then quickly closed the phone.

"I will," Martha said as she listened to the dial tone. She'd give anything to know how to help those two.

In the airport, Lois tapped the key to turn her computer off. He'd been sick, and her father had taken care of him. Jimmy had co-written his first big story. Clark had won another Kerth.

Life had gone on without her.

Clark read over the notes he'd made the day before about a story involving a man named Baron Sunday. It seemed Sunday was the alias of a man named Henderson, who had been involved in a case Clark had covered in the beginning of his career. It seemed Sunday was bent on ruining Clark the same way he felt Clark had ruined him. He was a master practitioner of the black arts and tried to use Clark's own fears to kill him. But what Clark had first thought to be his deepest fears was actually visions of his departure from Krypton. Those memories combined with thoughts of Lois ended up saving his life.

It also helped him write another powerful story.

He'd just taken his seat when Perry stepped out into the newsroom.

"Listen up, people!" He waited until he had everyone's attention before he continued. "I am more than pleased to announce that our very own Lois Lane was just named as a finalist for this year's Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Journalism! Turn those monitors up. They're about to announce the winner."

Loud applause broke out when Lois Lane was indeed named the recipient of the prestigious journalism award.

"Here ya' go, CK," Jimmy said as he gave Clark a glass of cold bubbly. "The Chief insists we celebrate!" He'd had several bottles of champagne chilling since early that morning. He was more than convinced that Lois would be named a finalist and win.

"Thanks, Jimmy." Clark allowed a smile to spread out across his lips. He lifted his glass in salute to his former partner. "Congratulations, Lois," he said softly, then took a sip of his drink.

She'd finally written the story that earned her that coveted award she'd chased for so long. Everyone knew this was something Lois had sought her entire career.

"How 'bout that girl?" Perry asked as he stepped up to Clark's desk.

"She's something else," Clark replied.

"I tried to get her on conference call. She's undercover somewhere in Florida. Or was last I heard."

Clark merely nodded. He and Perry had an understanding when it came to Lois. He didn't ask, and Perry didn't tell.

"I'd have thought the African diamond case would have

earned the win," Perry continued. "It was..."

"The illegal immigrant case," Clark answered for him. The detail that Lois had written into that piece was truly riveting.

"Yep," Perry agreed. "She was there... when those people were shot."

"I know." And he did know. There was no way she could have written such detail if she hadn't witnessed it. He was just glad that the patrol officer who pulled the trigger was behind bars.

"I, ah, I don't know if she'll make it in," Perry stammered.

"Not this one, Perry." He just couldn't accept this award.

Perry looked down at the man he'd come to think of as another son. "She wouldn't want anyone else to do it, son."

Clark looked away. He knew that; he knew she wouldn't want anyone else to accept her beloved prize, but how could he? She'd worked so hard for this chance. How could he stand before those people when he knew it was the place she'd lived to be? It was different when he had accepted the Merriwether for both of them. And the solo award last year, the Kerth, and the Bailey... they were different. She hadn't talked about any of them the way she had the Pulitzer.

"Just think about it." Perry clapped him on his shoulder and headed back toward his office.

Clark was alone with his thoughts of the past. He reached down to pull open a drawer on his desk and took out a picture. The image was of him and Lois, when he'd won his first Kerth Award. They were happy then. There had been no pressure of a relationship or of Superman. How he wished he could have that time back again.

Clark laughed softly as he walked along with his parents, Perry, and Jimmy. Even though part of him hadn't wanted to accept the Pulitzer for Lois, another part - the part that would always love that fiery woman - wouldn't have been anywhere else.

As predicted, Lois hadn't even shown up. She was still undercover, chasing down a major drug dealer, somewhere in South Carolina. So, Clark had stood on that stage and proudly accepted the elusive dream Lois had chased for so long. It had felt as if it had been his triumph.

"I can't thank you enough for inviting us, Perry," Martha told the editor.

"I think Lois would appreciate you both being here."

"I think she's going to be psyched," Jimmy said with a chuckle.

"That she will be, son. Come on. Give an old man a lift home." He and Jimmy said their good-byes, and made their way down to the parking lot.

Clark smiled down at his mother. "I'm glad you guys came."

"We are, too," she replied.

"You did a heck of job on that speech, son," Jonathan told him as he squeezed his shoulder.

"I just hope she sees this some day," Clark said as he lifted the leather bound jacket that covered the golden engraved paper within.

"She will. Perry's sure she'll come as soon as she finds out about it."

"Yeah. I'm sure you're right." But he wasn't. Not really. He wasn't at all sure if he'd ever see Lois again. To see the pain he'd caused her had been excruciating. To finally realize the true extent was something else altogether. He just prayed that one day she'd be able to put that pain and betrayal on a shelf long enough to come home to see her family.

Martha had been far from right. What Perry hadn't told any of them was that Lois already knew about her prized acclaim. Somewhere during her self discovery, she'd found out that

winning an award was no where near as important as the leads she chased and the stories she wrote.

And none of it was as important as just living. Living without the constant pain of shattered dreams. She'd learned to do that. Going back, standing in the midst of a life that had slipped through her fingers would only cause the pain to return. Though she'd learned to live without it, she'd hadn't learned to live with it.

It had taken her months to uncover the players in a drug ring that spanned twelve states and two countries. That story was written under an assumed name while her own byline was attached to a few stories that took place across the country so that no one would connect her to it. The stakes were way too high to take chances.

She'd moved on from there to a drag racing case in southern California, a ski accident involving the President's daughter in Colorado, and a gambling scandal in Vegas. Case after case, state after state. She'd even managed to see Paris, Rome, and Sydney.

Back in Metropolis, life rolled on for both Clark and Superman. He'd met Jimmy's dad, a spy, and uncovered a plot to assassinate the heads of the CIA, FBI, and the NIA. Story after story, rescue after rescue. Life marched on.

Month after month, life marched on.

Peering through the window of the cab, Lois watched the snow as it danced softly on the night air. The sporadic dusting had already begun to cover the hoods of parked cars and the temperature had dropped nearly five degrees since she'd left the airport - if the electronic thermostat on the dash was anything to go by. Shivering slightly, she adjusted the jacket of her sleek, new business suit. She'd long ago stopped wearing dresses and skirts except on rare occasions. The slacks proved to be much more comfortable and sensible with her on the go so much.

The driver pulled slowly up to the curb in front of a building on Carter Avenue. She couldn't help but notice that a few things had changed.

"Seventeen-fifty, Miss," the man told her as she searched through her small bag.

"Keep the change," she told him as she pulled her suitcase across the seat and out of the door behind her.

"Hey, thanks, Ma'am," came the cheerful voice of the man in the driver's seat. It wasn't often he got more than a dollar or two tip. A little more than ten was something special.

The woman stopped and looked back into the open door of the cab. "You're welcome," she told him when he turned to make sure she'd made it onto the sidewalk safely.

"And you have a nice night," he added with another smile.

"You, too." She stood up and pushed the door closed on the bright yellow vehicle. She missed cab rides. There weren't any in the small town she'd just left. In fact, there wasn't much in that town at all.

<<Except a psycho with a gun and a bad temper.>>

She heaved her small bag onto her shoulder and headed for the front door of the building in front of her.

She'd kept her apartment, faithfully paying the rent each month. There was really no reason why she had; she'd just thought it was wise to keep a place to come back to. Of course, she hadn't set out to be gone for two years. She hadn't set out to win another Kerth, a Bailey, two Merriwethers or a Pulitzer either. But she had. And chasing stories had saved her sanity.

Opting to take the elevator with her large load, she made it to the fifth floor in just a few minutes. Three locks later she was looking around the once familiar confines of her adored apartment. Her mother had come for the plants and the fish tank was empty. There were supposed to be dust covers on the furniture, but everything looked as if she still lived there. Not a speck of dust could be found either.

She set her suitcase on the floor next to the kitchen counter when she'd spotted a piece of paper lying there.

'Lois,

I sent Jimmy on over there yesterday to clean up the place a bit... just in case you made it in for the ceremony tonight.

Perry

PS - I really do hope we see you this time.'

A wide smile covered her face as she pulled her suitcase in the direction of the bedroom.

Why exactly had she come back to Metropolis? And on this particular night? She hadn't even made it to the ceremony when she'd won her own Pulitzer, let alone her Bailey. Yet, for some reason she just felt she had to be here.

The Metropolis Convention Center was elaborately decorated and filled with some of the country's most respected journalists. Several people stopped to greet her as she made her way further into the room.

"Well, I'll be," came a deep voice she'd know anywhere.

She excused herself from her conversation and turned toward a man who'd once been like a father to her. In some ways she felt even closer to him now. He was the only one she talked to on a consistent basis.

"Perry," she breathed as she stepped forward into the waiting arms of her old editor.

"Lois," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "Let me get a look at ya', darling," he said after a moment and pushed her back, his eyes moving over her carefully. "It shore is good to see you."

"And you, Perry." Her grin widened as they stood there staring at one another.

"The hair's great," he told her as his fingers slipped through long, thick locks.

"Yeah, well..." Another thing she hadn't intended to do - it just happened. But now that it was out, she liked it.

"And the extra weight looks good on ya'."

It was only about fifteen extra pounds. She wasn't sure how she'd managed to gain any the way she worked. But again it was one of those things she seemed to like now that it was tangible.

"Talking to you on the phone is one thing, but seeing you..." He pulled her into another brief hug. "Well, seeing you is better than seeing Elvis on his farewell tour."

Lois let out a low whistle. "Wow! I feel honored to be ranked right up there with the King."

Perry laughed softly, a sound she had truly missed. They talked briefly about a couple of her latest stories, Alice, Perry's sons, and even Lois' family before Perry cocked his head to look at Lois more closely.

"Somehow I knew you'd make it in for this." His voice was soft and knowing.

"Then you knew more than me," she told him as her eyes began to wonder. Now that she was here, she wanted to see the man of the hour.

"Aw, honey... There's nothing like a true love to go and make..."

"A fool of someone," she finished for him. After more than two years, Clark Kent still filled her mind and soul. When she'd first heard he was nominated for a Bailey, she'd been so thrilled for him. The story that had earned him the award was absolutely outstanding. Clark had been following a bunch of suspicious deaths in the Metropolis prison system that turned out to be a huge scandal. Prisoners were being hunted like animals by men and woman rich enough to pay for the privilege. Huge names, well known people, were taken down for that one. The series of articles that followed was some of Clark's best work.

Then what she'd told him on the phone so long ago came back to her.

{{{{“You win the Bailey and I’ll slip the ring on your finger. We’ll leave right after the ceremony.”}}}}

That really wasn’t the reason she’d come back after all this time. There was a part of her that was tired of running. She wanted to know if she could look at him and not want to die.

She wanted to know if she could see him and not want to just hold him and forget that the past two years had happened at all.

And for all they’d once meant to each other, for whatever they might still mean to one another, she’d had to be here for him.

He’d been there for her. When she hadn’t even been there for herself, he’d been there. He’d accepted award after award for her. It was his time for the spotlight and the part of her that had loved Clark - the part that still loved Clark- wouldn’t allow her to miss this.

Not again.

Perry sighed and pushed a hand into his pocket. “He’s over near the stage, speaking with Kurt Tulley.” He gestured with his head, smiling when she automatically looked in that direction.

Strong, broad shoulders stretched the jacket of his tux across his back as he listened intently to what the man in front of him said. His hand moved as he talked - a trait she had once thought annoying. Now, now it was... a welcome sight.

<<I really have missed him.>>

Her feet automatically began to move. What would she say to him? What would he say to her? Did he even want to see her? She wasn’t aware until just this moment exactly how badly she wanted to see him.

Her heart fluttered slightly and the palms of her hands began to sweat as she neared his side. A deep breath for courage and she opened her mouth.

“Hey, stranger,” she said softly and waited until he turned to face her. Surprised eyes met hers and she rushed on. “Do you remember me? I think we might have met somewhere before. Metropolis is the place that comes to mind, but I guess you never really can be sure.” She’d forced herself to remain calm - to keep her voice even.

He had to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat when he’d seen her. In his wildest dreams he hadn’t felt she’d be here tonight. It had taken him so long to come to terms with her absence, but seeing her threatened to overwhelm him.

“Ah... n...no, I guess you can’t...” He stared into her eyes for moment. “... be sure.” On its own, his hand lifted and he cupped her elbow, giving it a gentle squeeze. “How are you, Lois?”

“I’m... good,” she replied, an immediate heat coursing through her body from his simple touch. They gazed at one another a second longer before she finally stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his neck.

To say he was stunned would have been an understatement. The sudden onslaught of feelings threatened to buckle his knees. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, then his body managed to catch up with his mind and he slowly lifted his arms to hold her against himself. Although it had been two years since he’d seen her, standing there holding her again, it seemed like no time had passed at all.

“I’m so proud of you,” she whispered against his ear.

He almost wanted to cry. Her soft breath sent a fire through his entire being, making him regret every step he’d taken away from her.

Finally Lois eased back, but slid her hands down and grasped his tightly. “You look fantastic,” she breathed. And he did. He’d bulked up a little, if that was possible, and his dark hair almost shone under the large light fixtures in the room. He wore new glasses with stylish frames that seemed to make him even more beautiful than he’d ever been. She had seen him over the past two years on television as Superman of course. And while she’d felt a little rush with each glance, standing before him, seeing the real

man was much more powerful.

“So do you,” he replied softly as his eyes swept her body appreciatively. He pulled a hand from her grasp and slid his fingers through her very long locks. “The hair is...”

“I know,” she interrupted. “Way too long for a busy woman, but...” She tossed it back over her shoulder with her free hand. “I’ve been meaning to get it cut. I just haven’t had time.” She stopped when he grinned at her. God, how she’d missed that gorgeous smile.

“I was going to say it’s stunning,” he told her softly. Again, he reached forward to run his hand through the brown waves. For some reason he couldn’t control his wayward limb.

She felt her cheeks heat slightly from his adoration. Did he realize just how stunning *he* was?

And why did she feel like a teenager standing here with Clark? This was Clark! They’d known each other very intimately at one time. She knew his deepest secret, for Christ’s sake!

An awkward silence filled the space between them, reminding Lois just how raw they’d left their relationship so long ago. Finally she pulled on his hand so that she could loop her arm through his, guiding them toward an empty space on the other side of the room. The man who’d been speaking with Clark had obviously taken the hint that he was a third wheel because he’d drifted into the crowd.

“So...” she said as they walked slowly together. “Tell me about the crew at the Planet. How’s Jimmy? Is Ralph still annoying? And Bobby? Is he still a good source?”

He smiled to himself. Some things would never change. Lois still appeared to be just a bit high strung.

“Well,” he began, “Jimmy’s great. He’s writing now.”

“I know. I’ve read the articles. And how about those awards for his photography? I saw that series of pictures. They were incredible.”

“He’s even moonlighting a bit. Takes pictures for church groups, daycares, and sports leagues. He’s managed to bank quite a roll. In fact, he and I went together to buy my apartment building and renovate it.”

“Really?” Lois asked as she stopped in front of the double doors leading out on a terrace.

“We’ve filled the apartments with a few good neighbors. It’s a nice place to go home to now.”

What did he mean by that? She didn’t ask. Instead she led him over to an empty bench against the wall, refusing to release his hand as they settled.

“How about you?” Clark asked when they’d settled. When she looked at him questionably, he elaborated. “Any plans to invest all that money you’ve made?”

“Oh... I haven’t thought about it.” Though she’d been stunned to realize just how much money she’d accumulated over the months. Her mother had taken care of her few expenses at home and the Planet footed most of the bills while she traveled. She hadn’t had a lot of debt and once it was paid off, the money had simply collected.

“Maybe Jimmy and I should have asked you to be our other partner.”

And the word ‘partner’ hung in the air between them heavily. That’s what they’d once been. The hottest professional partners as well as the closest intimate partners. How had they gone from that place to this one?

“It really is good to see you, Clark,” Lois said after another unbearable silence. One of them had to break the ice, and even if she had been the one to leave, she breached the distance between them first.

“And it’s good to see you,” he answered truthfully as he turned to face her. He glanced down and watched as his thumb stroked the back of her hand. “So many times I’ve tried to call,” he whispered.

"I know," she replied, the past pain quickly filling the empty void in her heart.

He lifted his eyes back to hers as an old familiar feeling wrapped its arms around the moment.

"We can't go back," she rushed on before he could apologize. It was too late for that now; too much had happened.

"I know," he answered. How well he knew. He sighed softly, then lifted his hand to cup her face, his thumb stroking the scar above her brow. He didn't say a word - simply sat there, allowing himself to feel the heat surging through his arm and straight into his heart.

Lois closed her eyes, covering the hand on her face with her own. Silent tears brushed the ends of her lashes as her soul seemed to sigh. Her very being still recognized this man as a vital part of her existence.

Those tears... that's what had nearly changed his mind on that fateful night. It was also why he'd left her apartment so quickly. He couldn't stand to see her cry. He was almost relieved when she blinked several times, then opened her eyes. A soft smile played across her lips and he offered one in return. He allowed her to pull his hand down and cup it between both of hers.

Before either could say another word, an usher stopped in front of them. "It's time for the presentation to begin."

Clark glanced at the young man. Would it be wise for Superman to blow the poor fellow across the room?

"Thank you," he offered instead.

"Guess we better..." Lois said with a gesture of her hand. "Be a shame for the man of the hour to miss his moment."

<But you missed yours.>

The one thing she'd always sought professionally and she hadn't even come to accept it. Why? Would she tell him if he asked?

Did he want to know?

He shook his head to clear his thoughts, and stood to gently pull Lois to her feet. "You do know Perry booked you a seat at the Planet table?"

"As long as it's the one beside you," she replied with a grin and hooked her arm through his again.

"I think we might be able to accommodate you."

<I might not be able to survive the night though.>

God help him. Tomorrow he'd probably be physically ill, but tonight... just this one night he'd feel whole again.

The Bailey Award for Excellence in Journalism... Such simple words, even if they packed one of the most important punches in his professional arena. But right now all he could think about was the woman standing in the middle of his living room. He glanced once more at the now familiar case he'd placed on the bookshelf and the ring adorning the appropriate finger of his right hand before slipping the jacket of his suit from his body. He loosened the knot of tie as he started toward his bedroom.

"Make yourself comfortable," he shouted at Lois - a moot point. She'd already kicked out of her shoes and was settling on Clark's sofa.

How had they ended up at his place? Clark asked himself as he shed his shirt and tie. It almost felt like he was choking to death.

Could it have anything to do with the woman in the other room?

He toed off his shoes and reached for his glasses. Leaving his wire frames on his bedside table had become a habit, but he stopped just before he dropped them.

She knows you, he reminded himself. That's one reason...

Stop! He shouted internally.

<I won't go there.>

He glanced at the glasses in his hand, then carefully placed them on the table before heading into the kitchen.

Lois snapped her cell phone closed when Clark came into the room. He'd shed his button-down shirt, sporting a tight, white muscle shirt.

<<I wonder if he knows how good he looks in white.>>

"I hope you don't mind me getting comfortable," he said as he placed a can of cream soda in front of her.

"It goes both ways," she replied as she lifted a sock covered foot with a smile.

She had to remind herself to breathe when he shot a devastating grin right back at her. Lifting the soda can to her mouth, she watched every move he made when he walked across the room, gathered a few things, then sat. His black pants pulled tight across his...

"So," she said just a little too loudly. "I believe you've painted in here."

"Yeah," Clark answered as he looked around, like he hadn't seen the place before. "Historic tan, antique white, and battleship grey," he offered as he popped open his soda and took a healthy gulp.

"Is the sofa new?" she asked as she ran her hand over the fabric beneath her.

"No. Mom re-covered it." He held out the items in his hand to her. "I believe these are yours. The Kerth and Merriwether crystals are on the bookshelf."

She glanced up to where he pointed before turning her attention back to the items in Clark's hand. Lois immediately recognized the leather jacket on top. It contained her Bailey certificate. She took the things from Clark, then opened another leather bound jacket. Her name was emblazoned in gold under the words she'd longed to see since she was a child. 'Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Journalism'. Somehow she'd thought it would have felt different than this.

She opened another box and pulled the platinum ring from its case. Just as promised, and because she was last year's winner, she'd slipped Clark's ring onto his finger earlier that night. For the briefest of moments, she'd pretended it was a golden band.

Clark fingered the ring he wore, thoughts of another one dancing around inside his head as well. He'd kept the engagement ring he'd bought Lois so long ago. It was a reminder of how easily he could lose everything.

"This is... the best one by far."

He looked over to see she was running a finger across the certificate that held both their names. He downed the rest of his cream soda, then stared at Lois. "What are we doing here, Lois?"

She slowly leaned forward and deposited her treasures on Clark's coffee table as she rolled that question around in her head for a moment. Finally she looked up at him. For the first time she noticed he wasn't wearing his glasses. It hadn't been so long ago that she'd finally realized just how much of himself Clark hid from the world. And she'd finally realized what he sacrificed every day to be hero to the world.

"I've missed you," she blurted out before she could change her mind.

"You were the one who left."

His voice was more than slightly accusatory, striking a nerve. "*You* walked away," she said with a pointed finger and stood up.

"At least I didn't run and hide!"

<<Damn him!>>

This was exactly why she'd stayed away so long. She thrust a foot into a shoe as more of her buried anger seeped to the surface.

Clark hung his head. He hadn't meant to say that - to make her angry. But...

He lifted his head and looked at her- really looked.

<But nothing.>

He watched her struggle with her coat, then quickly stood and made his way over to her. His strong arms encircled her waist and

he buried his face against her neck.

"I was a fool," he whispered, then spun her around to face him. She barely had time to think before his mouth covered hers.

"Wha..." she protested just before all rational thought fled in a rush. She moaned loudly, dropped her bag, then wrapped her arms around his neck.

<<Don't stop!>>

<Shut up!> Clark told the little voice in his mind screaming loudly just before he surrendered to his heart's desire, and his libido, for the first time in his life. His hands smoothed down over Lois' back, boldly grasping her buttocks and pulling her aggressively against him. When she moaned again, he trailed kisses down her neck.

"I want you," she breathed as she, too, gave up the fight with rational thought. She'd missed this man, every day. She'd constantly felt him within her spirit. Now she wanted to feel him in every other possible way.

He grinned against her mouth as he reclaimed her lips. As his tongue continued its assault on hers, he began to walk her backwards toward his bedroom.

When her legs touched his mattress, Lois pulled back to look up at Clark.

"Don't, Lois," he said quickly. "Don't think about this. Don't say anything. Let's just... feel," he told her as he spun her around again. His large hands roamed her body, sending electric charges through her clothes, his hot breath caressing the skin right behind her ear. "Let's do this. Right here, right now. Let's give in the way we didn't before." And with that he ripped her shirt open.

She wasn't shocked by his audacity; she was excited. And incredibly turned on.

No. That was an understatement!

<<When did he do that?!>>

His hands were smoothing over her body again. Her very naked body!

"Do you like that?" he asked softly as his fingers found all of her sensitive areas.

"Yes," she couldn't help but breathe. All thought was gone now. There was nothing but here and now... with this man. She would finally give in the way she hadn't before. She would finally take what she'd wanted so many times in the past.

Someone had obviously stolen his brain, Clark thought vaguely as he continued the sensory assault on Lois. There was no way *he* would ever act this way.

But right now all he could think about was being as close to this woman as he could get.

<<This is going to happen.>> Lois thought as Clark helped her undress. There was so many times she'd wondered about doing this with him. She'd asked herself more than a few times if this might have kept them together.

Her closed eyes popped open as he...

<<Oh! Just like that!>>

Had it been that long? That she was so easily lost in her ecstasy?

"Oh, God, Lois..." He breathed, now completely lost to this woman.

<<Traitor!>> She thought when her body began to hum from every touch, every kiss.

Any other time, any other situation in the world he would have never done this. But Clark Kent had just met his sexual demon.

She could hear the blood rushing through her veins as her body seemed to know his just as intimately as his knew hers. His hot breath rushing across her neck was testament to that fact.

He couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Nothing he'd ever done felt as good as finally knowing Lois completely. <Heaven!> That was the only word to describe how he felt. Kiss after kiss, touch after touch... he was in heaven.

Another sixty point headline... across every national paper in the country - and it didn't even stir the faintest emotion, good or bad. Lois slammed the paper down angrily and looked out the window of her hotel room. She was in yet another city chasing down another hot lead. Her thoughts, however, were still in Metropolis.

{{{{"Nothing's changed, has it?" he asked her softly. "Not really."}}

It was more of a statement than a question. "Not what needs to change," she answered as she slipped on the tee shirt he'd given her.

"I don't have a single regret, Lois," Clark said as he slid across the bed, the sheet still draped over his lap. He reached out to grasp her hand, pulling her to him.

"Not one," she replied and pushed her hands through his hair.

He smiled just before they kissed softly. "Thank you." His hands smoothed up and down her thighs and buttocks.

"Thank *you*." She rubbed her nose across his playfully.

Clark chuckled, then wrapped his arms around her for a hug. "I won't say good-bye."

She couldn't say anything as her emotions threatened to get the best of her. Taking a deep breath, she leaned back to grasp Clark's face. "My super man," she whispered just before she kissed him gently. Her thumb smoothed across his lips as she seemed to look into his very soul. Then she straightened, pulled from him, and disappeared from his room... from his apartment... from his life...

Again.}}}}

What the hell had she been thinking? Sleeping with Clark like that?

Three times... they'd...done that three times... on the bed.

Then again in the shower... in the kitchen... on the sofa...

How many times had they made love?

Is that what they'd done? Made love?

Did she still love Clark?

She threw up her hands and growled in frustration. Of course she loved him. That was her problem. That had always been her problem. Loving Clark had nearly killed her when he'd told her they couldn't be together. Loving Clark had driven her from Metropolis. Loving Clark had taken her back again.

{{{{Lois looked at the man lying in front of her. His deep, dark eyes seemed to look straight into her very being. Did he know the power behind those brown orbs?

They'd made love... again. Now they were simply lying on the bed looking at one another. They'd been holed up in his room for nearly three hours now and neither had said much other than to voice their pleasure.

She reached out to smooth his hair back. They'd both changed so much, grown tremendously from who they'd been back then. Those changes, that new maturity, was what had led them here. To this place, taking advantage of stolen moments they might never get again.

Stolen moments they hadn't had the courage to share before.

"Mmm," he moaned appreciatively. "That feels good." His hand reached out to her, gliding across her bare hip. "Why did you come back?" he asked, the question she knew he would.

"I never took it back," she replied softly and rolled over. She stared up at the ceiling, looking for the words to voice her feelings. There was no sense lying to him. "I was devastated," she said simply.

"I know," he admitted as he leaned up on his elbow.

"I wallowed in self pity as long as I could, then let my anger take over. I had to get away."

"Do you know how hard it was to let you go?"

She looked at him then as if he had two heads. "Do you know how that sounds?"

"Yeah. And I know how it felt." This time he was the one to push her hair back. "So many regrets," he said softly.

So much to say. But not now. Too much had happened. They couldn't go back; they couldn't change any of it.}}}}

Yes, loving Clark dictated her life.

And loving Clark was the reason she was in a mess now.

Her hand smoothed over her flat mid-section. Their night of passion had proven more tangible than she would have liked. Why the thought of birth control had never entered her mind was still a mystery. The most brilliant female journalist in the world was also galactically stupid when it came to a certain man that moonlighted in a cape.

What did she do now?

She'd tell him, of course. That was never in question. But where did they go from there? Would they even keep this baby?

Lois turned from the window in shock at that thought. Yes! Yes, they'd keep this baby! This baby was part of Clark. And Clark was the only part of a long-dead breed. This baby would mean the world to him.

This baby already meant the world to her. This baby meant there would always be living, breathing proof that her feelings for Clark Kent were stronger than his resolve to stay away from her. This baby was also proof that his feelings for her were just as strong.

Yes, they'd keep this baby.

"All I'm saying is that maybe we should consider the possibility."

"He's right. Nor is very unpredictable. Wouldn't you agree, Kal-El?" Trey stopped to look down at the man to whom he'd just spoken. There wasn't even a nod to acknowledge that the other man had heard a word anyone had said.

"Milord," came the gentle voice of Lady Zara as she reached out to touch her leader's arm. His eyes finally focused.

"Sorry," he apologized. "Guess I was..."

"Back on Earth," she whispered and offered him a sad smile.

He nodded sadly before listening to his full rebuke... again. More than an hour later the council meeting ended and he was able to retire to his room. Heaving a deep sigh he sank to his bed. What he wouldn't give to be home. What time was it there? He'd lost track. The hours and days here were longer than those on Earth. He was sure it was past time for planting on the farm.

What else was going on back home?

Would Lois win another Kerth this year? A Pulitzer?

He thrust a hand through his hair. More importantly, what was she doing? Right now, right at this moment, what was she doing? Was she knee deep in some struggle for truth and justice? Or was she sitting before her laptop typing her latest masterpiece?

Was she smiling? Laughing? Was she happy?

Was she thinking of him the way he was thinking of her? Did she think of him at all? Sometimes she was *all* he thought of.

{{{{Did she know she had the most wonderful laugh in the world? Did she know it held the power to heal gaping wounds?

They were the only ones at the table. Everyone had left for home a long time ago, trying to beat the snow. His folks had said their goodnights and retired to their room in the Lexor across the street. The Planet had sprung for a suite in honor of their newest prize winner.

Funny, Clark thought. Receiving an award didn't feel half as gratifying as simply staring across the table at Lois.

"Weather's changing," he managed after a moment. "It's icing up the highway. I guess it's time for me to hit the road." He gestured with his hand, a flying motion Lois had made famous.

She nodded. "Yeah."

She walked with him to the coat call and allowed him to help her bundle up.

"Congratulations," she told him when she was ready to face the cold.

"Thank you." Clark looked down at the items he held, a symbol that he was a solid fixture in his profession.

Lois lifted her large, brown eyes to his - dark pools that threatened to pull him to the bottom of their depths. "I wish you didn't have to go," she said so softly he almost had to use his super-hearing.

Then an old familiar feeling wrapped its arms around the moment and right there for a second he forgot that she didn't love him any more.}}}}

To this day he hadn't figured out how they'd made it from there to his bed, but there wasn't a single second he'd ever give back. Those hours, those minutes, those seconds he'd spent with Lois were all that allowed him to live through his days now.

The shock had worn off. She was definitely pregnant. A visit to a local medical center proved there was absolutely no doubt at all. She'd immediately wrapped up her current story and made plans to return to Metropolis to see Clark, only to discover that she'd been held up in Third World countries a bit too long.

In her usual fashion, Lois rushed down the ramp into the newsroom, her eyes searching for Clark the time she'd stepped off the elevator.

"Lois!" Perry was surprised to see his star reporter. She hadn't mentioned she was coming to Metropolis.

"Hi, Perry. Where's Clark?"

"Good to see you, too, honey."

"Sorry." She leaned in for a quick hug. "I really need to see Clark."

Perry's expression was unreadable as he led her into his office. He gently forced her down onto the chair across from his desk before he cleared his throat.

"Ah, Lois, honey, I hate to be the one to tell you this."

"This what, Perry?" The way he was acting someone had died.

Oh, God, that wasn't it, was it?

"Clark... is gone."

"Gone? Gone where?" Had he decided it was his turn to chase stories for a while?

"He, ah, well he..." Perry leaned on his desk, glanced down at his hands, then plowed on. "I'll just say this. He went off with a group of Kryptonians."

"What?" Lois squeaked.

She couldn't think, couldn't see. Perry had just explained the tests Superman had endured for his race of people to decide if he was worthy.

His race of people - there were more Kryptonians out there. Clark wasn't the last of his kind.

Worthy - of marriage to his birth wife and to rule his people.

His wife.

His people.

Lois leaned over and took several deep breaths to keep from heaving. She felt absolutely ill.

"I should also tell you," Perry continued. "That I know Clark is Superman."

Her head snapped up so that she could look at him. "He told you?"

"No. I've known it almost from the beginning." Perry knelt down in front of her. "I told him before he left that I knew. He and I worked to come up with a cover story for Clark's absence. Everyone thinks he and Jimmy went along to document the entire trip for posterity."

"Jimmy went, too?"

"Yeah. Clark and I agreed the kid was ready for the chance to show what he's really made of." Perry reached out to take her

hands in his. "It was really hard for him to make the decision to go. He mentioned you several times."

Lois choked back a sob. "Is he... is he coming back?"

Perry nodded. "That's one thing he kept repeating - that he would be back."

But she knew what he hadn't said. "If he can," she whispered. The silence filled the room around them and felt so confining that she thought she was going to explode.

"I'm pregnant... with Clark's baby," Lois croaked as another sob overtook her.

Perry stared at her in surprise. "Well, ah..."

"It's okay, Perry. You don't have to say anything."

He climbed back to his feet. "Do you plan on...?"

"Keeping it?" she asked, just to have something to say so that her mind didn't settle on the fact that Clark was really gone. She waited until he nodded. "Absolutely. No matter what's happened between us, I've never stopped loving Clark. I don't think I know how to exist without loving him."

Perry smiled and reached down to pull her up to her feet. "Then I think maybe you'll need some help." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder as they walked toward the door. "I'll book your flight."

"Flight?"

"To Smallville. I think there's a couple that will be thrilled to see you."

Until now, she'd had no idea what she'd do without Clark. His parents were definitely the best place to start.

Superman was gone.

Clark was gone.

Kryptonians had come for their *leader*. Lord Kal-El had been called home to take his rightful place in society... and to save his world. Clark Kent and Jimmy Olsen had gone off with them as well.

He was gone!

That was the only thing that kept running through Lois' mind. She'd cried nearly the entire drive from Wichita, having forced herself to wait until she was alone before she let go. It was shocking enough to find out she was pregnant. Once she'd accepted that, she'd actually looked forward to telling Clark. He would be so thrilled.

<<Would have been.>>

Now she'd have to do this alone. Plans had to be changed again. She was forced to reconstruct yet another destiny.

"Lois, you need to push!"

She focused on the older woman beside her, offering a watery smile. God, she loved Martha Kent.

{{{{Martha and Jonathan were just as she'd remembered them to be. They'd immediately welcomed her in when she'd arrived unannounced at the farm. They'd even had the grace not to mention her red, splotchy face.

She'd seen them at the ceremony when Clark received his Bailey award, but she'd been preoccupied then. A brief hug and a few friendly words had been all that she'd allowed to separate her from the man she'd finally learned to adore.

The older woman had immediately ushered her inside the house for a piece of pie and coffee. Jonathan had asked a few questions about work, then he'd quietly began his tale about Clark's departure from Earth. She could tell that he, too, was devastated his son was gone.

"When we read your articles in the Planet and Times, we knew you hadn't heard he'd left," Martha offered softly.

"Yeah, well, I was pretty busy." Lois took another sip of her coffee as she thought over what they'd told her. Clark was off with these... people, and they didn't even know if he'd come home again. Suddenly her eyes welled with tears again. She

hadn't cried this much since she'd first left Metropolis.

"Lois, honey, what's wrong?" Martha reached out to grasp one of her hands. "Listen to me," she scolded herself. "Of course I know what's wrong."

"You have no idea," Lois said with a wry smile. She wiped her eyes, then took a deep breath. "Martha, Jonathan, I really need Clark right now."

Martha just looked at her for a moment before her own eyes swelled with tears. "Oh, honey," she breathed. She waited with bated breath. Lois nodded, causing another stream of tears from the two.

After a moment, Lois wiped her face again. "We went back to his place to talk after the Bailey presentation."

"You don't have to explain anything, honey," Martha said.

"I wish someone would explain it to me," Jonathan spoke up. "I'm lost here."

They both looked up at him. In one afternoon, Lois had gone from apprehensive to scared senseless, then on to confident acceptance. Now she was back to utter confusion.}}}}

"Focus, honey," Martha rebuked lightly.

She nodded quickly and sat up to bear down to bring this baby into the world. His father couldn't be here; his grandmother was instead. As Lois yelled out through the pain, every single thing she'd ever felt for Clark Kent was culminated into a tiny, breathing soul.

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If he had his powers, he was sure he'd push the transport. It couldn't travel fast enough to satisfy him.

"Think they missed us?"

Clark turned to look at the man beside him. Jimmy had aged since they'd been gone. He could still pass for much younger than he really was, but there were tiny lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"I know I've missed them," Clark answered truthfully. He'd missed them all. His parents, his co-workers, his friends... neighbors, the tons of people shouting for Superman's help... all of them.

He'd missed her, too. He'd missed her the most.

He'd relived their night together often. There were times he thought he could still feel her.

"There it is, CK!"

Jimmy was the only one that still referred to him with any respect of his former life. He'd shared his secret and even in his Kryptonian garb, he'd always been CK to his younger friend.

The blue and green sphere of Earth was never more beautiful than it was at that moment. Within hours they would be standing on familiar soil again.

For the first time in years, Clark felt a tear slip through his lashes.

"Aw, man. I have never been so happy to breathe smog!"

Clark chuckled as he watched Jimmy step up on the curb. They'd reentered the atmosphere, choosing Metropolis as their first destination.

"Let's make this quick," Clark said as he strode up the back alley toward the rear entrance of the Planet. "An official return will have to wait until my folks know their son is home."

"Absolutely," Jimmy agreed. "I sure can't wait to see my own mom."

As the small group made their way through the doors of the garage elevator, Clark began to tremble. Six and half years was a lifetime when the only place you wanted to be was home.

Lady Zara had remained on New Krypton, taking her rightful place on the throne. Ching had been indoctrinated as a Lord because of his bravery in the line of duty. The couple had been married and were now leading their people.

Lord Dar, Council advisor, was the only one who had

returned to Earth with Clark and Jimmy. He would give an official statement and leave just as discreetly as they'd returned. It was felt that Superman should be the one to receive all the acclaim. Besides, if the world hadn't fared well in the superhero's absence, their discretion might save them from a possible uprising.

A few minutes later Clark and Jimmy were pacing back and forth inside the archive room. They'd accosted a runner and sent him to bring the Chief back.

"I still don't see why the Sam Hill I just *have* to see these files," they heard Perry's voice as he neared the archive door. They both stopped and waited with bated breath until the older man stepped into the room. He stood motionless, his mouth clamped tightly closed in surprise.

"Chief!" Jimmy breathed and launched himself at his editor. This man had always been like a father to him, and until this minute he hadn't realized just how much he'd missed Perry.

It took a couple of seconds for Perry's body to process what his mind was telling him. He finally lifted his arms and hugged Jimmy just as fiercely as he was being hugged. "Jimmy," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. He drew back to look into the eyes of the young man before him. He wasn't such a young man anymore, Perry thought as he noticed the age lines on Jimmy's face. He wondered how much strife this new person had seen since he'd been gone.

Jimmy clapped Perry's arm, a wide grin covering his face. "Did ya' miss me, Chief?"

"Like Priscilla missed Elvis when he joined the Army!" They chuckled together before Perry stepped toward Clark. "And I missed you, too, son," he told Clark and reached out to pull him into a hug.

Clark had watched the reunion in silence, his emotions threatening to overwhelm him. He wouldn't speak for fear his voice would break. This was a happy occasion. When Perry released him, he smiled as brightly as he could.

"Now, you two are home for good, right?" Perry looked between them, half fearing their answer.

"We're home, Perry," Clark assured him. He waved a hand at the other man with them. "This is Lord Dar." The man bowed his head slightly. "He will give the official Kryptonian statement."

"I'll send a runner for my tape recorder," Perry answered.

"Superman will hold a press conference in a couple of weeks," Clark continued. Perry also knew his secret. It had been unavoidable if they were to pull off Clark's absence. "Until then I'm going home to see my folks."

"And I'm going to see my mom, too," Jimmy added. "I can't wait. A great big pot of beef stew and biscuits..." His voice drifted off to catch up with his mind. It really was good to be home.

Perry ran a hand across the back of his neck. As glad as he was for his boys to be home, there was a lot that had changed. "Ah, listen... There are a few things..."

"Please don't tell me there's something wrong with my mom," Jimmy begged.

"No, no, son. She's just fine. In fact, she's great. Lost a ton of weight, went back to school - she's a proof reader for Stern Publishers."

"Wow! I guess she's putting her passion to use." Jimmy grinned broadly as he thought of his mother. She'd always been an avid reader. In fact, he'd brought her back a ton of Kryptonian literature.

"It's just... well..." He stopped and looked up at Clark. "I guess..." Perry sighed heavily.

"My folks?" Clark asked, worried that the look on Perry's face couldn't possibly be good news.

"Your folks are good, too, Clark. Look, let me go get a recorder." And before anyone could protest, Perry was gone.

"A very queer fellow," remarked Lord Dar.

"Perry's the best," Jimmy was quick to let him know.

They were all left to wonder about what Perry had said. Had that much really changed since they'd been gone?

Before they could ponder long, Perry was back. Instantly all business, the small group settled at a table as Dar delivered the official Kryptonian statement. Jimmy and Clark added snippets of information here and there. Finally satisfied with the amount of information, the editor ended their briefing. He said good-bye to Jimmy because Dar had agreed to deliver the younger man to his mother's house. Jimmy promised to email pictures and articles to Perry for publication over the next couple of weeks before taking his leave. Dar would return for Clark in a few minutes. It would be nearly a week before Superman could take to the skies and the quickest way to get to Smallville was via Kryptonian transport.

"So, ah..." Perry began to break the silence between them. How did he broach the subject of Lois? Clark really needed to see her first.

"It's okay, Perry. You can tell me how she is," Clark told him, dying to know.

Perry smiled knowingly. "She's still a fireball," he said, relieved. "She left the Planet."

"What?" Clark brows shot up his forehead. That was definitely something he hadn't expected to hear.

"Traded in all those fancy awards for a much slower pace. Even chasing lunatics around the globe wasn't enough any more."

What could have influenced Mad Dog Lane like that?

"Do me a favor, Clark. Go see Lois before you go home."

"I'm not sure I'm ready for that, Perry," Clark admitted. There was a time he might not have said that, but that was a different time and he was another person now.

"Trust me, son. You need to see her." Perry reached out to clasp Clark's shoulder. "Besides, it's on your way. You can find her at the Smallville Post."

"The Post?" Now he was curious. What was Lois doing at the Post? What was she doing in Smallville for that matter?

"Go see Lois." Perry clapped his shoulder again. "That's an order," he finished.

Clark didn't have time to protest because Dar entered the room again. He said good-bye to Perry and slipped back out of the Planet as discreetly as possible.

"This looks fantastic," Lois told Sara, her secretary. The front page of the Post was a far cry from the publications her work had been featured in, but to have control of even this small venture was a definite plus in her ever changing career. They talked over a few details, then Lois disappeared behind the door of her office.

Clark's curiosity got the better of him on the short trip to his hometown. He had Dar drop him off in the business district instead of on the farm. He stepped out of Smallville's only alley and onto the sidewalk. He was glad he'd chosen to wear his tunic. There was no way he could have been missed in just his black suit. He received a few awkward glances as it was, but thankfully no one asked any questions. He made the short walk to the community's only paper, noticing as he went that the little place had changed a bit since he'd been gone. There were a few more cars parked on the square than used to be, and off in the distance, he could see the signs of progress in the form of construction. He paused in front of the Post and took a deep breath. The last place he'd intended to go first was to see Lois, but Perry's strange behavior left little doubt that something strange was going on. And just maybe he should find out.

He was about to see Lois again and he was terrified.

<Just do it> he told himself as he turned the handle of the door and stepped inside the building.

"Good afternoon," came the friendly welcome of the woman

behind the desk on the far wall. "May I help you?"

"I, ah, I'd like to see Lois Lane," Clark said in a rush, not trusting his voice.

"Sure. Just let me..."

"Sara, do you have those figures on the Hall...?" Lois had rushed into the room, papers in hand. She was intent on her documents when she first entered the room, but when she lifted her eyes, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Clark felt the blood rush from his face when his eyes met hers. Did she know that she was still the most beautiful woman alive?

Lois couldn't move, could barely breathe, yet her very soul seemed to sigh. She'd waited for this moment for so long and all she could do was stare. The man before her had changed. There was a sorrow behind his dark eyes that wasn't there before. He'd aged a great deal. A deep sadness marred his expression. His hair was long, nearly touching his collar.

She stepped forward and reached out to touch the silky locks. "Your hair is..."

"I know. Way too long. I've been meaning to get it cut. I just haven't had the time."

Immediately transported back to another time when they'd said those words, Lois was almost overwhelmed with emotion. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I was going to say stunning," she whispered in his ear.

Breathe, he told himself. The instant she'd touched him his body had reacted, every nerve ending coming to life. His arms had lifted automatically to hold her, a natural reaction. Her voice hitched a bit causing him to lose every ounce of control he had left. He choked back a sob, then another before finally just giving in. Both cried softly as they held one another again at long last.

Lois reluctantly withdrew so she could look at him. Her hands glided over his face, his shoulders, down his arms. She had to make sure he was real.

Clark simply looked at her. He'd wanted nothing more than this simple pleasure since he'd left. Since before he'd left. He reached up to cup the side of her head. Her hair was short again, a style that seemed to make her even sexier than he remembered.

"Look at these clothes," she remarked as she slid her hands down his arms again and grasped his hands. He wore a sleek suit, with some sort of short robe over it.

"A tunic," he answered absently.

"I love the black."

"I miss the..." He suddenly realized they weren't alone. His eyes shifted toward Sara, conveying information to Lois silently.

She understood him completely. "This is Sara," she said to Clark as she looked at the other woman.

"Hi, Sara," Clark managed, remembering his manners. He would have shaken her hand, but Lois wouldn't let his go.

"Hold my calls," Lois said before she pulled him into her office.

Behind closed doors she pulled him back into another long hug. This moment... she'd lived for this moment every second of the last few years. They'd almost given up hope. And now... now he was here. He was alive. He was... holding her the way she'd longed for him to do nearly every night since he'd been gone. Silent tears began to roll down her face as she gave herself up to the repressed despair that had been her constant companion.

"You look great," Lois said when she finally drew away from the embrace, her hands running across his broad shoulders.

"So do you," he replied, a smile beginning to turn up the corners of his mouth.

Please don't smile yet, she pleaded silently. If you smile, I won't be able to tell you what I need to.

She backed away, out of his grasp. "It's been so long," she said so softly he almost missed it.

"Too long," he agreed. "I never meant it to be this long."

Lois looked back up from where her eyes had fallen on a picture that graced her desk. "You always meant to come back?"

"I'd briefly toyed with the idea of staying gone," he relented. She knew him way too well. In the end there were just way too many people that he could never stand to be away from forever.

"Things are different," she continued as she lifted the picture frame and held it against her chest.

"So I've been told." First Perry, now Lois. What was going on? And whose picture was in that frame? Did he really want to know?

Fresh tears filled Lois' eyes as she eased closer to Clark. "There's no easy way to say this," she went on and slowly held out the picture toward Clark.

"Lois, you don't have to..."

"Just take it, Clark, and look," she insisted.

His eyes glanced down at the offending object. He'd ached for this woman for years. He was still riding the high from just seeing her again. There was no way he'd ruin that by looking at a picture of her...

"Look at it!" She shook the item in front of his face.

"I don't want to see..." A picture of... a boy?!

"It's been so hard without you. Thank God we had your folks. That's why..."

The roaring in his head drowned out whatever else she said as he realized just who the boy in the picture must be. He stumbled backwards and dropped heavily onto the chair against the wall. "Oh, God!" His hand covered his mouth as he continued to stare at the image in Lois' hand.

She stepped closer, kneeling before him and placing the photo on his lap. "He's a precious, precious gift."

Clark had to blink a few times to clear his eyes. "He's... he's..."

"Your son," she whispered softly.

His trembling hands reached down to grasp the frame. His son! He'd known that, of course, but to hear her say it was another matter.

"I was too late. You'd been gone for nearly a month when I found out."

Dark hair, beautiful brown eyes...

<He has Lois' nose.>

"We'd hoped for a message, anything to let us know you were alive, but nothing."

<He has my smile.> Clark's finger smoothed over the glass as if it somehow made the child more tangible. He reluctantly tore his gaze from the photograph when Lois touched his arm.

"He knows who you are. We've always talked to him about you, showed him pictures and videos."

Suddenly it was all too much. Clark shot to his feet and thrust the frame into Lois' hands. "This is too much," he nearly shouted. "I need air!"

"Clark!" She rushed after him, but it was no use. He took to the sidewalk at a full run after he burst through the front door. Lois glanced down at the picture again. "Oh, Clark." She'd known he'd be upset, but this wasn't a reaction she'd imagined.

Clark didn't stop running until he'd reached the bank of Slade's pond, a few miles from his parents' farm. Just a couple of short hours ago he'd been so happy to be home. Now, now he was... really confused.

He leaned over and placed his hands on his knees, heaving to catch his breath.

"Why?!" he shouted into the air. Life was so unbelievably unfair. Isolated his entire life, he'd found his place in the world at the Planet... and with Lois. His stupidity had caused him to walk away from that place, even if he'd never been able to turn away from that connection. Convinced it was the only option to keep her safe, he'd sacrificed his own happiness for her. But his

actions had devastated her, pushed her to leave her home, her life. Two years he'd pined for her. Then in a glorious night of unbridled passion, he'd come home again.

Unbridled was right. They'd made love over and over without taking precautions. It had never occurred to him at the time. There had only been one thing on his mind that night - filling his very being with as much of Lois as he could.

He straightened and looked out across the lake.

<A son!> "A son!" He said loudly. That was more than a little surprising. He'd had no idea if it was even possible for him to father a child. Apparently he was completely compatible with Earth women.

He continued to walk as he thought about what Lois must have gone through without him here. Had she realized the true extent of her strength?

He'd missed so much.

A grin escaped as he thought about how radiant she must have looked in the last months of her pregnancy.

<I'll bet she was gorgeous.>

He had no doubt that Lois handled pregnancy and now motherhood the same way she handled investigations. She didn't know how to fail.

He'd been gone for a long time; his son wasn't exactly a baby. He'd missed everything!

How could he be someone's father when he didn't even know if he'd ever be whole again? So many things had gone wrong on that wretched rock. Death had been all around him.

He walked onto the dock that stretched out into the calm water. With a sigh, he eased down onto the worn boards. When he closed his eyes, the image of a grinning boy greeted him.

<He's adorable!> Of course he is; he's half Lois.

What's he like? When was he born? Is he a good child?

And Lois? Did she have a difficult pregnancy? Delivery?

"I don't even know his name," Clark whispered as his tears began to fall.

How in hell did he step into this life? This life that had been created without him?

Lois paced back and forth across the front porch. She'd looked for Clark everywhere with no luck. Where was he?

She stopped when she noticed the man in her thoughts making his way slowly up the driveway. He stopped at the end of the walk, looking for all the world completely lost.

"I, ah, I..." He looked around at his childhood home. There'd been a few changes. A sizable addition stretched both out to one side of the house and up. The barn had also received a facelift. Cows now grazed in the surrounding fields. Only one field still contained wheat. "I..." he stopped again, trying to control his emotions. "I don't even know his name," he managed after a moment.

"Lane," Lois answered softly as she made her way down the stairs toward him.

"Lane," he repeated softly.

"Jonathan Lane Kent," she went on. "I couldn't bear to call him Clark."

He nodded, as if he understood, even though he was completely lost. "I have no idea what to do here," he managed miserably.

"You don't have to do a thing. I know this is hard..."

"You have no idea." He dropped his head back, once again fighting to maintain control.

He was doing exactly what she knew he'd do - blaming himself for leaving them. "You couldn't have known."

"Lois," he told her as his gaze met hers. "I honestly had no idea I could impregnate an Earth woman. My physiology is so much different."

"Well, it seems you're completely compatible."

He smirked dryly. That was an understatement.

"I'm so sorry you had to come home to this."

"Sorry? This is not a... a horrible thing, Lois. It's just..." He gestured with his hand, as if she'd understand what he meant when he didn't even know himself.

"So much to grasp," she finished for him and took another tentative step toward him. "We'd almost given up hope," she whispered.

"Thinking of home is what kept me going," he told her.

"Thinking of you kept me sane." He looked directly at her when he said that. Life was much too short and far too precious to mince words. He'd never make those mistakes again.

"Oh, Clark," she gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

He took a step closer to her. "There have been times when I swear I felt you with me." Another step. "My beautiful Lois," he said and lifted his hand to cup her face.

She held his hand to her cheek and offered him a watery smile. "My super man."

Clark sighed and pulled her to his chest. Once again they clung to one another. He turned his face into her neck and inhaled deeply, filling his senses with one of the smells he treasured most.

"I've missed you so much," he told her.

"And I've missed you," she answered and held him just bit closer.

{}{}{}{That's what he'd told her that night. They'd sat facing one another on either end of the window seat in his room, rubbing each other's feet.

"It was so hard to breathe when I first left Metropolis," she said in answer to his declaration. "You were always right there with me." She placed her hand over her heart. "You'd be surprised all the places you have been. I've seen you in Utah, waiting next to me with bated breath as a madman held his entire family hostage. Down in Georgia, picking peaches. On the banks of the Nile river; knee deep in snow in Moscow; on the waves in Australia; a desolate village in South Africa. No matter where I chose to be I'd see you... everywhere."

How many times had he asked himself why he let her walk away again?{}{}{}{

After what seemed like an eternity, Clark drew back to look at her. "I'm sorry for leaving you both."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. You didn't know."

"I really wish I had." He smoothed his hands up and down her arms, reluctant to lose contact with her. He looked past her toward the house.

"He's with your parents," she told him, knowing immediately what he wanted. "They went to Wichita to celebrate the end of the school year. Straight 'A' student," she bragged.

"Kindergarten?"

"He actually finished first grade. He was already reading when he started last fall, so we all decided he was too advanced and moved him up."

Clark couldn't help but grin as pride welled within him. He lifted his hand and tucked a stray hair behind Lois' ear.

"I'm sorry he's not here."

"When was he born?" Clark asked as if he hadn't heard her.

"August twentieth. He was early."

"Was there complications?"

"No. He was incredibly healthy, just small."

Clark smoothed his hands across her back as he listened to her talk about his son.

Their son, he reminded himself. He'd created life with the only woman he'd ever loved.

And every sleepless night he'd spent dreaming of this woman crystallized behind his lids. He lifted his hands to gently hold her face between his large hands, then leaned forward to kiss her softly. It was as if his entire world spiraled into that single

moment.

Lois' hands grasped the back of his tunic tightly and she sighed against his mouth. <<Please don't let him stop.>> It had been so long since they'd seen one another, yet he was more familiar to her than nearly anyone she knew.

Led by his raging, repressed libido, Clark thrust his tongue into her mouth, quickly relearning her depths.

"Clark," Lois said with a whine, pulling away from their kiss. They just couldn't do this again. Not like this. Things needed to be said, hashed out. She needed to know other things, important things.

It took a moment for the cloud to lift, and he stood there staring at her dumbfounded.

"Not like this," Lois began. "We did this before..."

"I don't regret a second of that night," Clark reminded her.

"Neither do I, but you've just returned home and learned you have a nearly six-year-old son." She stopped when she saw the pain in his eyes. "Clark, don't do this." She reached out to hold him by his arm - he looked as if he was about to bolt.

"I understand, Lois. Like you said, I've been gone a long time."

"It's not like that. There is nothing I want more in this world than you. It took me a long time to realize just how vital you are to me, but you've been gone a long time."

Clark thrust a hand through his hair in frustration. What the hell was wrong with him? She was right. There was so much for him to process - for both of them to process. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for a thing." She smoothed her hand up and down his arm. "What do you say we go inside and get something to drink?"

He sighed heavily. "I think I could use something."

"Good." She wrapped her arm around his and they walked slowly toward the house.

"So, what time will everyone else be back?"

"Probably six or so." They climbed the stairs in silence, both simply reveling in the other's presence. "How 'bout you keep me company while I cook?"

"You cook?" he asked in surprise.

"Watch it, Kent. I'll have you know I've become a very good cook."

"This I have to see," he announced with a smile in his voice as he pulled the door open. She laughed softly and he almost felt like crying again. It was so good to be home.

Clark had made his way around the den at least ten times looking at all the pictures of his son, of his family. Over six years of images - six years of things he'd missed. Lois' pregnancy - she'd been adorable. He grinned at the sight of her protruding belly. The birth of his son. He lifted a frame from the shelf. It was of Lois holding their new baby. He sighed, and replaced the picture.

There was a photo of his father standing beside what appeared to be a new tractor. Another of Jonathan riding Lane on that tractor.

Lane. His name is Lane.

He looked at another image of Martha holding out her hands to a waddling toddler.

And they went on and on - the proof that he'd missed a few very treasured years.

Lois watched him closely, unable to believe he was actually here. She picked up their coffee and walked over to him.

"I've missed so much," Clark whispered.

Lois held out his mug to him. "There's so much more to share. And we have tons of videos. I know it's not the same..." She trailed off when Clark turned back to look at the pictures again.

"At least I'll be able to see what I've missed... hear him talk,

laugh." He couldn't believe how much this hurt. He looked down into the dark liquid in his cup, happy to have something else to concentrate on for a second. It was strange to see a drink be any color but blue. He inhaled the strong aroma and took a large gulp. It was hot, but it was so good.

"Good?" Lois asked as she watched him savor the coffee.

"Very," he replied and took another gulp. He turned to survey the new changes to the farmhouse. "You guys have done a little remodeling."

"A whole wing for your parents. Your dad had his knee replaced. It was impossible for him to get upstairs."

He faced her again, concern written across his face. "Is he okay?"

"Better than ever. No more suffering with arthritis pain."

Clark nodded. "And Mom? How's she?"

"Full of more energy than that boy of ours!"

"Boy of ours," he repeated softly.

"Sounds strange, huh?"

"Incredibly." Clark moved toward the entrance of the hallway that led to the new wing of the house.

"We remodeled the upstairs rooms, too. I have a suite of sorts. Lane has your old room."

"When did you move out here?"

"Right after I found out I was pregnant. I cried, I whined to your folks, then I turned in my resignation."

"I never thought you'd leave the Planet." He moved around and smoothed a finger across one of her Kerth crystals. His coveted Bailey ring was encased in a plastic box and proudly displayed among Lois' awards. It appeared that he'd been part of this life he'd missed after all.

"I never thought I'd be anyone's mother either." She just watched him explore this strange new world.

"Did you..." He stopped to finish his coffee. "Did you ever think of...?"

"Never! That was never a possibility."

"I couldn't have blamed you," he said as he looked down into his empty cup.

"It just wasn't a choice."

Clark nodded, relieved it hadn't been a choice. He would have literally died if he'd found out she'd been pregnant and had aborted. He looked up. "I, ah, I'd really like to take a shower."

"Oh!" Lois rushed over to the corner of the den. "Someone named Dar left this for you." She pulled a bag across the floor. It was way too heavy for her to pick up.

"Is he gone?"

"Yeah. Said there was nothing else he could do here."

He nodded again as he leaned to heft the strap of the bag over his shoulder. "Is the bathroom in the hall still there?"

"Yeah," she told him with a smile. "There are fresh towels, wash clothes, soap. You can put your things in the first room on the left at the top of the stairs."

He said nothing, just headed for the stairs. He kept his eyes focused ahead of him. There would be plenty of time to see everything. Right now all he wanted to do was shut himself away in private so he could get a handle on his emotions.

"Clark?"

Reluctantly he looked back at Lois. "Yeah?"

"It really is good to have you home," she told him, a small smile gracing her lips.

Nothing but a slight shake of his head. He didn't trust his voice. When he'd closed himself off in the bathroom, the warm spray of water cascading down his back, he finally allowed himself to breathe again. Once more the tears came.

Lois chopped the carrots carefully, her thoughts as far from her task as they could get. She'd heard Clark earlier. That was the first time she'd ever known him to cry. What must he feel?

“Can I help?”

She turned to see him standing at the bottom of the stairs. He wore a pair of shorts and a tight muscle shirt. Instantly she was transported back to another night, another place.

It was all she could do to force herself not think about that time. <<Thank goodness the shirt’s not white>> she thought. It was grey and so were his shorts. He was bigger, she noted, much bigger. His muscles were more defined and... <<My God, look at that chest!>>

His bare feet padded softly on the tile as he crossed the room and she noticed he’d combed his wet hair back. He looked a whole lot better.

“Ah, sure,” she managed. “Want to put the rice on?”

“Absolutely.” Clark moved down the length of the counter, opening the cabinet where his mother had always kept the rice cooker. He smiled when he found it still in its place - a newer model, but still in its place. By the time he’d flipped the switch on the cooker, more tears had filled his eyes.

“What’s wrong, Clark?” Lois asked as she moved over to his side.

“It’s just so nice that some things haven’t changed.”

She smiled sadly and reached up to tuck a wayward lock of hair back. “Some things will never change.”

He didn’t have to pretend he didn’t know what she meant by that. He could see it in her eyes. His heart actually sighed in relief. He’d been filled with so much apprehension where Lois was concerned. He’d decided years ago that when he returned to Earth he would find Lois and make things right, prepared to do whatever it took to get her back. Of course, there had been tons of worries that came along with that decision. What if she wasn’t interested anymore? What if he’d hurt her beyond repair? What if she was involved with someone? He never dreamed that ‘someone’ would be his son.

Leaning forward, he kissed her softly. “I think my life might depend on that fact,” he told her when he pulled back to look at her.

She grinned wider just before she wrapped her arms around his neck. She knew her life depended on it. Out of all the changes, the one thing that hadn’t was how she felt about him. And certainly a few... thousand hugs couldn’t hurt either.

“I think I needed that,” he told her when she’d stepped back.

“Any time.” She patted his arm, then continued with her dinner preparations.

He helped her in silence for a bit before he poured himself a glass of iced tea and leaned against the counter. “It’s not cream soda,” he commented when he’d finished his drink.

“Yeah. We don’t keep a lot of those any more. Too much sugar. Lane doesn’t do well with a lot of sugar.”

“Hyper is he?”

“That’s one word for it.” Lois dropped the vegetables in the wok.

Clark turned to watch her stir the ingredients in the pan to coat them with sauce. “It’s amazing to watch you do that.”

“Your mother’s a wonderful teacher,” she commented. “And I had terrific motivation.”

“Guess growing boys need more than Rocky Road and Chinese take-out.”

“Just a little.” She lifted a spoon to his lips for him to taste.

“Mmmm. That’s really good, Lois,” he said surprised.

“Don’t sound so shocked, farmboy.”

“Farmboy?”

“Would you prefer hick?”

“Ah, no,” he replied with a smile. He eased closer to her side so he could place a kiss on her temple. “I’m finding it difficult to keep my hands and my lips to myself,” he whispered in her ear.

She had to close her eyes. The feel of his hot breath across her ear was doing a number on her system.

He kissed her again, then moved over to drop heavily on a chair. He couldn’t suppress a smile when she sighed. “I can’t tell you how good this place smells,” he said waywardly.

“Smells?” What an odd thing to say!

“You don’t realize the things you miss until they’re gone.”

“Like a fresh cup of coffee on the corner of your desk first thing every morning,” she said absently.

“Or the sound of the garbage truck at six in the morning.”

“The smell of ink, stale donuts, or the sound of Ralph’s voice.”

“Perry’s booming demands. Apple pie, baseball, flying.”

“Flying,” she agreed dreamily, then looked at Clark.

“That’s the first thing we’ll do when my powers return,” he told her quickly.

“Absolutely.” She stirred the vegetables again. “Oh, you know what else? Loud ties!”

“My ties were not loud.”

“Yes, they are. And I kept them. They just don’t look as good on me.”

He said nothing, but his mind ran away with that statement as his eyes glossed over from trying to picture that image. Lois wearing one of his ties - and nothing else.

“You have a dirty mind, Clark Kent,” Lois said as she shook the spoon at him.

A wide grin spread out across his face and he shrugged his shoulders. <Can’t blame a guy for dreaming.> He shook away those thoughts and leaned forward on the table. “I miss television.”

“I would have thought, as advanced as Kryptonians are, there would be televisions everywhere,” Lois commented.

“Holograms... but only for informational purposes. They find entertainment a hard concept to grasp.” But they knew how to play basketball. He’d introduced the game to a few of the guards and it had caught fire.

“Double fudge crunch bars,” Lois continued their list. When he cast her a questioning glance, she said, “Lane likes them more than me. The sugar thing again.”

“Ahh.” Clark lifted the salt shaker, poured a bit in his hand, then licked it off. “I miss real food.”

“Trading story ideas.”

“Making love.”

Lois stopped and faced him.

“It’s true,” he told her as he looked at her.

“I, ah, I thought... Lady Zara?” She could feel her face burn in embarrassment, unable to believe she’d just asked about his love life. She would never forget how Martha had struggled telling her about Zara, about the fact that she was Clark’s wife. There was also no way she’d deny the jealousy that raged within her over that information. True, she and Clark had never made a commitment to one another. But still...

“She was my *ceremonial* wife.”

“But you were with her for six years.” Six long years! <<Shut up, Lois!>> She didn’t want to hear this!

“You’re talking to the man who waited nearly thirty years to make love for the first time.”

He’d told her that.

{{{{Lois sat on top of the counter in Clark’s kitchen watching the muscles in his back ripple as he put together a couple of sandwiches for them. After three hours in bed, she was hungry.

“How’s this look?” He asked as he held up the biggest sandwich she’d ever seen.

“Like too much for me to eat!”

He grinned. She loved his grin.

“You’ll have some for later,” he suggested as he moved over to the fridge to grab them a soda.

“I thought you looked good in black, but white... mmm, I

think it's your color."

A deep shade of red colored his cheeks as he stood before her in nothing but his boxer briefs.

"Don't tell me you're embarrassed," she said around a mouthful of food. She was wearing the muscle shirt he'd had on earlier and found that amazingly she wasn't the least bit shy.

"Well..." He eased up to the counter beside her and took a bite of his sandwich.

"Clark, we've been naked together all night!" She just giggled when his color deepened even more. After another bite, she wiped her mouth. "You certainly weren't very shy in the throes of passion."

"Lo-is!" This time he looked scandalized.

"You weren't." She closed her eyes a moment, savoring the memory of their last encounter. It had been incredible. "The look in your eyes, the bead of sweat on your upper lip..."

"Can we talk about something else?" he asked, as he took another bite from his meal.

She reached out to push his hair back on his head. "Relax. I'm just having fun teasing you."

He looked up at her, then smiled. "It's okay. I kinda' like to watch you, too." He moved their plates aside and eased between her legs, pushing his large hands under her shirt to smooth across her naked hips. She giggled as she wrapped her arms loosely around his neck. Fully expecting him to kiss her, she growled when he stopped mere inches from her mouth. "What's wrong?"

"I think you know what's wrong," she said reaching out to kiss him.

He pulled back again. "You are insatiable."

"Me? What about you, Mr. 'I can make love for hours'? That has to be a super trait."

"You don't seem to have a problem keeping up. Is that a 'Lois' trait?"

She grunted when he dragged her closer to his body. "Remind me to send her a thank you note," she said just before she pressed her lips to his again.

"Mmm," he moaned, then broke the kiss. "Her who?"

"The other crazy, insatiable woman who allowed you to perfect your techniques."

He kissed her neck, then put his head back so she could return the favor. "Ahh," he moaned an excited sigh. "Why would you want to send yourself a thank you note?" He sucked in a deep breath as she tugged on his ear lobe.

"Wh... oh, oh... like that." It was his turn to send shivers down her spine; he licked a sensitive spot behind her ear. Her hands gripped the sides of his neck so she could guide him toward the other side. "What?" she asked again, remembering his question.

"Note... to yourself." He looked up into her smoky gaze.

Huh? Note to myself? What was he talking about? It was hard to concentrate when he kissed her that way. Did he mean...?

Surely not. She pulled back and placed her palms on his chest to stop him from returning his lips to her neck. At his concerned look, she asked, "Myself? As in...?"

"You're the other insatiable woman who helped me perfect..."

"That's not possible!"

"That you're insatiable?" he teased.

"Funny, Kent." If he was implying what she thought he was, she needed to...

<<To what, Lois?>>

The smile faded from his face as he lifted his hands to frame her face. "It's very possible, and it's very true." Leaning forward, he kissed her softly.

"So, you're saying that..."

"You stole my virginity, you naughty girl." He was grinning again.

He was also doing that... thing he could do with his lips. That, that... gentle nibble - definitely a super trait. There was just no way he was...

<<Like that, Kent. Just like that!>> Dropping her head back to allow him better access, she gave herself back over to him once again. That other thing would just have to wait until later.

Much later, she thought as he grasped her head so he could kiss her again.

<<Just like that!>>}}}}

She remembered thinking the next day that there was no way he'd been a virgin that night. He'd been much too confident. But later, as she'd gotten to know Clark better through his parents, she'd realized he'd told her the truth. In the many hours she'd had to think about him, and that night, she realized he'd been following the lead of his heart. There were times during their passion induced haze that she'd actually felt his love for her. So, why had she walked away?

"How about you?" he asked, cutting in to her thoughts. "Find someone special to spend time with?"

"Yeah," she said dreamily. "He's nearly four feet tall with gorgeous black hair and brown eyes."

Clark chuckled softly. "How do I compete with that?"

Lois cocked her head to the side and tried to look straight into his soul. "Competition is overrated."

He was caught slightly off guard by the expression on her face. Raw emotion burned deeply behind her dark eyes. What he wouldn't give to have saved her from a bit of the pain she'd suffered. They stared at one another for a moment before Clark cleared his throat and looked away.

"So, want to sit on my lap?" he asked and patted his thigh.

"Oh no! The last time I sat on your lap I got knocked up," she replied as she lifted the wok to pour the vegetables in a serving dish.

He clamped his mouth shut. Guess she had a point there. He'd made the suggestion in hopes of having her close again. But obviously her answer was meant to lighten the mood. It worked because after a beat, he burst out laughing.

It was Lois' eyes that filled with tears this time. The sound of his laughter was absolutely beautiful.

Ahh, how he'd missed this woman! He finally calmed and looked up at her. Did she have any idea how much he loved her?

Before either could say another word, the sound of a car door slamming ripped through the quiet night air.

"Mommy! We had so much fun. Gammy and Poppy took me to the fish tank." The door banged back against the wall as an excited little boy rushed into the kitchen. "You should have seen the..." He stopped in his tracks and stared at the man rising from the table.

"Slow down, Lane," Martha yelled after him. "There's plenty of time to tell Mom everything." She, too, stopped just inside the door when her eyes fell on the son she thought she'd never see again.

Clark had panicked when he'd heard the car door shut. For a brief second he'd wanted to be anywhere but in that kitchen.

"Why is everyone just standing in the... door?" Jonathan's mouth fell open, just like the others.

"Lane, honey, this is..." Lois started, holding out her hand as she moved toward Clark.

"My daddy," the boy whispered the rest for her.

Clark's throat felt as if it was closing up; his heart thundered against his chest. He could only stand there, staring down at the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. The pictures had shown Lane to be a gorgeous child, but standing just a few feet from him was something else altogether. He'd known he'd meet... his son. Yet, he'd tried not to think about it. Talking with Lois had helped keep his mind off this moment. What did he do now? What did he say?

He watched as Lane took a step toward him and his large body started to shake.

"I didn't think this day could get any better." His little voice held just as much wonder as his eyes did. This child he'd help give life to knew him; he was glad to see him. He stopped directly in front of Clark and thrust out his hand. "I'm Lane Kent, your son," he said with pride.

Breathe, he told himself. <And don't let him see you cry!> Pure instinct took over. "I'm... I'm Clark," he whispered and reached out tentatively to grasp the small hand before him. <God, he feels so good!> "Your, ah, your..."

"Daddy!" the boy breathed as he squeezed the large hand he held. His eyes filled with tears and Clark felt like he'd die.

"What's wrong?" Clark asked as he knelt before him, still holding his hand. Seeing his son's tears was worse than, than... kryptonite!

"Nothing," Lane told him. "I'm just... happy."

Clark lost the battle with holding back his tears and felt the first hot drop roll down his cheek.

"Don't cry, Daddy. I'm a really good boy."

Clark choked back a sob and pulled Lane into his arms, carefully enfolding him in his strong embrace. Every ounce of apprehension left him in a rush. His mind might not know this child, but his heart knew him well. This was his son. The son he and Lois had made - the product of their love for one another.

Lane accepted his father's reaction and wrapped his small arms around his large neck, giving the man all the time he needed. It was sometime later when he grunted. "Ah, Daddy?"

"Hhh?"

"You're squeezing me too tight."

Clark chuckled and drew Lane back to look at him. His large hands touched him gently, cupping his head, smoothing over his shoulders, down his arms. He took his hands in his, his thumbs rubbing his small fingers. "Until just this moment, I had no idea what to do when I saw you for the first time," he admitted.

Lane just smiled as he looked into his father's eyes - eyes like his own.

It wasn't until Martha suppressed a sob that Clark remembered they weren't alone. He looked up into the tear-filled eyes of his mother. "Hey, Mom!"

"Clark!"

Clark glanced back at Lane, reluctant to release his hands.

"Go on. There's nothing like Mommy's hugs," the smart guy told him. Lane pulled his hands from Clark's and stepped back out of the way.

Clark had barely stood up when his mother wrapped her arms around his neck. He was right. Lane was right. There was nothing like Mama's hugs.

Martha drew back to look at him, cupping his face in her hands. "You're home!"

"I'm home, Mama," he told her, then kissed her cheek.

"Mama, Lois," he said as he closed his eyes to savor another hug. "I have really missed my mama."

Lois had to stifle her tears. She'd waited for this moment for so long. Martha had shared her fears about Clark never coming home. And since becoming a mother herself, she knew how the older woman felt now.

"Can your old dad get in on this?"

Clark chuckled softly as he pulled away from his mother and grabbed his father.

"And Dad?" Lois asked.

"Daddy, too," Clark agreed as he kissed the side of his father's neck.

Lois had to turn away. She concentrated on finishing dinner instead. If she continued to watch their reunion, she would break down.

Jonathan drew back, squeezing Clark's shoulder. "'Bout time

those people brought my boy home."

Clark didn't say a word, just smiled at the two people who'd raised him as their own as he wrapped his arm around his mother's shoulder.

"How about that little guy?" Martha asked as she looked over at Lane.

Clark smiled at the small boy who stood a few feet away, waiting patiently while his father reunited with his own parents. Immediately Lane offered Clark a wide grin. "He's... the best surprise I've ever received." He pulled away from Martha and settled again on his chair, then motioned for Lane to come near. The boy chose the chair next to his dad, never taking his eyes from Clark's as he sat down.

"Tell me about Lane Kent," Clark said as he clasped his hands between his knees and faced Lane.

The boy smiled.

<He's a perfect mixture of me and Lois!>

"Watcha' wanna know?" He was small, and his feet hang a good two inches from the floor, swinging back and forth.

"Well, your mom tells me you're nearly six."

"Yep. My birthday's is in August. I'm having a Superman party!" Clark's brows rose toward his hair, but Lane kept talking. "Not many kids my age know who he is."

"Do you?" Clark asked him softly. Did he? Did Lane know who Superman was?

"Sure. He's strong, and smart, and fast, and his suit is really cool. His mom made it for him."

Clark didn't miss the glance Lane gave his grandmother. Obviously the little guy *did* know. He looked up when Lois touched his hand.

"He knows," she said softly and held Clark's gaze long enough to convey that Lane not only knew, he understood.

How much time had she spent talking with their son about his absent father? Clark indicated with a slight nod that everything was okay.

Lane stopping swinging his legs and the grin on his face faded. "Superman's cool, but you're better."

This child had just wrapped his father around his little finger. Gazing into his beautiful face, Clark reached out and cupped the child's cheek, his large hand nearly covering the entire side of his head. "And you're better than flying," he whispered, rubbing his thumb under his eye. "Brown eyes."

"The same color as yours," Lane said as he continued to look at his dad.

Clark moved his hand back through the hair just above Lane's ear. It was cut short, like a little man. Would this child suffer because of his absence?

"Know what?"

"What?" Clark pulled his hand away and sat attentively while he waited for Lane to answer.

"I'll be in second grade next year."

"I know. Mom told me. She said you are very smart."

"Good genes," Lane boasted with a bright smile. That caused his father to chuckle softly. "I like your laugh."

"Do you?" When he nodded, Clark said, "Well, maybe if we keep talking, I'll find something else to laugh about."

"Why don't we all talk for a while?" Martha asked as she set a bowl of salad on the table. "Over this wonderful meal."

Clark looked up at his mother. "We can do that." He glanced at Lane, who nodded his agreement, then turned to ease closer to the table.

It seemed no one could keep their eyes off Clark as they settled and prepared to eat. For a few minutes the talk centered around what everyone wanted on their plates. Clark shoved a fork into his food and lifted it to his mouth. He didn't realize he'd voiced his satisfaction until everything grew quiet. He looked

around to see all eyes watching him.

"It's good," he mumbled around a mouth full, then immediately pushed more into his mouth.

"Slow down, boy," Jonathan told him. "You can eat all you want."

After several minutes of eating like a starving man, he lifted his glass and drank down half his tea.

"Did you have tea on that world?" Lane asked him.

"Ah, no," Clark answered as he set the glass back down. "We had nourishment fluid, blue nourishment fluid."

"That's all?!" Martha asked incredulously.

"That's all."

"What did Jimmy eat?"

"The same thing," Clark took another bite. "It was so hard for him to get used to it. We were both warned not to overdo it when we got back. We could end up really sick. But..." He lifted the fork again. "It's so good."

They all laughed softly.

"Mom, think you could cook omelets for breakfast?" Clark asked when half his food was gone.

"Yeah, Mom," Jonathan mocked.

"Anything you want, honey," Martha answered with a smile.

"Take her up on that, son. She doesn't make offers like that often," his dad added.

"Oh, Jonathan. You know you're in better health than you've been in years." She patted his trimmer waistline.

"Yeah, Dad," Clark said. "You do look great."

"Lost fifty-six pounds," the older man said as he rubbed his stomach. "That there grandson of mine was motivation to get healthy. I want to see him grow up." Jonathan winked at Lane.

Clark's gaze fell to the boy beside him. "I think he's going to be motivation for a lot of things." He smiled at him before looking away. His eyes stung a bit; the last thing he wanted to do was break down at the dinner table.

"Speaking of looking great," Jonathan remarked. "You're not so bad either."

"Tell me about it," Lois mumbled as she shoved some food into her mouth.

Clark grinned over at her. "There wasn't a whole lot to do but fight and work out." He shrugged. "You should see Jimmy." He lifted his hands out. "Big as a barn. The nourishment fluid really packs a punch."

"I'd like to see him," Lois said.

"And he wants to see you," Clark told her. "He used to say 'Man, CK, I'd love to hear Lois yell at me'." He smiled and shook his head. He and Jimmy had become as close as brothers in the time they'd been gone.

Lois noticed the far away look wash over Clark, so she leaned forward to see Lane. "Hey, honey, why don't you tell your dad about your trip today?"

"Okay!" Lane scrambled to his knees, his favorite position at the table. "We had a great time! We went to the fish tank."

"Fish tank?"

"He can't say aquarium," Lois explained.

Clark nodded and focused his attention back on his son.

His son! What a mouth full!

"And we saw the sharks, and, and..."

Two minutes later, Clark's brows rose into his hair. Lane was even longer winded than Lois.

<Babbling! I've missed listening to Lois babble.>

Right now he'd have to settle on listening to Lane instead. He wasn't slowing down a bit. Clark leaned forward on his hand and sighed in utter contentment. It was so good to be home.

"Are you sure you've had enough?" Martha asked as she took Clark's coffee cup from him.

"I'm sure. I'll probably be nauseated now." He rubbed his

stomach and offered his mom a smile. She just smiled back before turning to head into the kitchen.

When they'd all finished dinner, they'd gone into the den to drink coffee. Lane had settled next to Clark on the sofa and listened while his father asked about the farm, the new cattle, and the renovations. Lois explained how she'd become editor of the Post, and Martha told him about her art shows at the gallery in town.

Lois noticed Clark yawn widely. "Lane, honey, maybe you should go up and get ready for bed?"

"Aw, Mom, not yet," the boy whined.

"Dad will be here tomorrow."

"But, Mom..."

"Hey, big guy, Mom's right. I'll be here tomorrow." Clark reached up to ruffle his hair. He knew how his son felt. Lane was reluctant to go to bed, but he was finding it difficult to hold his eyes open another second.

At the sight of Lane's out-poked lip, Lois tried another tactic. "Lane, sweetie, I think Daddy's tired. He's had a very long trip."

Lane lifted his wide eyes to his father's. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, but I *am* tired." Clark cupped his son's cheek gently. "I'll come say goodnight in a few minutes."

The boy nodded and eased to his feet. "I'm glad you're home."

"And I'm glad to be home, Lane." He reached out to take one of his small hands.

"You're glad about me?"

"I am very glad about you," he whispered and lifted his hand to kiss his fingers. When he looked back up, Lane offered him the biggest smile yet. "You look so much like your mother." Clark leaned over and pressed his lips to the child's forehead, holding them there as more tears welled in his eyes.

When Clark drew back, Lane squeezed his hand. "Promise to come up?"

"Promise." He reluctantly allowed Lane's hand to slip from his as the boy backed up toward the door. They didn't take their eyes off each other until Lane was out of sight. Clark smiled at Lois when she rubbed his back.

"I'll go up and turn down the bed for you while you say goodnight to your folks."

"Okay," he said and ran his hand across her knee. She stood and disappeared. All at once, Clark was exhausted. He was glad Lois had known that and helped him out. A few minutes later, he'd said his goodnights to his parents and was approaching the door to his old bedroom. He stopped when he heard Lane speak.

"God, it's me Lane Kent. I just wanna say thanks. I knew if I kept asking you'd send my daddy home. I'll be a good boy. You'll see. Daddy'll be so proud of me. Mommy says he's the best. I like him. But he seems so sad. Guess he's thinking about the bad things that happened when he was away. I know I said I wouldn't ask for anything if you sent Daddy home, but it's not for me. It's for him. Help him get happy again. Bless Mommy, Grammy, Poppy, and especially my daddy. Thanks." He was about to get up, but dropped back to his knees. "Amen!"

Clark watched as he scrambled onto the bed and pulled the covers up to his chin. He waited a few seconds before he walked into the room. "All settled?"

"Yep!"

He eased down on the bed and reached out to make sure Lane was tucked in. "You know, I'm gonna need some help."

"I'm a good helper," Lane declared.

"That's what I thought. I'm new at being a daddy. And since you've already been a son for so long, you think you could help me out? Show me what to do?"

"Mommy says she was scared to death when she had me. Grammy told her to just love me. Maybe you could try that."

"Oh, Lane." Clark eased closer, reaching to touch his face. "I think I can do that," he said through his tears.

Lane climbed from under the sheet and wrapped his arms around his dad's neck. Clark's large hands covered his small back and he turned his face into his neck. Another smell that was already dear to him.

After a few minutes, Lane drew back, smiled at Clark, then climbed back into his bed. "Night... Daddy."

"Goodnight... son." He watched as Lane closed his eyes, the corners of his small mouth turned up. He wished he could sit and watch him sleep all night, but his body was weary. The thought of an empty bed a few feet away finally forced him to his feet. His eyes stayed on the still form of his son until he was completely out of the door.

Lois was standing just outside the empty bedroom across the hall. "You're all set."

"Wanna tuck me in?" he asked with a grin.

"Clark," she whined.

"Relax." He reached down to take her hands in his. "I don't think I could move, let alone anything else." And he yawned again to prove his point.

"You do look tired."

"I'm exhausted." He leaned forward and kissed her softly. "Will I see you in the morning?"

"I hope so. I live here."

"That's not what I meant. I just might sleep in. What time do you leave for work?"

"Work? Are you kidding? I've had vacation time waiting for this occasion. I might not do anything but sit and look at you, but I'm not about to go to work for a while."

He chuckled softly. There was no way he'd argue with her. He certainly wanted to sit and look at her for a while. But right now he felt as if he'd drop. He lifted her hands to his lips.

"Goodnight," he told her when he lifted his head again.

"Clark?"

He stopped in the entrance to his room.

"I'm so happy you're home."

They stared at one another, conveying every emotion possible in that look. He stepped back over to her and kissed her soundly. "You have no idea how good it feels for me." One final kiss and he was gone. She was left to look at the closed door before she turned and made her way down the hall.

Inside, Clark dropped heavily to the bed. Another time he'd done this flashed behind his lids. He had to shake his head to get rid of that image. Flopping back against the pillows, he inhaled deeply all the wonderful smells of home. Lethargy overtook him, offering sweet respite from his racing thoughts. It was so very good to be home.

An angel - that was the only way to describe her, Clark thought as he leaned against the door frame just inside Lois' room. He'd retired a while ago, simply unable to keep his eyes open a second longer. He'd shared dinner with his family, listened to story after story, looked at his son, smiled at his folks, and flirted with Lois. But his body could no longer keep him alert.

He'd slept... better than he had in years. But he'd awaken a little while ago and couldn't go back to sleep. He finally made his way into the bathroom, looked in on his son, then headed directly toward Lois' room. He couldn't force himself to turn away.

Acting on instinct alone, he eased into the room. As gently as he could he settled on the bed behind Lois, his hand coming up to smooth over the side of her face.

"Wha...?!"

"Shh," he whispered. "It's just me."

"Is something wrong?" she asked concerned.

"Not now," he assured her, then kissed her cheek softly

before settling down behind her. He pulled her as close as he could. "Please don't ask me to leave."

She covered the hand around her waist with her own. "I won't," she said with a sigh. It felt so good to have him with her. She felt safe and relaxed. She felt whole for the first time in years.

His heavy, even breathing told her he'd already fallen asleep again. Wasn't it truly amazing how fast things changed?

Clark's thrashing woke Lois with a start. He yelled out then sat up quickly. Wild eyes searched the unfamiliar room around him.

"Clark?" Lois reached out to touch his arm. She was startled when he roughly snatched it away. A second later she was pinned against the mattress, her wrists being held above her head in one of Clark's hands.

She didn't recognize the man above her. He looked almost predatory. Then suddenly his eyes cleared and he leaned to kiss her senseless. He pulled away abruptly, then smiled brightly.

"I love you. I never stopped loving you. I never will." He kissed her again, released her, and eased off the bed.

"Wha...?" She sat up, too stunned to say much more. "Where ya' going?" she managed.

"Bathroom!" He winked at her then disappeared from the room.

"Wow!" She touched her swollen lips. It was going to be so easy getting used to having Clark home.

Lois was sitting up against the headboard when Clark came back into the room. He settled beside her, laid his arm across her body, and buried his face against her neck.

"Clark?"

"Hmm?"

"Just now... when you woke up..."

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said without moving.

"You grabbed my wrist."

His head jerked up and he reached for her wrist. This time a lot more gently than before. "Did I hurt you?" He turned her arm over to inspect it.

"You... I just didn't know you there for a second."

Clark sighed and turned to lean up beside her. She didn't think he was going to say anything, but finally he sighed. "New Krypton was bland. A rock. Very little vegetation. It was smoldering hot in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter. The red sun made everything look funny." He turned his head to her. "I missed all the beautiful colors of this world."

"There was fighting. A civil war of sorts. More or less us against Nor and his followers. We chased him for four years." Lois noticed his hand clamp into a fist. "I was so tired... Tired of fighting, tired of listening to an entire planet of people whine... tired of defending my real home, my family..." He relaxed his hand. "Tired of defending my love for you." He didn't look at her, just stared down at the comforter like it held all the answers. "The only time I got any peace was inside my head..." His eyes met hers again. "... thinking of you."

She swallowed, but still didn't speak.

"Lois..." He looked away, as if searching for the right words to say. "I almost gave in," he whispered softly. "I was in so much pain. I wanted relief, if only for a while." He moved to sit up on the side of the bed, leaning over to put his elbows on his knees. "I, ah, I betrayed you."

<<What?>> Lois waited for him to go on, trying to calm her racing thoughts.

"She was there, and she... We'd become friends, good friends. Nothing like you and I."

Lois wasn't sure she wanted to hear any more. She'd been relieved last night, but now it appeared she'd misunderstood.

"One night, after a particularly hard day in the field, she was there, in my chamber when I returned. She'd come to tell me about a raid in another province." Again, he grew quiet, staring down at his feet. "We kissed, undressed each other." Clark stood and walked over to pick up an item on the dresser, inspecting it like it was a precious stone. "I tell myself I would have stopped."

"It's..." She had to force herself to swallow the lump so she could speak. "Clark..."

"I wouldn't have," he said softly. "I wouldn't have stopped until I was exhausted," he gritted out between his teeth as he slammed down the object in his hand.

<<Would have?>>

"I didn't get the chance," he said after a moment. He turned slowly to face Lois, large tears welling in his eyes. "Mr. 'I can make love for hours' couldn't even get started." He choked back a sob. "And I tried. I did everything I knew to do," he spat, fully crying now. "And she tried." He shoved a hand through his hair as he turned away from her again.

She covered her mouth to stop herself from crying with him. Hearing him cry the way he had the night before was one thing, to witness it was another.

"I yelled at her." Another sob. "I sent her away crying." He wiped his wet face roughly. "Then... I thought of you." He twirled back to face her, anger and disgust flashing behind his eyes. "I was angry at you. But dammit, I had all the right reactions!"

What did she do here? How did she help him with this?

Clark grabbed a tissue and cleaned his face before he dropped back to the mattress. He was silent for a long while before he said softly, "I spent the next two years telling you how sorry I was."

"You had nothing to be sorry for," she offered quietly.

"I walked away from you. I have asked myself so many times how I could do that to you."

"We both made mistakes."

"That's an understatement."

"It would have been okay," Lois said softly after a moment.

"Not for me. It would have never been okay for me. I'd given you my heart," he countered. "That was the only thing that kept me sane." He got up again and left the room. Before Lois could contemplate his absence, he was back, carrying several notebooks. When he sat back down beside her, he placed the notebooks on Lois' lap. "This is everything I felt, saw, or did while I was away. Even what I just told you."

"Clark." Her hands settled on the cool surface of the books.

"I started these with every intention of bringing them back to you. I wasn't sure if I'd ever be able to explain my feelings, but these..." He placed his hand on top of hers. "... these will. Please read them."

She nodded at him, unable to say any more.

He smiled slightly. "I believe I smell coffee."

"Yeah." She glanced at the clock. "Your folks are up."

"I think I'll go down." He waved his thumb behind him.

"Sure."

He searched her eyes for any sign that what he'd told her had changed her feelings. He found concern, confusion, and love. Despite it all, this woman still loved him. <She might change her mind once she reads the things I wrote.> But he couldn't think of that now. Leaning over, he stopped a mere breath away from her lips. He wanted... needed her to come to him.

And she didn't disappoint. The second he was close enough, she covered his mouth with her own. Awkwardly she reached out to wrap her arms around his neck as the kiss deepened. She drew back to look at him. "Nothing..." She cupped his cheek and looked deeply into his eyes. "*Nothing* will change how I feel about you. I love you."

Clark grinned widely as his heart began to soar. He'd longed to hear those words for years. After another brief kiss, he

practically jumped to his feet. "If you manage to get down before Lane gets up, I'd like you to join me for a walk."

"I'll be down before you finish your first cup of coffee." And she allowed his sudden giddiness to wash over her, offering him a sexy wink.

"Argh! You're killing me!" he almost shouted as he left the room.

Clark practically bounded down the stairs.

"I thought the house was falling down," Jonathan said as he looked up to see his son step into the kitchen.

"Sorry, Dad." He kissed the side of his father's face. "It's a beautiful morning, isn't it?"

Jonathan laughed softly. "I'd say you feel a bit better."

"I feel great!" He wrapped his arms around his mom's waist from behind as she poured him a cup of coffee. "How's my mama this morning?"

"Very happy," she said and smiled when he kissed her cheek. "Thanks," he said as he released her and took the coffee from her. "Mmm, good," he remarked as he headed for the table. "So, Dad, need some help this morning?"

"Oh, no you don't. You're not gettin' me in trouble with your ma." He downed the last of his coffee before turning to kiss Martha. "Wayne and I will be over by the creek if you need us." He clapped Clark's shoulder. "See ya' in a bit, boy."

"Okay, Dad." Clark smiled at him before he left. "Why can't I help Dad?" he asked his mom as she gathered the ingredients for his breakfast.

"You need a few days to get used to being home."

He watched as she kept working. She was right. He'd also like to spend some time with his son. A wide smile spread out across his lips. His son - he was really beginning to like those words.

Clark stepped into the barn and inhaled deeply.

"Please don't tell me you've missed that smell," Lois said as she stepped around him to offer her pony some oats.

"All of it, Lois. I've missed all of it." He reached out to pet the horse. "She's beautiful."

"He," she corrected.

Clark peeped over the stall wall at the horse. "Sorry, buddy," he mumbled at the animal for mistaking his gender.

"He was a gift from my father," Lois explained as she continued to feed the horse.

"Really?" He took the brush she offered and began to stroke the horse's coat. "You two are..."

"Comfortable in our repaired relationship. In fact, he lives in town."

"What?"

"Runs the general practice. And get this! He and my mother are back together!"

"Wow! I guess things really have changed." Clark moved around so that he could see the horse in the next stall. "Old Maggie."

"Old is right," Lois commented. "Doc Tanner didn't expect her to live past Christmas."

Clark stopped rubbing the horse and faced her. "I've missed six of those," he said sadly. "Time was different there. I lost track after a while. It became a game for me and Jimmy to guess what time of year it was here."

"Well, you'll be home this Christmas. We'll have the largest party this town's ever seen." She grinned at him, then continued through the barn and out the other side.

He followed and they continued out into the pecan grove. "There were animals there, but nothing like here." He indicated a squirrel making its way up a tree trunk. "Something that resembled a squirrel. The largest animal was a tonk."

“A who?”

“A tonk. It looks similar to a rhino except much bigger. The most abundant wildlife was fish. There was an ocean.”

“Just one?”

“Just one very huge ocean. Very small bodies of fresh water, but it was the clearest water I’ve ever seen.” He looked out over the field as they continued down through the grove. “Cattle on a wheat farm,” he remarked.

“That’s where the money’s at.”

“And it seems the Kent farm is doing well.”

“Very well. Martha and Jonathan paid off their mortgage a few years ago and we paid cash for all the renovations.”

“How about you? Must have been tough getting used to the pay cut you took coming out here.”

“Actually, I banked nearly everything I earned when I was traveling. Made some good investments, thanks to your father. I’m actually more satisfied now.”

He merely nodded. “How satisfied?”

She stopped and waited for him to do the same. “Monetarily I’m very comfortable. I’m thrilled to be a mother, and I’m no where near as lonely any more.”

“Why, Lois? Why did you wait? Why didn’t you just move on?”

“Move on to what, Clark? I gave my heart to you a long time ago,” she repeated what he’d told her that morning.

“And if I’d never come back?”

“We’ll never know, will we?” She dared him to say anything else. They couldn’t spend the rest of their lives doing this. They would never be able to move on. “Come on,” she told him after a second. “I’ll race you to the pond.”

And she was off at a full run. Clark chuckled and set chase after her. Both were laughing happily when they made it to the water’s edge.

“What are you doing?” Lois asked when Clark pulled his shirt over his head.

“Going swimming,” he answered as he began to unbutton his jeans.

She could only watch in silence as he toed off his shoes and tossed his socks and jeans aside. <<Damn! Why do they have to be white?!>>

Clark straightened, wearing nothing but his white boxer briefs and a bright smile. “Ya’ coming?”

She couldn’t answer as he turned and waded into the water. He looked... so good.

“Come on!” He splashed water at her, then turned and dove under. She was still standing on the shore when he came up. “What’s wrong?”

“I am *not* coming in there.”

“Ah, come on. I thought you were a country girl now,” he teased.

“Not when my folks have a big, *clean* swimming pool at their place.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Party pooper,” he whined with a grin before he went under again.

She waited patiently for him to get his fill. Finally he began to ease back toward the edge. And oh, God, why did he have to do that? she thought. <<Go back under. Please go back under!>> He looked so good and oh, oh! She had to turn away. His wet briefs were clinging to all the right places.

Clark was oblivious to her plight. He shook his head to rid it of some of the water clinging to the long strands. “I need a haircut.” He leaned over to grab his clothes.

“Aren’t you going to get dressed?” Lois asked as he started to walk away.

He stopped. “I’ll just wait till I get back so I can shower.” When her eyes swept down his body, he smiled. “Do I make you nervous?”

“No,” she insisted as she pushed past him and headed for the house. Clark chuckled and quickly caught up to her. They walked in silence for a second before she blurted out, “You’re certainly not modest any more.”

“I’ve been through way too much to be modest. But if it’ll make you feel better,” he said as he stopped to get dressed. “I’ll put my pants on.” He flashed her a knowing grin, then pulled his jeans back over his hips. Very slowly he lifted the fly, making sure she was watching him.

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “You’re doing that deliberately.”

“Doing what?”

She wouldn’t look. No way! She glanced anyway. <<Does he know how good he looks?>>

Clark buttoned his jeans, then approached her. “Please look at me.” He reached up to cup her cheek. “Look at me all you want.” He kissed her softly. “I’m certainly going to look at you.”

Forcing herself to breathe, Lois could only stare at him, nearly drowning in his dark eyes. Blinking to stop the tears threatening to spill from her eyes, she leaned forward and kissed him again. “I love you,” she told him and wiped his lips with her thumb. “So much,” she whispered.

“And I love you,” he answered, capturing her lips again. They grinned at one another, held hands, and headed back home.

Home! That wonderful word again.

They passed by the clothes line, where Martha had put out clean sheets to dry, talking happily about nothing in particular. Suddenly they heard Lane screaming. Both began running toward the house.

“NO! DADDY! WHERE IS HE?!” The little guy shot out of the back door and stopped when he nearly ran into his parents. He took a deep breath and would have fallen to the ground if Clark hadn’t caught him.

“What’s wrong, little guy?”

“I... I...” He threw his arms around his dad’s neck, breathing heavily. “I thought you were gone.”

“Oh, Lane.” Clark lifted his hand and cradled his dark head. “I’m home.” He leaned him back so he could see his eyes. “When my powers come back, and when Mom gets tired of me mooching off her...” He flashed Lois a grin. “I will leave to go to work and to be Superman, but I’ll always come back.”

“You won’t ever go back to that other world again?”

“Never! You and Mom, Grammy and Poppy, you guys are my world now.” He placed a kiss on Lane’s forehead. “What do you say I join you for breakfast, then you and I go explore this big ole farm?”

“Kay!” He happily took his dad’s hand and they started up the steps. “Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Why are your pants wet?”

Clark just laughed softly and followed his son inside. He was going to enjoy getting to know this little guy.

She watched until they were out of sight before she turned and went back inside. Clark and Lane were off to get to know one another, Jonathan was working, Martha was painting, so Lois was left to entertain herself. Remembering the notebooks Clark had given her, she headed upstairs.

^^^

Day eight, and I feel like I’m dying. What have I done?

Coming with the Kryptonians seemed like such a good idea at the time. I was in so much pain... Surely getting away had to help. And I sure as hell can’t get much farther away.

Well, actually by the time we reach New Krypton, I’ll be an entire galaxy away. What a concept to have to comprehend.

—

Everything I've ever believed to be true, everything I've ever imagined... I just can't grasp the fact that I'm on my way across space to another planet. We're on board the 'mother ship'. I have to laugh at that. Things are just so strange. Nearly fifty people were aboard this ship, including part of the Council. The Council is essentially the ruling party, or government, on NK. There are only five members, but they basically rule the world. Zara is considered the First Lady, yet she's limited in what she has been able to do without me.

I guess I have to tell you who Zara is. Zara, from the House of Ra, is... my birth wife. You read right, my birth wife...

~~~~~

She read on as he explained how the factions worked on New Krypton. He talked about the tests they'd put him through when they'd come to Earth. Then he began to talk about her.

~~~~~

It was so hard to make the decision to come. All I could think about was you. So many times I'd tried to call. I wanted to ask your opinion; it was an automatic response. Even after more than two years, some habits you just can't seem to break.

It took a while, but I remembered that you were gone. The team was only one. But it was never an easy decision. You were always on my mind.

You still are. If it wasn't for thinking of you, there's no way I could make it.

~~~~~

On and on she read about life and how much his had changed.

~~~~~

The fighting started today. My subjects don't really trust me, but they want me to lead them against Nor. I don't know why but I just can't quite grasp that.

~~~~~

She closed the first notebook two hours later, a clear understanding of what Clark was feeling when he made the decision to leave. It had never been easy for him.

She could picture her flabbergasted boy scout when they'd ushered him straight into his ceremonial union with Zara. Even if he'd made it clear early on that his marriage was only for show, there was part of Lois that was jealous of Zara. She'd had him for six years.

Lois stood and walked over to look out of the window. Across the field she could see Clark and Lane flying a kite. As much as she'd enjoyed reading his thoughts, right now she wanted to hear his words. She hurried down the stairs and out the back door.

\*\*\*

"Hold on tight," Clark told Lane as he slowly released the string on the kite.

"Got it!" Lane's little arms had to fight, but he held on.

Clark sighed in contentment. He didn't remember ever having so much fun flying a kite.

He and Lane had taken a tour of the farm, which had grown by nearly thirty acres. There was several hundred head of cattle, three fields of wheat, and two more well stocked ponds. They planned on going fishing later that evening. Clark was hoping he could convince Lois to come along.

"Penny for your thoughts."

He almost jumped when Lois spoke behind him.

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you," she said as she eased up beside him.

"Please, startle me any time." He smiled and reached out to pull her close enough to plant a kiss on her lips. "What brings you out here?"

"I wanted to see you," she said and wrapped her arm around his waist.

"I'm glad," he put in. "Hey, Lane, don't get so close to those

trees."

"Ah, little help here," his son yelled back. The wind had gotten under the kite and was almost carrying him across the field toward the grove.

Clark trotted over and helped him rein in the kite.

"Sorry, Dad. Not very strong, am I?"

"Don't you worry. You'll be big and strong before you know it." Clark ruffled his hair, then pointed to Lois. "Look who came to see us."

"Hi, Mom." Lane offered her a wave and a smile.

"Hey, sweetie."

"Wanna play basketball?" Lane asked as they walked back toward the house.

"I would love to," Clark answered.

A few minutes later they were laughing and tossing the ball around. Lois mostly watched Clark. He was so much different than she remembered him to be. No longer was he a shy, naive farmboy. He was much more confident, sure of himself and his masculinity. He carried himself as if he knew his place in the world. She briefly wondered if he'd always be this way - a balanced mixture between her sweet, gullible partner and the new, stronger lord from another world.

And would she get used to the change?

\*\*\*

Clark rubbed his hand across Lane's back as he carried the little fellow up to bed. They'd had a very full day. And they'd even convinced Lois to come along on their fishing trip. He and Lane both had whined because she caught more fish than they had.

He gently lowered Lane to his bed and covered him up. The little guy had fallen asleep on his lap before he could finish the book they'd been reading. "Thank you for a wonderful first day as a daddy, son," he told the sleeping child. He smiled as he tucked him in. "Goodnight." His lips touched Lane's head briefly before he pulled back and crept from the room.

Lois had just stepped onto the landing from the stairs when he came out into the hallway.

"Hey, you," Clark offered as he pushed his hands into his pockets.

"Hey, yourself." She grasped the front of his shirt and pulled him close. "Are these the only kinds of shirts you own?" she asked, fingering his tight muscle shirt.

"Ah, actually I've grown to like these."

"I love 'em," she said as she smoothed her hands across his hard pecs.

He looked down at her hands, heat building quickly deep within his belly. "You didn't like the black suit?"

"Oh, yeah. I like that, too," she said with a grin, looking up at him.

"I miss the blue."

"Yeah, that, too," she agreed and allowed her hands to roam down his sides.

He smiled back at her, but kept his hands firmly buried in his pockets. There was no way he could touch her. His body would react, then his body would react... then...

"Clark?"

"Hmm?"

"What's wrong?"

He just shrugged.

She pulled her hands back and her smile faded. This man had flirted with her shamelessly all day. He'd said things to her that he never would have before his absence. She'd blushed like a fool! So why was he standing here like he'd rather be somewhere else?

"Well," he said, breaking into her thoughts. He kissed her briefly, then stepped around her toward his room. "I'm beat."

"O... kay," she answered absently. He gave her a smile, then

disappeared behind his door, leaving Lois standing there in silence. <<What just happened here?>>

Behind his closed door, Clark leaned back against the wood and sighed in relief. He finally pulled his hands from his pockets and rubbed his face. <Real bright, Ka...> He'd almost referred to himself as Kal. Six years was a long time.

Too long, he thought as he pushed away from the door. He dug around in his bag and pulled out a picture frame. It held the image of him and Lois at the ceremony when he'd received his first Kerth. Reverently he placed it on top of the dresser and eased back to sit on the bed. Looking at the photograph, he remembered another night he'd done the same thing.

{{{{Heaving a deep sigh of relief, he couldn't even look at himself. Not more than thirty minutes ago he'd been lying with Zara; he'd touched her, kissed her. He'd enjoyed her reactions. And he'd been angry because his body failed to react.

He lifted his head to stare at the picture on the table across the room. It was \*her\*. There was nothing inside his head but her. Lois was the reason he'd failed to react with Zara; Lois was the reason he'd reacted the moment he was alone with his thoughts of their night together; Lois was the reason he'd shamelessly sought relief alone.

She was also the reason he felt disgust now. He felt as if he'd betrayed her. They'd never made a commitment to one another. Yet, to her was where his heart belonged.

But he hadn't even thought about her when he'd been with Zara. Later, when he'd failed to become excited, he'd been so angry with her. It wasn't her fault. It wasn't Zara's fault. The way he'd acted, though, it had been everyone's fault but his own.}}}}

Suddenly the door banged open and his head shot up. Lois was standing there, hands on her hips, with an angry scowl on her face.

"I said I wouldn't do this. That you needed time. You've been through so much and it's going to take time for you to deal with everything. Hell, it's hard for me to deal with everything. But dammit, I want to know what's wrong. We spent the whole day flirting with one another, kissing, and hugging. Then I tell you that I find you irresistible and you don't even take your hands out of your pockets. You blow me off and shut yourself away in your room." She stopped when he smiled. "What? This is \*not\* funny!"

"Babbling," he said simply. "I missed hearing you babble."

"Can it, Kent," she said, trying to maintain a straight face. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Do you really want to know?"

"Of course!"

"Okay." He stood up, a very serious expression on his face. "I didn't touch you out there because if I had there was no way I could have come to bed alone." She blinked. "Lois, I know I told you we couldn't be together years ago, but I never felt it in here," he said and placed his hand on his chest. "And when we slept together..." He took a deep breath and looked away. "It meant more to me than just an affair. For me, years of hoping and dreaming had been realized. And being apart all this time has only made the feeling grow. I know a relationship involves so much more than the physical aspect. But I can't seem to convince my body of that."

She just stood there, staring at him. What did she say to that? <<Try the truth.>> "I want you, too, Clark. I really do. I just don't want to make any mistakes this time."

"Then please understand when I keep my hands in my pockets or go to bed early," he begged.

That look, like a wounded animal- that's why they needed to wait. She knew what he said, but could also see the shadows behind his eyes. He had so much to deal with; \*they\* had so much to deal with.

She nodded. "I love you," she said softly.

A small smile spread out across his face. "I love you." He reached out to rub her arm. "Now get out of here before I change my mind."

She couldn't suppress a giggle as he turned her and pushed her out of the door. "'Night," she sang as she continued down the hall.

"Goodnight." He waited until she closed her bedroom door before he shut his. His traitorous body still hummed from where she'd been in the room with him. But Lois was right, to some degree. He did need time to process everything. With a sigh, he pushed away from the door to prepare for bed.

\*\*\*

{{{{Run! That was all he could think as his feet carried him further and further into the small grove of trees. Laser fire danced around him as he reached a deep ravine. Adrenaline pumping, he leapt across the divide.

"This way, Milord," shouted one of his guard.

They burst forth from the growth into a small village. The various buildings around them were all smoldering. They continued down the path, toward a large structure at the other end. En route they passed an opening between two buildings. Drawing to a halt, he couldn't believe his eyes. There, lying in a heap, were the bodies of several people.

They'd been executed, shot in the backs of their heads. Their hands were tied behind their backs.

My God, there was a child!

He walked over, bending to turn the face of the girl so he could see her fully. She was barely more than six!

Suddenly the face of the girl faded and another took her place.

NO! He stood and backed up in shock. There, in a pool of blood, lay his son.}}}}

Clark sat up in bed, sweat beading on his body. He took several deep breaths to calm himself. It had only been a dream!

But... He threw his covers aside and scrambled from the room. He didn't stop until he was kneeling beside Lane's bed. Almost crying in relief, Clark reached out to rub the thick shock of hair back off the boy's face.

"I won't ever let anything happen to you, son." He watched him sleep for a while before he eased back to his feet. A final glance and he left him there, unaware of his father's demons. Instead of heading back to his room, he padded down the hall to Lois' door. He didn't hesitate as he reached out to turn the knob.

Just like the night before, he crawled onto the bed and wrapped his arm around her. She started, but reached up to pat his arm.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," was all he said as he buried his face against her neck.

She smiled into the darkness, then closed her eyes again.

Clark was already breathing deeply.

\*\*\*

He was gone when she woke up the following morning. It was still fairly early so she wondered what time he'd gotten up. A few minutes later, she joined Martha in the kitchen.

"Good morning, honey," Martha greeted her.

"Morning." She poured herself a cup of coffee. "Did you see Clark this morning?" she asked after she'd taken a sip.

"No. I thought he was still asleep."

"Ah, no." She'd looked in both his room and Lane's, just to make sure. Martha didn't know he came to her room during the night.

"I wonder where he's gone," his mom remarked as she leaned over to peer out the kitchen window.

Lois drank the rest of her coffee before she moved toward the door. "I'm going to see if I can find him."

"Okay."

She set out across the yard toward the barn. She heard the



sound of an ax connecting with wood. On the other side of the barn was Clark, chopping wood. Sweat ran off his shirtless body and muscles rippled as he lifted the manual tool and brought it down with a thud. She noticed that he was exerting a tremendous amount of effort with each swing. And he looked angrier than she'd ever seen him. Afraid of his reaction if she made her presence known, she chose to stand at the corner of the barn and watch him.

Again and again he struck the wood. He wished the logs were \*him\*.

After waking from his nightmare about Lane being dead, he'd had another. Nor had tormented him. He'd killed innocent people. And the bastard had run! Eventually cornered, Nor had been killed. Clark was just furious because of how he'd been killed.

He placed another log on the chopping block and yelled as he brought the ax down. His weapon stuck deeply in the wood and he left it there, heaving deeply as he tried to regain control of himself.

"Clark?"

He twirled to see Lois standing a few feet away. His beautiful Lois.

Suddenly he felt drained. He dropped down onto a log, thrusting a hand through his wet hair.

"We, ah, we have enough wood for the winter," Lois noted as she gazed at the large pile. How long had he been out here? "You do realize it's June?" She'd meant for that comment to break the tension, but it made it worse.

"Whatever," he growled as he shot back to his feet and started snatching the split logs from the ground to stack them. He slammed them down on the pile under the shelter built for that purpose.

"Did I say something wrong?" Lois asked in confusion. He didn't answer, just kept stacking. "Fine," she snapped and turned to leave. She could take a hint.

Clark stopped after a moment. What was wrong with him? One second she was his beautiful Lois, the next she was his greatest obstacle. His greatest emotional obstacle. The dreams he'd had the night before had cast serious doubt in his mind where Lois was concerned. Could he truly come all the way home again? Would he bring too much baggage for her? Is that why she was keeping her distance from him? Yeah, he'd only been home a full day, but there was just something about the way she acted around him.

<You're paranoid, Kent!>

Kent! He'd referred to himself as Kent! He almost felt like crying. He hung his head for a moment and tried to regain his composure. Finally he grabbed his shirt, wiped his face, and headed for the house. He found Lois sitting at the kitchen table talking with his mother.

"I think I've lost my mind," he stated simply as he stood by the table. "There was so much death," he continued before either could speak. "Not just soldiers, but women and children as well. And that was the nice side of the son of bitch."

Both ladies eyes widened at his choice of words.

"It's just so hard... the fighting had ended a long time before I came home. I just can't seem to get the images out of my head." He wiped his face again. "Out there just now, when you spoke," he addressed Lois. "The first thing I thought was 'my beautiful Lois'. Then 'Lord Kal' took over, telling me that I can never make you happy. That I can't give you what you need."

"Clark..." Lois began, but he held up his hand to cut her off.

"I, ah, I didn't particularly like that man... Lord Kal. He was egotistical and logical and everything I never want to be. Yet, that's who I was for such a long time."

"Son, it's going to take time," Martha spoke up.

"I know this, Mom. I really do know this. But..." He looked

away, tears filling his eyes.

"It's hard," Lois finished for him as she stood and approached him. "But we'll be here. Tomorrow, in a week, in a month." She reached up to cup his cheek. "We love you."

Slowly a smile spread across his face. "And I love you, all of you. Please don't forget that along the way."

"We won't." She slowly reached out to hug him.

"None of us will," came the voice of his mother as she joined them. Clark released Lois and hugged his mother.

"Hey, Mom?" Clark asked, his head resting on her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"I'd like some pancakes."

She laughed softly as she drew out of their hug. "That's my boy." She patted his stomach before moving across the kitchen to make his breakfast.

\*\*\*

Clark made it back downstairs from taking a shower about the same time Martha set his pancakes on the table. "Think you could mix this for me, Mom?" Clark asked as he held out a packet to Martha.

"What is it?"

"Nourishment fluid," Clark said softly.

"Why would you need that?" Lois asked as she placed a pitcher of juice beside his plate.

"Well," he started. "I don't really need it." He cast a glance from Lois to his mom, who seemed just as curious. "I can't come off the stuff cold turkey. It's the only thing my body has had for six long years."

Martha looked down at it. "What do I do?"

"Mix it with a quart of boiling water. When it's cool enough, put it in the fridge. It'll be really thick."

He looked almost happy, Lois noted. Was the stuff addictive?

Martha nodded and turned to do what he'd asked. Clark sat down and began to prepare his pancakes.

"It's not addictive," he answered Lois' unspoken question. "I won't have to drink it at all when my powers return."

She said nothing, just agreed with a shake of her head. "Will Jimmy have to drink it, too?"

"Yeah. He'll need it for about six months." Clark licked syrup from his finger. "But he was given a strict plan to follow to wean himself."

"Wean himself," Lois said absently. "That's one way of putting it."

Clark stopped his task and looked at her. "Does this bother you? It's not a drug, Lois. You, Lane, my parents, you can all drink it. In fact, it has nutrients you can't get anywhere else." He spread out his arms. "Hell, look at me. And Jimmy. It's like milk. It does a body good," he teased.

She finally smiled. "Kryptonian milk. I can buy that."

"There's just one problem. There are no cows on New Krypton." He shoved a fork full of food into his mouth and sighed. "I missed food," he said again.

"Hey!"

They both turned to see a happy little boy run down the stairs. He didn't stop. Clark turned and caught him, fork stuck in his mouth.

"Morning, Daddy!"

"Mormma, saa," Clark mumbled around the utensil.

Lane pulled the item from his mouth. "You're funny."

Clark smiled. "And you're still the best looking thing I've seen in a galaxy."

"What about Mommy?"

"Well, now, Mommy is in a league all her own, Lane." Clark shifted the boy on his lap and picked up some more food, gently pushing into the child's mouth. "Ya' see, son, there is absolutely no one that can compete with your mommy." Lane turned to look at him, syrup dripping from his lip. Clark reached out to wipe it

away with his finger. "Mommies and sons are two different classes," he explained. "A son makes a man feel as if he's truly accomplished something with his life. But a woman makes a man feel complete."

"Daddy?"

"Yeah?"

"I have \*no\* idea what you just said."

Clark laughed out loud. "I said I think you're great and Mommy's gorgeous. How's that?"

"That I understand!" Lane said and pulled the fork Clark held close enough to eat the food on it. That caused his father to laugh a little harder. They settled into lighter conversation as they finished their breakfast.

\*\*\*

Clark lifted the glass to his mouth and downed the blue liquid. He closed his eyes as a rush of energy ran through his body. It had been nearly three days since he'd drank any of it and he instantly felt its fortifying effects.

"What does it taste like?"

He turned to see Lane standing beside him. "Well, kind of like berries. Want to try?" He held out the glass and the boy leaned up to take a stiff.

"Sure it's okay?"

"Positive. It's like drinking a glass of vegetables."

"Yuck!" But Lane took the glass anyway. Cautiously he allowed the liquid to roll down and touch his lips. "Mmm," he declared. "This is good!"

"Not compared to Grammy's cooking," Clark told him.

"Will that stuff make him look like a little Hercules?" Lois asked as she came into the kitchen.

"No," Clark assured her. "I spent way too much time in the gym." He looked back down at Lane. "Go ahead. You can finish it."

Lane was about to turn the glass up when Lois took it away. "I don't think I want you to have this," she told him and set the glass down on the counter.

"Lois, it's okay," Clark said again.

"Yes, it is, because he's not going to drink it." She moved around them and poured Lane some cold water from the fridge. "Here. Drink this."

Clark stared at her for a moment. "I wouldn't give him anything that would hurt him."

A nod, but nothing else.

"You don't believe me?"

"I just think he shouldn't drink it."

Lane stood with the glass of water, watching his parents closely.

"Don't you trust me?"

"It's not that," Lois began.

"Then what?"

"Clark..."

"You didn't answer. Either question!" He said and he folded his arms across his chest.

Lois was suddenly lost in other thoughts. He looked like a certain superhero that used to grace the skies of this world. Part of her was transported back, back to a time she longed to have again.

When she failed to say anything, Clark stalked from the house angrily.

"Great, Mom!" Lane shouted and slammed his cup down on the table before he ran after his dad. "Wait up!"

Clark didn't slow down. He'd made it as far as the pecan grove before he stopped to look down at Lane. "You better go back. I might do something wrong!"

"I wanna be with you," Lane said and started out after him again because he was walking away.

"Just go back!" he shouted with enough force to stop the boy.

Lane stood there, large tears welling in his eyes, watching his dad walk away. He looked up when Lois put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't touch me!" he spat, then stomped off toward the barn.

Lois sighed heavily as both of the men in her life walked off in anger. Deciding to give them time and space, she went back inside.

\*\*\*

^^^

It's so cold! I feel like it's seeped into my bones. We train in the snow, up to our knees. I tell myself that tomorrow will be better. Only tomorrow is just like today.

— -

How much is one person supposed to be able to stand? This damn nauseating blue hell. What I wouldn't give for a cheeseburger.

— -

Different day, same old things. Kryptonians don't like change.

Have you noticed I've begun to speak of them as Kryptonians? I don't really refer to myself as any one thing at all. What I am? Yeah, biologically I'm Kryptonian. But in every other way, I'm Earthling.

Oh, and Kryptonians are essentially human. That's the one truly positive thing about coming to this world. I've learned so much about myself, my body.

My heart. I've learned a lot about my heart.

— -

I noticed today that my clothes don't fit any more. My shirts are too tight, my jeans won't button. I don't wear regular clothes often, but now and then I like the reminder of home.

— -

I found out why my clothes don't fit. I've gained twenty pounds! Of solid muscle. That blue gunk is good for something. It's packed with vitamins and minerals. Hell, Jimmy's even benefited from it. He's getting rather large, too.

— -

Another day in hell. I was shot today. Laser pierced my side. The Council made the decision to move me off the front lines. They want to keep the precious 'First Lord' healthy and safe.

What a load of bull! Their idea of healthy and safe is training to use the drei and griping at me because I won't procreate with my wife! I laugh every time I think about it. And just why do I have to train if I'm not going to be on the front lines?

Maybe it's more for the procreation part. (lol)

^^^

Lois read the day away. Before she knew it, Martha was calling them to dinner. Neither Lane nor Clark was there. Her son had eaten and went up to watch television in his room before bed. No one was sure of where Clark was. He hadn't returned since he'd stormed off. Lois was advised to allow them both their space. It had to be difficult with the overwhelming emotional overload they were both dealing with. She couldn't say a word, but managed to finish her meal, then returned to her room.

Another notebook was finished before Lois finally turned the light off and rolled over. She'd just closed her eyes when she heard Clark's door shut. Sighing in relief, she pulled the covers up to her chin.

\*\*\*

It hadn't been Clark who'd shut his door. It had been Lane. He'd gone in to his father's room to wait on him. His father had said he would always come back. And no matter how mad he was, they were going to talk!

Clark finally managed to make it back to the farmhouse around midnight. He'd been so angry with Lois when he'd left. The thought that she didn't trust him with their son had cut like a knife. He'd walked down to the pond on the back of the property

and sat staring into the water trying to figure out what to do. He had to talk to her, of course. If she really felt that way...

He wasn't sure what he'd do. He was in more pain than he'd been when he was away from her.

And there was Lane. He'd treated him badly. None of this was his fault. Poor guy was probably so hurt and confused.

Abandoning his vigil at the pond, Clark had started back toward the farm. He'd passed the Fortress of Solitude and was unable to resist going up. Finding his globe, he'd listened to the messages of his father again. Those words seemed to contradict the words he'd heard from the hologram inside his ship. Why hadn't he questioned any of it before traveling across space to defend a rock?

It was dark when he'd awakened. He'd been so tired, unable to hold his eyes open. Deciding to take a nap, he'd slept well into the night. He'd quickly scrambled from the treehouse. The others were probably worried he'd gone off again.

Lane! That kid must feel horrible.

Clark was relieved to have found the door unlocked. And his mother had left a plate in the oven for him. He grabbed the food, a drink, and a napkin before heading upstairs. He'd eat in his room after he talked to Lane.

He snapped on the light in his room to find a sleeping child in his bed. The plate and glass were abandoned before he sat down on the edge of the bed. A gentle hand stroked the soft black hair on his son's head while his heart skipped a beat. He might have been shocked to find a son here when he'd returned from New Krypton, but what a wonderful surprise.

What would he do if Lois said she didn't trust him? Surely she hadn't meant it.

Lane stirred, then rolled to his back. "Daddy?" he said, opening an eye, then the other.

"Yeah. I'm here."

The boy pushed himself up against the headboard. "You said you'd come back," he said, a bit of wonder touching his words.

"I'll always come back."

"I was mad at you," Lane admitted.

"Yeah. I was pretty angry at myself." Clark moved to lean on the bed beside him. "None of what happened today was your fault. Mom and I..."

"Had different heads."

"Different heads?"

"Not thinking the same thing," his son explained.

"Different opinions?" Clark asked.

"Yeah, that. Grammy says it's okay for people to have those."

"And it is. But there are some things people need to have the same heads about."

"Like what to do with their son?"

"Yes." Clark reached down and took Lane's hand. "I shouldn't have gotten so angry with your mom."

"I shouldn't have either. I told her not to touch me." Lane looked down at the cover in shame.

"Well, maybe we should talk to her tomorrow," Clark suggested.

"Kay."

"I'm really sorry, Lane."

"Me, too, Daddy."

Clark smiled down at him. "I love to hear you say that."

"I love to say it." His son grinned back. "Can I sleep here tonight?"

"I think I'd like that." Clark leaned over to kiss the top of his head. "Wanna help me eat my supper?"

"Sure."

Clark got up to grab his plate and father and son started to put a broken bridge back together again.

\*\*\*

Even though he'd slept a great deal the day before, Clark

slept very well that night. There had been no dreams to wake him. A small foot kicked him in the stomach, arousing him once. Smiling, he'd tucked Lane against his side and drifted back off.

When he finally woke, it was nearly nine in the morning. Lane was gone and his mother had set him out some fruit and yogurt. A note explained that she and his father had to go to the farmer's market and they'd taken Lane with them. It also scolded him for not coming home. Clark grinned and sat up to eat his breakfast.

Twenty minutes later he'd eaten, showered, and went in search of Lois. He found her in the den. She was reclined on the lounge at the window, the sun shining in on her. She was so beautiful.

As if she knew he was there, she looked up at him. When their eyes met, an entire conversation took place in the span of seconds.

"I'm sorry," she told him as she closed her book.

"Did you mean it? Is that how you feel?" He didn't move, just stood in the doorway.

"No. That stuff just represented another thing that had you when I didn't, that still has part of you."

He took a deep breath in relief. After a moment, he walked across the room and sat down on the end of the lounge. "That hurt... worse than being away from you. To think that you didn't trust me."

"I'm sorry," she offered and leaned up to touch his arm.

"But you know, why should you trust me? I've been gone so long, and I've changed so much."

"Not that much."

"If I'd thought it would hurt him, Lois..."

"I know."

"The look in your eyes," he said as he faced her, tears filling his own.

Immediately her eyes welled with tears, too. "I'm so sorry."

"I might have been shocked when you told me about him and run off like a fool, but believe me, Lane is part of me. And I'm not talking about my DNA. He's part of me here." And Clark demonstrated by splaying his hand across his chest.

Lois covered her mouth with her hand. To know she'd hurt him that way made her want to die. This was the last thing he needed.

"I \*have\* to drink that damn stuff for a few days. When my powers come back, I'll throw it away and we'll never have to talk about it again." He looked away, rubbing his hands over his knees. "I'd never, ever do anything to put Lane in harm's way."

Lois reached out to smooth his hair back on the side of his head. "I can't believe I made such a big deal out of it."

"I can understand how you felt though." He faced her again. "I wanted to be here with you just as badly as you wanted me here."

"And now?"

"Now I want us to have the same heads."

"You've talked to Lane," she breathed. More than anything she'd been worried for Lane.

"He was in my bed when I got in last night. I told him that you and I had to get in the same head where he's concerned."

"You're right."

"I know it's going to be tough getting used to having me around. You've been Mommy and Daddy's entire life. But, Lois, I want to do this. I want to love him."

"Oh, honey," she whispered.

"We have to talk. And I'm sorry I ran off. I should have stayed."

"Do you think we would have talked this calmly if you'd stayed?"

"Even if we hadn't, at least we'd have been communicating."

"You're right." She stuck out her hand as if to shake. "From

now on we talk.”

Clark took her hand in his. “About everything,” he added, then offered her a smile.

Lois smiled back. “I missed you.”

He pulled her closer, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “I missed you.”

They sat that way for a long time in silence, simply soaking up the other’s presence. Finally Lois spoke. “Where were you?”

“In the Fortress of Solitude,” he told her at once. She had the right to know. That’s the kind of relationship he wanted to have with her. “I fell asleep.”

Slowly she started to laugh. “Guess you were worn out.”

“Jumping across space will do that do you.” They shared another laugh before he reached over and picked up the book she’d had. It was one of his notebooks.

“Number three,” she told him.

“And you still want me?”

“You have no idea,” she mumbled as she pulled away and stood up.

“Where ya’ going?” he asked as he reached out to grab her hand.

“To potty.” And like he’d done to her, she winked at him.

He just shook his head with a sappy grin on his face. A bad day with Lois was certainly better than ten good days without her. It was so good to be home.

\*\*\*

Lois and Clark set out with a picnic lunch hand in hand. They really didn’t have a destination in mind other than somewhere together.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lois began to break the silence.

“About?”

“Us, the future.”

“And?”

“And, when I moved to the farm, it was simply self-preservation. Yes, I longed and prayed for you to come back. When you did, I planned for us to move back to the city and pick up where we left off.”

Clark pulled on her hand to stop her. “We can’t pick up where we left off. Too much has happened.”

“I know. So much more than I’ve thought would. That’s why...” She stopped, looking away.

“Tell me,” he urged.

“The farm is the only home Lane has ever known. And your parents, my parents - they’re here. Then there’s my job.”

“Lois.”

“Yes?”

“I’m not sure if I want to go back to the city, either.”

Her brows rose in surprise. “Really?”

“Really.”

“What about Superman?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that, too.” He started to walk again and she followed. “It’s been a very long time since I’ve been Superman. And there’s so much I’ve dealt with on New Krypton. I’m afraid that might have tainted my view of things where he’s concerned.”

It was Lois that stopped him this time. “Are you saying you don’t want to be Superman again?”

“I’m saying I might want to scale back. The world has apparently done well in my absence. Yeah, I know I’ll be expected to be everybody’s hero, but I have to be able to be my own savior first. Not to mention I have other responsibilities now. I’d really like to be Lane’s dad.”

“But can you turn a deaf ear to this world?”

“I don’t think that would be a problem living on the farm. And I’m not planning on totally disappearing. I’ll still help out with the big stuff.”

“And what will you do on the farm?”

“I thought maybe I’d help Dad. Maybe learn a bit more about farming and business, expand the farm some more. I’d also like to take care of my son as much as possible.”

“You sound like you’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“I have.” He glanced behind him toward a grove of oak trees. “Come on. Let’s set up under that big tree over there.”

She nodded and followed his lead. She’d follow him anywhere. From the sounds of it, she wouldn’t have far to go. Had he really given thought to staying on the farm? Would he be satisfied here once his powers returned? And if he wasn’t satisfied, could she make a life where ever he chose to go?

She watched him spread their blanket and smiled. She would make a life in a yurt if that’s what he wanted. But she really hoped he could be happy here. It was funny how priorities changed.

\*\*\*

Clark leaned back on his outstretched arm, watching a couple of squirrels fighting over a nut. He and Lois had talked, mostly about world events that had taken place in his absence. She told him about a terrorist attack that had taken place in September of the year before. Two planes had crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City. Another had crashed into the Pentagon and another in a field in Pennsylvania. He felt absolutely horrible that so many lives had been taken, stolen from them by a group that felt they should control the world. But if there was one thing he’d learned while he’d been gone, it was his limits. Yes, he could have saved countless lives if he’d been here. However, unless he’d known it was going to happen before time, there was no way he could have stopped those planes from crashing. And even if he could have stopped one, there was certainly no way he could have stopped four.

“You couldn’t have stopped them, Clark.”

“I know,” he said sadly.

“The most you could have hoped for was to help dig out survivors.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, but it didn’t help right now. He still felt awful so many had perished.

“You’d be so proud of the heroes that emerged from this tragedy. Mankind has learned they are stronger than they thought they were.”

“And they’re fighting now?”

“Unfortunately. But what else was there to do?”

Clark sighed and pushed himself up, wrapping his arms around his bent legs. “That’s another lesson I learned the hard way. There are times when that’s simply the only way.”

“It’s a shame, but it’s true,” Lois agreed. “Maybe once your powers are back, you can do something.”

“I won’t step in and try to take over. That would negate all the progress made to this point.”

“I know,” Lois told him. “But maybe you could influence them to find another way.”

“I’ll only offer assistance if I’m asked.”

“Good enough,” she said because she certainly understood what he said. And he was right. If he stepped in, there would be those that took that as a sign they were incapable of taking care of themselves. The attacks had been a dark day in history, but it had also taught a few very valuable lessons. One was that man needed man to survive.

Clark pointed out across the field. “My folks found me right over there.”

“I know. They told me.”

He stood and began walking toward the spot he’d pointed out. “I wonder what they were thinking that day,” he said without looking to see if Lois was behind him. He knew she would be there.

“They probably felt a bit like I do about Lane.”

“I’ve asked myself a million times if they loved me so much,

how in hell could they bind me at birth to someone they'd never met and might never meet. For a race of intelligent people, they were... not very smart." He bent and picked up a rock, then threw it across the field.

He was angry, Lois realized. More than anything, he was angry about what had happened. Would he ever tell her everything? She hoped he would.

Clark turned to her, an expression she couldn't quite discern on his face. Finally he smiled and she felt her entire world brighten.

"What do you say we get our picnic cleaned up and go see if our boy's home yet?" he asked her.

"That sounds like a great idea." She took the hand he offered and moved back toward their blanket to pack up. As they worked together in silence, she decided that whatever he offered, she'd take, because having him home was worth so much more.

\*\*\*

Clark stepped into the hallway from Lane's room. He'd read his son a book and made sure he was tucked in tightly. Instead of heading toward his room, he turned down the hall toward Lois'. They'd already said goodnight, but he needed to see her just one more time before he went to bed.

"Come in," Lois called when she heard the soft rap on her door. "Hey, you," she said when Clark stepped inside. "Something wrong?"

"Not now," Clark said with a grin. "I just wanted to see you again." He leaned back against the closed door and folded his arms across his chest.

"I'm glad," she told him as she climbed onto her bed and folded her legs. "I was just on the phone with my mother."

"And?"

"She wants us to come for lunch tomorrow."

"Sounds fine with me."

"Are you ready for the world?"

"I have to get back into it sometime." He pushed away from the door and went to sit on the chair in front of her vanity. "Is Ellen just now finding out I'm back?" he asked as he perused the items before him.

"No. I called her the other day. She and Daddy understood our need to reconnect."

"Do they know?" he asked without looking away from the items before him.

"Yes," she answered, knowing exactly what he meant. "I confided in them when I was pregnant with Lane. I know it wasn't my secret to tell, but..."

"It's okay," he said as he picked up a particularly interesting item.

Lois blushed when she saw what it was he held.

"Kryptonian women had periods, too," Clark offered as he inspected the tampon in his hand. "But only three times a year. Medical science had advanced to the point that they could control the frequency with hormone injections." He finally put the offending item back down. "They didn't believe that it was very sanitary for women to have one every month."

"It's certainly aggravating," Lois told him, feeling even more heat taint her cheeks.

"I can imagine," he said as he reached for another item. It was Lois' brush. He picked it up and rose to walk over to the bed. "May I?" he asked when he sat down.

"Ah, sure," she answered and turned around to give him access to her head.

"They're a... unemotional race of people," he said after a few strokes. "They would never talk about something like a woman's cycle."

"I honestly didn't think you'd ever do it, either," Lois admitted, the embarrassment again heating her cheeks.

Clark stopped moving the brush. "I hope that we get to the

point where we can talk about everything," he said.

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Me, too, but..."

"But what?" He pulled the brush away from her head, dropping his hands to his lap. "If you can't tell me that you're dying of cramps, how will I know to get you some aspirin?" He said that with a grin, but he was serious.

"I know that." She waved her hands dramatically like he was supposed to understand what she meant.

And apparently he did. He turned her around to face him fully. "I would hope we're way past that stage."

"What stage?"

"That shy, 'everything's embarrassing', first kiss, first time I've belched in front of you stage. You know all those awkward little things you do in private that you don't want anyone to know about. Well, I want us to get past that. I want us to be able to share anything without embarrassment. That includes talking about tampons or Midol. Sheez, Lois, I watched the video earlier of you giving birth."

"That's different! You would have seen that in person if you'd been here."

"And we'd already be past this conversation." He turned her again so that he could continue to brush her hair. "I know we never made it very far in our relationship before, but too much precious time has escaped us. We can't afford to waste another minute obsessing about things so trivial. You're a woman; you have a period. You need things for it. We both have bodily functions and itches, little quirks we'd rather no one knew about. And there will probably be more times that we have to discuss things we're not comfortable with."

He was right; she knew that. Still, to have him talk about it so openly... "You're so..."

"Different?"

"I was thinking... more." She leaned around to see his face again. "When I was growing up, I always dreamed about this wonderful man coming along to sweep me off my feet." She grinned at him. "I never thought one would do that literally." He grinned back. "I dreamed of a man I could talk to, really talk to. Even about bodily functions." She said that with a crinkle of her nose. "I found that with you. We might not have made it to that stage back then, but we would have gotten there."

Clark lifted his hand and reverently caressed her face. "I'm so glad to be home," he whispered.

She closed her eyes to enjoy the feel of his hand on her skin. All too soon, the spell was broken and he began brushing her hair again. He started talking about things on New Krypton. She sighed and happily gave herself over to him.

\*\*\*

Lois rolled over onto her back and opened her eyes to total darkness. She must have fallen asleep while Clark was brushing her hair. For a moment she felt a tinge of embarrassment, but then their conversation came back to her. If she couldn't fall asleep with Clark, then who could she fall asleep with?

He was there, beside her on the bed. She turned her head to look at him. His eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. "Clark?" At first he didn't seem to hear her. "Are you okay?"

Finally he blinked and his eyes met hers in the shadows. "Couldn't sleep?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

He rolled to face her and lifted his hand to smooth the hair back away from her face. "Will you marry me?"

"Absolutely," she said without a second's hesitation.

"I intend to ask you again when I can propose properly."

"Is that why you were lying awake staring at the ceiling?"

He moved his hand down her neck and over her shoulder. "I woke up because I had another nightmare."

"Want to talk about it?"

He sighed, then gently pushed her back so he could lay his

head on her stomach. She began to idly play with his hair as he started to talk. "Right before the end of the fighting came, Nor took a village hostage. He raped dozens of woman and young girls." Her hands stilled briefly. "I'd reached my limits with Council and insisted I lead the raid on the village. The Council made the decision that the... lives of countless people were more important than those of the ones in that village. They'd made the decision to sacrifice them for the good of the world."

Lois wanted to cry out because she knew how much pain that decision had cost her gentle boy scout. He'd probably fought it tooth and nail, arguing feverishly for the lives of innocent people, even if it was just one. Instead, she continued to smooth her hands through his hair to offer him comfort as well as the courage to continue.

"Nor was supposed to be inside the main hall in the center of town. We entered the building, unobstructed, to find six little girls lying naked in their own blood. They'd been repeatedly raped, beaten, and eventually their throats had been slashed." He reached out to squeeze her arm. "I heard the shouting, then Ching grabbed me. I didn't realize what had happened until I'd hit the ground. We'd just managed to get out before the building blew up."

An involuntary gasp escaped Lois' lips before she could stop it. She'd come so close to losing him and would have never even known it.

"We were thirty strong when we went in. Ten remained afterwards. Ching was the one who found Nor. We began door to door searches. He was there, ravaging a poor woman in front of her kids. So sure that we'd die in his trap, he'd taken the time to do that!" He spat the last words and rolled back over on his back.

He was upset. Lois watched his chest rise and fall heavily as he tried to calm himself. She remained quiet; he needed to get this out.

"How does a man do that?" Clark pushed himself up to lean against the headboard. "Those kids didn't talk for a year. Rape was not something that happened on New Krypton. With wives and concubines, men didn't need to rape anyone."

"Concubines?" Lois asked before she could stop herself. She, too, sat up.

"Yeah. Real bright race of people, huh?" He ran a hand through his hair. "They're okay now, the kids. At least as okay as one can be after seeing something like that. The woman..." He stared off across the room. "She reminded me of you. She had incredible strength. Never concentrated on herself, just fought to get her kids better. And she did it while she carried that monster's baby."

"Oh, God!" Lois covered her mouth with her hand. That poor woman.

"Her husband was killed during the war, so he never knew. And through all of that, she was a rock." He half turned to Lois. "That's what woke me up. She reminded me of you. I can imagine you fighting for Lane like that."

"How about the baby?"

"She kept it, Lois. A beautiful little brown haired girl. I dubbed her nobility on her second birthday just before I left."

"I don't think I could have ever been that strong," Lois said softly.

"I hope we never have to find out." He leaned forward to kiss her forehead, then hugged her close.

They sat in silence for a while, just soaking up the emotions rolling off each other in waves. "I don't mean to sound like I'm questioning why you asked me to marry you, but how did you go from that village to asking me to be your wife?"

He smiled before leaning her back to see her face. "Thinking of you brought me out of that nightmare. But not before I woke up. So I lay here in the dark listening to you sleep and letting my mind fill with you. Like it wasn't full enough," he said with a

snort of laughter. "My mind just kind of wondered naturally to our future. And when you spoke..." His hand lifted hers, carefully opening it against his. Hers was small in comparison. Her soft skin contrasted with his. "I remember the first time our hands were against each other like this. I was thinking 'how can these small, delicate hands be so strong?'" He carefully wrapped his fingers around hers and pulled her hand to his chest. "I can't wait to see this finger..." He demonstrated which one by gently squeezing it between two of his. "... with a band of gold around it."

Lois smiled tearfully. "I can't wait to wear it." She leaned into the hug he offered, completely content for the first time in years.

Clark held her that way for a moment before he shifted them to lie back down. They lay together, clinging to one another. "Don't ever let me go," he whispered some time later.

"Never," she answered, but to deaf ears. He'd uttered that command in his sleep. Would he ever heal from all the wounds caused by his time on another planet?

\*\*\*

"Are you sure?" Lane asked his father.

"I'm positive," Clark answered.

Lois continued to listen to them from the kitchen. She was cleaning up after breakfast because Martha had left for town. Her soon to be mother-in-law was preparing for an art show at the end of the week. Jonathan was off tending to the cattle, and her two favorite men had drifted to the den earlier. She wasn't sure what they were doing, but they sounded like they were having fun.

"Mom, are you done? We're ready to go."

They were headed in to town to see Ellen and Sam. Lane loved visiting his grandparents; it meant he could swim. And he was definitely ready, she noted when she stepped into the other room. He was wearing his swim trunks and flip flops.

"We have to stop at Archie's first. Dad needs some trunks."

Clark shrugged sheepishly. "I, ah, could actually use a few other things. I only have that one pair of jeans that fit. Unless you want me to wear that black suit," he teased.

"We'll discuss that one later," she told him, conveying her meaning in the heated look she gave him. "But the other things we can get."

He nodded as he gathered up the bag she'd packed and waited by the door for her to grab everything she needed. She stopped in front of him because she'd noticed his expression had changed.

"Okay, let's have it."

"Have what?"

"Something's wrong. You didn't take that comment I made back there and run with it." She folded her arms across her chest, daring him to deny that something was on his mind.

"I don't like the idea of having to ask you to buy me clothes."

"Are you uncomfortable with me taking care of you?"

"Not exactly that, just..." He waved his hands in frustration.

"Look, I was Lord of all for six years. I snapped my fingers and things appeared."

"And asking me for things reminds you of that?"

"A little, yes."

Lois relaxed her stance. "I understand that, but how will you ever be comfortable on the farm? It's not like you'll have a regular paycheck or a very big one either."

"But I'll be able to feel like I'm contributing."

She reached out to place her hand on his chest. "Don't you realize how much you're contributing just by being here?"

Her words were so soft he almost missed what she said.

"Lois," he whispered, feeling every emotion pouring from her.

Lane had watched his parents with wide eyes, wondering if they'd argue and get mad again. He wasn't exactly sure what this was, but he continued to watch them in silence.

Lois had to force herself to concentrate or they'd never get out the door. She cleared her throat as she pulled her hand away from Clark's chest. "I think we'll both be happy," she managed as she looked down at Lane. "Honey, if we're going in Archie's, you need to put on a shirt."

"Got it." The boy held up the item with a grin. She ruffled his hair as he slipped it over his head.

"Of course, I'm happy," Clark began.

"That's not what I meant. Well, it is, but... Anyway, you'll be contributing. Your bank account is heavier than mine."

"What?"

"Your mom, as your power of attorney, rolled everything in your checking account over into your savings account. Perry kept you on the payroll at the Planet for the entire two years he was allowed to. \*And\* he managed to get you a healthy bonus. Martha, with the help of my father and yours, invested some of that money. The returns have been tremendous."

Clark's brows furrowed. "What?"

"Clark, you're a very wealthy man."

"Then could I have a new game?" came the voice of their son.

Both faced him, then started to laugh. Clark reached down to lift Lane up in his arms. "I think we have a wise guy, Mom." Lane began to giggle as his father tickled his ribs. The trio talked happily as they made their way outside so they could get to town.

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Other than the new construction, things in Smallville hadn't really changed all that much, Clark noticed, much to his relief. He hadn't been sure what he'd find in town, but was glad he still recognized it. His mother's gallery was a brightly colored building just two doors down from Maisy's diner. There were a few other new businesses as well, though the old favorites seemed to still be the anchor.

Jensen's Farm Supply still occupied the end of Taylor Street. It stretched out for the entire block. Old man Jensen stood on the platform outside talking with a customer, just like he'd always done. Archie's was still the same, too. The clothing store had an old time feel when you walked in the door, but you could find some of the latest styles in fashion and footwear. Clark picked out a swim suit, new underwear and socks, a couple shirts, and some new jeans. He and Lane also bought matching sneakers, which tickled the boy to death.

Lois glanced over at Clark. He'd been rather quiet since they'd gotten to town. He'd been sociable enough with Archie and his wife, and he'd held up his end of the conversation with her and Lane. He just seemed reserved and distant. He turned to her and smiled.

"Still Smallville," she assured him, pretty sure what had caused his melancholy.

"Still Smallville," he agreed as he glanced back out the window.

"Ready?" Lois asked as she maneuvered the car into her parents' driveway.

"Ready." He lifted her hand and kissed the back before climbing out.

Lane was already running around back. "Nana! Doc!"

"Doc?" Clark asked as he waited for Lois to come around to join him.

"He loves that Dad's a doctor and never called him anything but Doc." She shrugged. They'd never made a big deal out of what Lane called her father. Sam didn't mind, so everything was fine.

Clark took a breath and they walked hand in hand around to the back of the house. Lane was talking with Sam, who'd knelt to be eye level with his grandson. Ellen was busily arranging plates on the table beside the grill. She spotted them first.

"Hey, you two!" She approached with open arms, taking

Clark by surprise when she immediately folded him into a hug. "I'm so glad you're home, son," she whispered in his ear.

He'd promised himself he'd hold it together. And he tried, really tried. But when Ellen choked back a sob, he felt his eyes begin to sting.

Ellen leaned back to look at him. "You look wonderful. Those others seemed to have taken care of you."

"They didn't have a choice," Clark told her.

"Of course not," Ellen said as she reached up to wipe under his eyes with her thumbs. "They were afraid my daughter would whip their a..."

"Mother!"

She patted Clark's face with a wide grin. "I'm glad to have you back so we can take care of you ourselves."

"It's good to be back," he said with a smile. This was not the Ellen Lane he remembered. Where had this woman come from? She was a lot like his mother. Had Smallville rubbed off on her that much? Or was it Martha?

Lane, he decided when she moved away so Sam could greet him. The tender way Ellen touched his son told him that little boy had worked miracles just by existing.

"It sure is good to see you," Sam offered with an outstretched hand.

"It's good to be seen," Clark returned as he shook the other man's hand.

Sam just smiled at him for a moment before pulling Clark forward into a hug. "My princess is complete again," he said when he drew back. "And my boy has his daddy. What do you think of that boy?"

Clark's eyes found Lane's and they shared a smile. "I think that boy is priceless, Mr. Lane."

"Mr. Lane! Can that nonsense. You can call me Sam or Doc or even Dad," he told him as he threw an arm around Clark's shoulders and guided him over to the grill. "Now, that girl of mine said we had to give you a few days, but as a medical professional I know that the best way to help someone heal is to thrust them into familiar things." They stopped in front of the grill, and he lifted a pair of tongs. "What do you say we see if we can sear these steaks?"

"You would probably think I was mad if I kissed you right now, but Doc, you don't know how good it feels to be asked to do something so mundane," Clark told Sam as he took the tongs.

Sam paused, his eyes telling Clark that he completely understood or at least accepted what his future son-in-law felt. He pulled his arm from around Clark's shoulders and dug around in the cooler for a couple of beers. He opened one and held it out to the man beside him. When they both had one, Sam lifted his bottle up. "Here's to family. Family that's all together."

"Where they belong," added Ellen who held up her own bottle, in her case, soda. She and Lois both joined in on toasting being back together again.

"I'll drink to that," Clark said as he touched his bottle to everyone else's. Yes, it was great to be back where he belonged.

\*\*\*

"Are you sure we can't just fool around a little?" Clark asked as Lois guided him toward his room. They'd stayed at her parents' house throughout the afternoon and into the night. Martha and Jonathan had joined them for dinner, and they'd all enjoyed a swim. In Clark and Lane's case, they'd enjoyed several swims. Clark had been pleased that Lane could swim so well and was even happier to play the day away.

They'd all talked, about everything but Clark's trip, everyone apparently understanding his need to escape those demons for a while. Clark had helped Sam cook both meals. And he'd helped her father celebrate a few too many toasts. Without his powers, Clark had managed to get a bit tipsy. Lois was almost flustered from trying to get him home and in bed. Lane had stayed with his

grandparents in town, to her relief. She wasn't sure if she could have dealt with both of them.

"I'm sure," she told him as she pulled his shirt over his head.

"How about tomorrow?"

She couldn't help but chuckle at his sappy smile. "If you'll be a good boy and get in bed, we'll play around tomorrow."

"Promise?" he asked, the enthusiasm of a child bubbling over.

"I promise." And she almost sighed aloud when he climbed into bed. Although she wanted him to sleep with her, there was no way she would survive that. He'd shamelessly talked about how he'd like to make love to her the entire trip from town. To make it worse, his hands had roamed freely. But there was no way she'd take advantage of this situation. When they made love again, she wanted them both to remember it the next day.

Hell, she'd remember it the \*rest\* of her days.

"Love you," Clark mumbled through his haze. He'd already begun to drift off.

"I love you," she told him, though she doubted he'd heard it. She smoothed his hair back on his head. He'd probably needed the slight release the alcohol had given him today. There was no way she'd ever begrudge him an escape. Besides, it was so good to see him let loose a bit. The Clark she remembered had always been so reserved and polite. Yes, she'd fallen in love with that man, but as she'd told him, she was glad he was... more.

She pressed her lips to his temple, then straightened and headed for her room.

\*\*\*

Clark admired the ring he held as he sipped his coffee. He'd bought an engagement ring for Lois almost before they'd been dating years ago. He'd kept that ring, safely tucked inside his suit where it had hung on a chain around his neck, as safe as his love for her. He set down his cup and picked up the other ring on the table. It was a perfect golden circle. The gold was almost the color of bronze because it was from New Krypton. It was the band intended to be worn by his wife. Zara had given it to him on their wedding night. She hadn't worn it, knowing where his heart truly lay. She'd chosen another ring instead so that he could some day bring this one back to the one who'd stolen his heart.

"Clark?"

He looked up at his mother. "Hi, Mom."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just couldn't sleep."

"I'll make a little more coffee," she offered before sitting down beside him. "Those are beautiful," she told him of the rings.

"I've been trying to figure out the perfect way to propose."

"I think Lois would like a simple 'will you marry me?'"

Clark laughed softly. "I've already done that." At his mother's raised brows, he clarified, "I asked her yesterday."

"Then just give it to her."

"She deserves something special, something more."

Martha reached out to take the wedding band so she could get a better look. "This is very beautiful."

"My birth father gave it to Zara's father. It was supposed to be hers. She wouldn't wear it, said it belonged to Lois." Clark fingered the ring in his mother's hand.

"She sounds like a smart girl."

"She is." Clark looked away, lost in a place somewhere other than the kitchen. "Mom, we never... she and I... never..." He gestured with his hands.

"Slept together?"

"Well..." He looked down at the cup between his hands as if it could help him explain this. "We never consummated our marriage, at least not completely."

"Clark, you don't have to tell me this. You should be telling Lois."

"I've told her most of it. Anyway, Zara and I, we kissed and explored a bit. A bit more than I like to admit. Lois knows about that. I told her everything that happened, how I felt, how far we went."

"But there's more?"

"The night Nor was killed... she came to my chamber. We talked and I broke down. I confessed my loneliness, my fears, and I expressed my anger because I wasn't the one that killed Nor."

Martha gasped slightly, but didn't speak.

"She listened and she helped me understand that what I felt was natural and that it was okay." Clark looked up at his mother. "That it was human. She held me while I cried and she continued to hold me all night. A new level of friendship was achieved that night. The next day she confessed a few things to me and we set out to make some changes."

His mom looked at him closely, realizing immediately that something was wrong. "What is it, son?"

"How do I tell Lois that Zara held me like that? Sex is one thing. That doesn't take a single emotion. But what we shared that night, it was very emotional."

"Just tell her. I have a feeling Lois will understand."

"You don't know how many times I wished I hadn't gone."

"We can't change the past, Clark. We can only accept things and try to make a better future. You need to let it all go. There's a little boy that needs you now. You can't help take care of him if you're too busy sulking about the past. And Lois will understand."

"I hope you're right." He lifted the wedding band again. "There's no way she can wear this until she knows and is okay with it."

"Why don't you go back up and see if she's awake?" His mother gathered up the rings. "I'll take care of these for you."

He reached up to cup her cheek. "Have I told you that I love you?"

"Yeah, but I like hearing it."

Leaning to place a kiss on her forehead, he couldn't help but be thankful this woman had found him in that field all those years ago. Sometimes he wondered if Jor-El had known exactly where to send him.

\*\*\*

His mom had been right; Lois was awake. She'd showered and was brushing her hair. "Hey," she told him when he walked in.

"Hey." He went over to sit down on the chair at the end of her bed, watching her pull the brush through her hair.

"More nightmares?"

"Something like that," he answered as he stood and began to pace.

She stopped, placed her brush on the vanity, and turned to wait for him to continue. There was something on his mind and apparently it was pretty serious.

"Lois," he began as he shoved a hand through his hair. "You never said how you felt about the things I told you happened with Zara."

"I know about the other night you spent with her," she told him softly.

He stopped and looked up at her.

"I read about it last night." She held up another of his notebooks. "I won't lie to you. I was a little hurt when you first told me about the things you shared with her. And when I read about how much she'd meant to you that night..." She looked down at the notebook in her hands. "I asked myself what I'd have done in your shoes, in hers. We'd never made promises..."

"It still doesn't make me feel better."

"Nor did it make me feel better when I first read it. I didn't exactly sit at home the entire time you were gone. I've dated a



time or two because I was lonely.”

“And that’s okay,” he said as he stepped toward her.

“But my heart was always with you, so there was never anything but a couple of dinners with some nice guys.” She placed the notebook on the vanity before continuing. “Actually, I’m grateful to Zara. If it hadn’t been for her, you might not have ever been able to come home to me.”

Clark dropped his head, pain piercing his heart over how he felt. “I, ah, I... There’s part of me that loved her,” he said quietly.

“I know.” She waited until he looked back up at her. “She sent you back to where she knew you needed to be. That takes a great love. I wouldn’t have been able to do that. I’d have been selfish and kept you for myself.”

“If I’d stayed...”

“I know,” she said with tear-filled eyes. She knew. If he’d stayed, he would have eventually become Zara’s husband. Both might have lost their hearts to someone else, but they would have dealt with their new destiny. They would have loved one another as passionately and as completely as their wounded hearts would have allowed them to.

“I never \*fell\* in love with her, not like I did with you.”

Lois rose and approached him. “I know,” she said again. Not only did she know, she understood. “There’s part of me that loves Zara. She gave you back to me.” She rubbed his face, her thumb stroking the soft skin under his right eye.

He stared into her eyes, searching for anything that would tell him she might have doubts about them being together. He only found love - a little deeper than was there before. He lifted his hand to cup her face. “How did I ever get lucky enough to find you?”

“I’m only glad you decided to come home.” She’d read that, too. How he’d come to the realization that he’d never be the same again without her.

Clark pulled her against him for a hug, allowing her to wrap around his very soul. After a moment, he drew back and kissed her softly. “I’m glad you decided that you wanted me to be home,” he told her.

“There was never anywhere I wanted you to be more than with me.”

“I know.” He wrapped his arms around her loosely. “You don’t know how much I regret pushing you away.”

“That was another time, Clark. We can’t keep dwelling on that.”

“I know.” His hands roamed up and down her back. “I seem to remember somebody telling me we could fool around a little today,” he said with a sly grin.

“You remember that?” she asked with wide eyes.

“I felt good, but I was a long way from being drunk.”

Leaning down, he trailed a few kisses down her neck.

She tilted her head to give him better access, wondering just why it was they were waiting to reunite physically.

“Clark!”

He growled and lifted his head at the sound of his father’s call. “Yeah, Dad?” A light tap sounded on Lois’ door. “It’s open.”

Jonathan opened the door, cautiously sticking his head in. “I didn’t mean to disturb you two.”

“It’s okay, Dad. I was about to ravish Lois, but it can wait.”

He pulled away from her to face his dad, but kept one arm around her shoulders.

His dad chuckled softly. “Well, now, I wouldn’t dare ruin a man’s plans.” He and Clark shared a laugh, but Lois just smacked Clark on his arm. “I was talking to Sam yesterday and well... I could use some help this morning.”

Clark’s face lit up like a child receiving a new toy. “Just give me a second to get dressed.” He kissed Lois quickly. “Do you mind?”

“No, go help your dad.”

“Thanks, baby. I’ll see you at lunch.” And he was gone.

Jonathan turned back to Lois after watching Clark practically run from the room. “If I’d known asking him to help would do that to him, I’d have asked the day he came back.”

Lois approached the older man, reaching out to take his arm as they made their way toward the stairs. “He told me he wants to feel like he’s contributing.”

“Yeah, that’s what Sam said.”

“Do you know he’s planning on asking you if he can stay on here to help out?”

“I got that impression from my conversation with your father.” They stopped at the top of the landing. “Do you think he’ll be happy here?”

“I’m not sure he’ll be happy anywhere, but here. He’s not the same man, and I just don’t see the city or the fast pace of journalism ever keeping him content again.”

“Neither do I,” came the voice of the man they were discussing.

“Sorry, boy. We didn’t mean to talk about you behind your back,” his dad told him.

“It’s okay.” Clark lifted his hand to rub his dad’s shoulder. “So, how about it? Do you think you could use another pair of hands around here all the time?”

“Clark, you know I’ve always wanted to be able to leave my farm to you. And I’ve missed working alongside you ever since you left for college. But...”

“I knew there was a but,” he moaned.

“I only want you to help in the mornings for at least the next two weeks. The afternoons are reserved for this here beautiful lady and your son. You still need to get to know them. Soon enough Lois will go back to work and Lane will be in school. We can work then.”

“And when my powers come back, things will become a whole lot easier for you,” Clark told him.

“Now that I won’t mind. My old bones are really starting to tell my age.” They all chuckled. “I don’t want you here just to be a work horse. I want you to learn the business.”

Clark shared a knowing look with Lois. “I told Lois the same thing.”

“Then I guess I have myself a partner,” Jonathan said as he stuck out his hand to his son.

“I guess you do,” Clark agreed as he took the hand offered.

“Welcome home, son.” Jonathan smiled softly, then began his trip back down the stairs. “Get a move on! Breakfast is getting cold and daylight’s a-wasting!”

Clark laughed softly. “I sure have missed him,” he told Lois.

“He’s missed you, too.”

“Come on. I’ll buy you breakfast.”

“You’re on, farmboy.”

He just shook his head with a grin on his face as they headed for the kitchen. He’d dearly missed this woman.

\*\*\*\*

Lois looked up to watch Clark across the room. He’d put Lane to bed earlier and now he was just sitting there staring unseeingly at the television. He did a lot of that. He’d shared stories about his time on New Krypton. Horror stories in her opinion. She’d held him when he’d cried. She’d laughed with him. She’d listened, she’d read his notebooks, and she’d watched. For over a week she’d mostly watched him. He was so different... quiet now.

He’d started helping his dad in the mornings a few days ago, and the work had done wonders for his outlook. There was a new kick in his step that hadn’t been there before. There was also a different look on his face.

In the afternoons, he’d take her and Lane swimming at her folks, fishing at one of the ponds, exploring the farm, or they’d stay in and play games. Mostly there was a lot of talking and a lot

of laughing. It was so good to have him home.

Suddenly he turned and looked at her. "Let's go flying."

"Your powers are back?" she asked in surprise. That was another thing he hadn't mentioned. And she hadn't asked. She hadn't asked anything of him. He'd talk when he was ready.

He stood and approached her. "Come on." He offered her his hand and grinned when she automatically took it. His parents smiled at one another as the couple stepped onto the porch.

Clark led her out into the grass and turned to grasp her sides. "Wonder if this is like riding a bike?"

"Should I be worried?" Lois asked playfully.

"Not a bit," he replied and lifted them into the air.

Lois gasped slightly and drew just bit closer to him.

"Since I've been back I've felt... I don't know... like something was wrong," he began as he moved them under the blanket of stars. "Now I know what it was. I missed being... me."

Tears filled her eyes as she understood exactly what he meant.

"I've been here in body only. But I think I'm ready to actually \*be\* home." He grinned brightly. "Hold on." And with that, he tucked Lois against his side and they sliced through the night air.

\*\*\*

"That was so great," Lois said excitedly as they tiptoed into their room. Clark had moved his things into her room earlier that day, refusing to sleep alone any longer. Nearly every night he'd wake and come to her. And he'd been the perfect gentleman, simply holding her as they would lie in bed at night. They'd often talk into the early hours of morning. He'd sleep deeply, but just as often he was restless. Nightmares of his time on New Krypton refused to release their handle on him.

A wide smile graced his lips, his body positively humming with life. He'd felt his powers returning a couple of days ago, although the power of flight escaped him until today.

Lois continued to rattle on about their flight while she gathered her clothes to change for bed. When she turned, she had to stifle a gasp. Clark had taken off his shirt and an almost predatory look was on his face.

"Clark?"

"Why don't you ever kiss me, Lois?" he asked, taking her by surprise.

"What? I kiss you all the time."

"No," he started as he moved toward her. "You accept my kisses."

"I kiss you back," she defended herself.

"You haven't initiated the first kiss. It's not often you touch me unless I've touched you first." He'd made it to her, his face just inches from hers.

"You're right," Lois admitted shamefully. "I haven't, have I?"

"Nope," he replied with a shake of his head.

"I wanted to give you time to adjust."

"\*You\* needed time to adjust. If it had been up to me, we'd have made love the first day... and every day since."

Is that why she hadn't made any advances? Had she needed time?

"It's okay, honey," he told her as he lifted a hand to gently cup her face. "I know it's been a lot to deal with."

She felt like kicking herself. This man, who'd learned about a son he never knew, who'd patiently gotten to know that boy over the past week, he was telling her he understood. Suddenly it made no sense at all to waste another second.

Lois dropped her clothes and thrust herself into Clark's arms. They kissed frantically, as if to devour the other. She vaguely heard material ripping. Who cared?!

Not another second, she thought as she worked to help rip Clark of his clothes.

He wasn't sure how they'd ended up on the bed, clothes part

way off, but he wasn't about to stop now.

A cold sweat drenched his head as he gave himself over to this woman once again.

Home! He was finally home!

"That was..." He heaved to catch his breath.

"Wow!" she finished.

"I was thinking... quick." He shifted, pulling away from her.

"What did you expect?" She still couldn't move.

"I don't know," he said as he pulled his clothes off completely. "Something a little more..." He closed his eyes as he shifted his body over hers again.

"More?" she finished for him with a contented sigh.

"Yeah," he agreed as he leaned to capture her lips in a kiss.

"You know... this might..." he began between kisses. "...ah... not be... ooo..." He sucked in a sharp breath when she nibbled on his neck. "... the best...ah, ah, time... to mention it..." He kissed the side of her neck. "But we haven't taken precautions... again."

A brief panic rushed through Lois, but then she smiled. Would it be so bad if they created another baby? "Don't stop," she replied.

They'd discuss birth control later, Clark thought as her tongue slipped into his mouth. Much, much later. There had to be worse things than Lois becoming pregnant again.

\*\*\*

Clark lay with his arm across his forehead, his body spent. He and Lois had made love three times since entering their room. It had been even better than he'd remembered. He glanced over at her. She was staring at the ceiling, a look of pure satisfaction on her face.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I am now," she told him as she rolled over to look at him.

"That was better than I remember."

He chuckled softly. "I was just thinking the same thing." He rolled so they were face to face. "Let's start planning our wedding tomorrow."

"I thought you were going to propose properly."

"I am. Our folks are keeping Lane over the weekend and you and I are going away."

"We are?"

"Yep. I wanted to wait until my powers were back because I plan on flying us to a little place in the Caribbean."

"That sounds sinful," she told him with a grin.

"You have no idea," he said as he reached out to trail his hand over her hip, instantly reminded of another time he'd done the same thing. He leaned over to place a gentle kiss on her lips.

"The cabana's on the beach, fully stocked, very private." Another soft kiss.

"I should shower."

Lois blinked in surprise when she found herself pinned against the wall in the shower, a warm spray cascading down on them as Clark held his mouth a mere breath away from hers.

"Tell me yes, Lois. I want you."

Yes, they'd made love several times that first night, in several different positions and places. But she'd never seen this look on his face. He looked like an animal about to pounce his prey.

"Yes, oh, God, yes, Clark!" She breathed and wrapped her arms around his neck as he devoured her in the most incredible kiss yet.

He was invading her senses like nothing ever had, not even the previous times they'd made love. They'd come full circle; he claimed her and she'd claimed him. They were truly part of one another.

"That was..." he panted.

"I know."

They stared at one another in disbelief. They'd just shared themselves on an almost cosmic level, neither quite believing what had just happened between them.

Her hand lifted to cup his face. "My beautiful super man."  
 "My beautiful Lois," he replied before he leaned to kiss her tenderly. "I love you so much," he told her as he folded her into a hug.

"And I love you," she whispered, tears stinging her eyes. If she'd thought this man was vital to her survival before, she'd been sadly mistaken.

\*\*\*

"You're sure I can't come?" Lane asked as he stared wide eyed at Clark.

"We've had this talk, son."

"I know. I just..." He looked down to keep his dad from seeing the tears in his eyes. He just hated to see his dad leave at all.

Clark reached out and lifted his boy's chin so he could see his eyes. He hated to leave Lane, but he and Lois needed this time together. "How about a short flight before I go?"

"Really?" His face brightened a bit. He'd almost forgotten Clark had said his powers were back. Both his parents had been planning this trip most of the day. He knew they needed alone time, but it didn't make him feel any better.

"Really." Clark smiled brightly as he lifted his son into his arms. "Hey, Lois!" She was still upstairs gathering her things.

"Yeah?"

He waited for her to appear at the top of the stairs. "I'm taking Lane for a short flight."

"Okay." She was thrilled for her son, remembering the first time she'd flown with Superman.

Clark took Lane outside. "Hold on. We'll have to shoot straight up pretty fast. And we'll travel quickly until we reach an area where it'll be safe."

"Where no one will see us?"

"I'm sorry, son, but if others found out..."

"I know, Daddy. I'll hang on tight." He wrapped his arms around his dad's neck. "Ready!"

"Here we go!" The duo shot into the air and headed west. It wasn't until they were well out over the Pacific Ocean that he slowed down.

Lane looked around him in wonder. His mom had told him stories of flying with his dad, but to do it was even better. "This is great!"

"Out of all the things I can do, I enjoy this the most."

"I thought you enjoyed being my daddy the most."

Clark stopped in mid-air, looking at his son with a serious expression. "Being your daddy is like breathing, Lane. I wouldn't survive without you. We have a lot of time to make up for, but never doubt that you're the \*best\* thing I've ever done."

The little boy smiled bright enough to light the world. He sure loved this man. "Show me more!"

With that, Clark once again began to move them through the sky.

\*\*\*

It was nearly an hour before Clark and Lane returned to the farm. They landed softly near the back door.

"Thanks, Dad. That was great!"

"We'll go again when Mom and I get back."

"Do you think I'll be able to fly like you?"

Clark stared at him. He'd theoretically known that was possible, yet he'd never given it much thought. Did he want Lane to fly? Part of him did, wanted him to experience the joy he had the first time he'd crossed the sky. But another part wanted nothing more than for Lane to be just a normal kid, then an even more normal adult. He knelt in front of the boy and reached out to take his hand. "Maybe you will. We just don't know. But if you do, I'll be right here to help you."

"I know, Dad."

"You're a good kid," Clark told him and reached out to ruffle

his hair.

"You're a good dad," Lane replied before he held up his hand, indicating he wanted a high five.

Clark didn't disappoint. Their hands slapped together with a loud clap.

"I'm ready, Clark," Lois called from the kitchen.

"Well," Clark said.

"Guess you have to go."

"Yeah." He just looked at his son. This was harder than he thought it would be.

Lane closed the gap and hugged him as hard as he could. Clark wrapped his arms around his son even as overwhelming love wrapped itself around his heart.

"I love you, Lane," Clark whispered after a moment.

The boy pulled back to look at his dad. That was the first time he'd said that to him. His small hand came up to cover Clark's large cheek. "I love you, Daddy." And he leaned forward to kiss his father's lips.

Clark was stunned. He'd wanted to show Lane a lot more affection but wasn't really sure how the boy would take it. He lifted both hands to cup his son's small head when the child pulled back. "Do you know how much you mean to your daddy?"

"You mean a lot to me," Lane told him. "Come right back here on Monday."

Pulling the boy to him for another hug, Clark assured him, "Right back here."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Lane drew back to smile at him. "Will you bring me something?"

"Absolutely!" Clark placed another kiss on his son's lips before he rose to his feet. For the first time he noticed Lois standing on the porch. She wiped away tears before she pointed a thumb behind her.

"Bag's ready. Packed light just like you wanted."

"Okay." Clark looked back down at Lane. "Take care of my folks for me."

"I'm your man!" Lane ran up the stairs to stand just outside the screen door, beside his mother. "Take care of my daddy," he told his mom. "And bring him back to me."

"Oh, honey. He'll be back." Lois leaned to place a kiss on his forehead. "Love you."

"Love you," the boy replied before he pushed her toward the stairs. "Go on. Have fun."

"See you on Monday."

"Kay!"

Lois walked out to where Clark stood. He disappeared for a brief moment before he was back.

"Took our bags out," he answered the question in her eyes. She nodded and wrapped her arms around his neck. He looked over at Lane again. With a wave, they were gone.

\*\*\*

Beautiful was the only word to describe the place Clark had brought them to. Their cabana was nestled in a sparse group of vegetation, no more than fifty yards from the ocean. Clark had told her that when the tide was in, the water was only a few feet from the door. She supposed that was why the small building sat atop stilts.

He'd indeed made sure the place was stocked. They had enough food for a week! There was fresh food as well as packaged staples.

Their home for the next two days consisted of just one large room. There was no kitchen, but a refrigerator kept items from spoiling. The covered porch held a very nice grill and there was a cabinet with dishes. And more than enough food to keep them from starving, she decided.

A large bed sat along the back wall, facing a wall of windows

so that they'd be able to truly appreciate the rolling waves. Only a half wall separated the sleeping area from the bath area. If she'd had any reservations around Clark, they'd all be dispelled this weekend.

They'd put their things away and decided to walk along the beach. They were quite some distance from another cabana and on the opposite side of the island from the small village. It was part of a chain, Lois had discovered as she and Clark talked about the island, on their walk. He'd discovered it years before he'd met her, while he was traveling. And he'd waited until the day there was someone special enough in his life to bring back.

"We should have made good on our promise," Lois said to break the short silence that had overtaken them.

"What?" he asked, not sure what she meant.

"We'd said we'd come to paradise to write our memoirs. Remember?"

He did remember their long-ago conversation. They'd said things, mostly to have something to say at the time. What he wouldn't give to have that chance again? They would, indeed, shut themselves away from the world.

"So many..."

"Don't say it, Lois," he interrupted her. She'd been about to say regrets. It was entirely too late for those now. They were building a new life... together, and they were on the brink of the happiness they'd denied themselves before. He wouldn't make those mistakes again.

"You're right." She grinned at him, content to move forward. They continued to walk for a few minutes before Clark broke the silence.

"I wanted to ask you something," Clark said after several hundred yards along the pristine white sand.

"You can ask me anything," Lois assured him.

"Would it be okay if I took Lane on a trip before school starts?"

"You can take Lane anywhere... except New Krypton."

Clark chuckled softly. "That's the last place I want him to go. I was thinking maybe a camping trip or field hopping."

"Field hopping?"

"A trip to several professional baseball fields. My dad and I did that when I was ten. I'll never forget it."

"I think a trip alone would be wonderful for you two."

"Of course, I'd have to get my driver's license again. We'll fly some... a lot, but I want that connection from being cooped up in the car together. Gives us a lot of time to talk."

Lois stopped, forcing Clark to as well. "That's a great idea."

"I think he'll enjoy it."

"I think his father will enjoy it," Lois told him with a sly smile.

"Yeah. I will." He leaned to kiss her. "I know something else I'll enjoy." Her giggles could be heard as Clark leaned to nuzzle his face against her neck and tickle her ribs. She pushed away from him and started to run down the beach. Clark shook his head and ran after her. How had he ever survived all those days without her?

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Clark came up behind Lois where she sat brushing her hair. He gently removed the item from her hand and leaned over to kiss her neck. "Make love to me, Lois," he whispered.

She could get used to that, she thought as she stood and wrapped her arms around Clark's neck. He'd said that to her more than once this weekend, but every time moved her beyond belief.

Slowly, she took the lead in their encounter. Sure, steady hands moved over hard muscle as she took him to heights he'd once thought he'd never reach again. Together, they found their way home at long last.

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They'd spent two entire days making love, but Lois still found it hard to keep her hands off of Clark on the flight back home. She'd fully expected him to propose sometime over the weekend, but he hadn't. In fact, he'd talked about their wedding but not one mention of his 'proper' proposal or an engagement ring. She'd begun to wonder if maybe she should buck tradition and offer him a ring.

"Clark, this isn't the way home," she pointed out when she noticed an unfamiliar part of the country stretch out before them.

"I know," was all he said as he continued his little detour.

They landed on the roof of the Daily Planet in Metropolis and he set her down on her feet.

"What are we doing here?"

"You'll see." He took her hand and together they made their way down the stairs to the elevator. When the doors opened to the newsroom floor, the commotion stopped and everyone began to clap.

"Clark?"

He didn't say a word, just led her down to where Perry was standing. For the first time she noticed that everyone was there. Her folks, his parents, Alice, Lane and...

"Jimmy!"

"Lois!" The young man swung her up into his arms. "Ah, man, it's so good to see you," he told her when he drew back to look at her.

"It's good to see you, too." Her eyes swept his body. "You look fantastic!"

"So do you. And a mommy!" Jimmy glanced over at Lane.

"He's gorgeous. Looks just like you and CK. And smart... We spent the day together yesterday. The kid's a natural on the basketball court."

How long had Lane been in the city? Lois thought as Jimmy continued to praise her son. And why?

"He's great, Lois," Jimmy told her earnestly.

"Thank you." She gave in to the impulse to hug him again.

This man was almost like the brother she'd never had. She'd missed him, and unlike Clark, she hadn't seen him since \*she'd\* left. "I should have never stayed away so long," she whispered, more of those regrets welling up deep within her.

"Shh," was the only reply she received as the younger man pulled her just a tad bit closer. He'd missed this woman more than he'd thought. It was easy to understand why Clark loved her so much. They'd only been friends yet just her mere presence seemed to close a gaping hole he hadn't realized existed within him.

Jimmy slowly drew away from Lois as Perry calmed the chaos around them. "You're probably wondering why you're here," he began. "Well..." He unfolded the paper in his hands and held it up to her.

'Homecoming!' was the sixty-point headline across the front. And the byline belonged to Clark Kent.

Lois glanced over at him as she took the paper and began to read. In the article, Clark introduced his trip briefly before moving on to why his homecoming was so special. He spoke of his parents, his friends, but mostly of her and Lane. The piece ended: 'Lois Lane, will you marry me?'

She stared up at him with tear filled eyes. The short story he'd written was absolutely terrific, proving why he'd won those awards.

"I have to say, Lois," Perry said when she didn't speak. "I've received a ton of calls about this piece. Every major newspaper in the country wants to pick up the series. Folks are talking about Clark here restoring the perspective of the modern man." He grinned over at the other man. "And they all want to know your answer."

"So how 'bout it, honey?" Clark said as he pulled a ring she'd only seen once from his pocket and kneeled. "Are we going to

give them something to read?"

"Yes!" she breathed and leaned over to kiss him soundly.

Clark slipped the ring onto her finger, kissed it softly, then stood to take her in his arms. This time the applause was punctuated with the sound of popping corks.

"Hear that, people?" Perry bellowed. "That's the sound of success!"

Lois and Clark were swallowed up by the thrilled crowd of family and friends. They'd all ridden the rollercoaster life with them, and it was time it finally changed courses onto more calm waters.

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"Are you sure she'll like it?"

"I'm sure."

"I don't know, Dad."

Clark smiled down at his oldest son. Lane had recently turned twelve. His black hair was even shorter now and thicker. His eyes were the same color as his father's. His smile was the same. But his attitude was all Lois. He was fire and ice wrapped into a tiny frame that rarely slowed down.

He had been introduced to his father through his mother and others that had known and loved that super man. He'd lived without the male guidance he desperately needed for nearly the first six years of his life. But he'd hardly been away from his father's side since. Clark had indeed learned the business of farming, transforming the Kent farm into a very lucrative enterprise. He'd also written about his trip, just as he'd promised Perry when he'd left for New Krypton. His 'Homecoming' series had thrust him to the forefront of the news world and had also earned him another Bailey, Kerth, and Meriwether award.

But Clark was not alone in his success. Jimmy had earned several awards of his own for his writing as well as his photography. The younger man had also become a member of the family. He, too, had chosen to leave behind the fast pace of the city and moved to Smallville. Bringing along his mother, they chose a house in town - across the street from the Lanes - so they'd be near the new business they opened. 'Mama's Passion' was a book store and coffee shop just off the square, and it was an immediate success among the locals. While Jimmy continued to take occasional trips and write travel pieces for the Planet, his time on a distant planet had also changed him so that his former life could have never satisfied him again.

It was a new life; one with a slower pace, but more satisfying than any Jimmy or Clark could have ever imagined. Farming had afforded Clark the opportunity to truly get to know and care for his family. He was there through every milestone and memory. He was the one in the delivery room when another dark haired little boy joined the Kent clan. And just recently, one more.

Lois claimed having a house full of boys was her penance for missing Clark so much over the years. Clark would laugh and tell her that God had broken the mold when he'd made her. There was no way another little Lois could occupy the same space.

Father and son stood in the middle of the game room that had been constructed recently, admiring their handiwork. Clark had painted the wall, but added a special border - his sons' handprints.

"Didn't you enjoy playing in the paint?" Clark asked his helper.

"Yeah. That's why I'm worried about what Mom thinks. Nothing this much fun can be very good!"

Clark laughed loudly at his son before reaching out to swipe his paint brush across his cheek. "How 'bout this? Is this fun?"

"Yeah," Lane shouted as he reached out to stamp a handprint on Clark's arm.

Lois found them sitting in the middle of the floor covered in paint. "What are you two doing?!"

"Painting the game room?" came Clark's reply, an expression of complete innocence on his face.

"Uh huh..." She moved into the room to usher Lane into the shower. On the way out, the boy stuck his tongue out at his dad.

Clark laughed again before turning to look at the small prints on the wall. His sons... Jonathan Lane, Samuel Clark, and James Perry - the culmination of the incredible love he had for his wife. The love they had for one another.

His eyes drifted over to the wedding picture that hung on a wall of family portraits. That had been one of the best days of his life.

{{{{He was so nervous that he was sure everyone could hear his trembling knees.

"Relax, son," his father told him as they waited for Lois to come out of the bungalow.

They'd opted to have their wedding at their bungalow in the Caribbean - they'd purchased their getaway place - right along with Lane's sixth birthday. Bare feet and comfortable summer attire, along with a few friends and their family were all they needed to share their special moment with them. Clark's 'Homecoming' series had already announced their union to the world.

He had to look at Lane to remain calm enough to wait this out.

Then finally Lois was there. Beautiful, mesmerizing eyes... That's what he remembered most about that day. That beautiful stare that seemed to pierce right through him, straight into his very soul.

'Into tomorrow and beyond... in work and play... our home, my heart... I'll take you everywhere.'}}}}

Those were some of the words he'd said to her that day. And those feelings - the way he'd felt that day - that was still what he felt today. The fire raged between them as strong as it always had. One touch could send him reeling. One kiss and he was lost. Just as Lois had done once, across space and back again, Clark had taken Lois everywhere.

THE END